

Introduction

What do babies need to learn to be able to talk? Georgie and Phil discuss this and teach you some new vocabulary.

This week's question

At what age do babies usually start babbling?

- a) around 7 months old?
- b) around 9 months old? or,
- c) around 1 year old?

Listen to the programme to hear the answer.

Vocabulary

babble

meaningless noises and sounds which babies make as they start learning to speak

stressed syllable

sound within a word which is emphasised by being spoken longer, louder or higher than the other sounds

error

mistake

classic example

perfect or most typical example of something which has all the features which you expect such a thing to have

take (something) for granted

accept or assume something without question

ambiguous

having more than one possible meaning; being open to interpretation

TRANSCRIPT

Note: This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Phil

Hello. This is 7 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Phil.

Georgie

And I'm Georgie. For most parents, their baby's first word is a special moment. This happens after an early stage of language development called **babble**, when babies start making simple sounds like "ga" or "ma".

Phil

Babies have to learn to use their mouth muscles to make specific sounds. They experiment with different

sounds and mouth shapes. So, what exactly is happening when babies start learning to speak? What do you think, Georgie?

Georgie

Well, Phil, I'm no expert, but I imagine they watch the adults around them and kind of copy and imitate what they do. What do you think?

Phil

I definitely think that's what my children did when they were learning to speak. Well, let's compare our ideas with those of an expert - Professor Julian Pine from Liverpool University, speaking here on BBC Radio 4, and he lists the skills that babies develop in order to speak:

Professor Julian Pine

Well, one of the first things the child's got to do is, they've got to break down the speech stream into words. Then they've got to link the words to the things that they refer to in the environment, so they've got to learn what the words mean. [Right].

Georgie

In this programme, we'll discover how babies learn to speak, and, as usual, we'll learn some useful new vocabulary. And on the subject of words, remember you can find a list of this programme's vocabulary on our website, bbclearningenglish.com. Some people find it helpful to study the vocabulary before listening.

Phil

And another thing to do before listening is ask my question, Georgie. We've mentioned the **babbling** noises that babies make when learning to speak, but at what age does this usually start? Is it:

- a) around 7 months old?
- b) around 9 months old? or,
- c) around 1 year old?

Georgie

OK, I think my best guess would be a) around six months old.

Phil

OK, well, we'll find out a little bit later on in the programme. Let's return to Professor Pine's list. The first thing babies do is recognise where individual words start and end. For this it helps to know that, in English at least, words often begin with a **stressed syllable** – the sound in a word which is emphasised by being spoken longer or louder. Learning this takes time, and here, Professor Pine and Michael Rosen, presenter of BBC Radio 4's programme, 'Word of Mouth', discuss children who haven't quite discovered it yet:

Professor Julian Pine

We can see this in the kind of **errors** that children make, because little kids will often call a giraffe a 'raffe' by leaving off the unstressed syllable because that's not typical English.

Michael Rosen

Ooh, and I've got an example of this - my son used to call a machine a 'sminge' – he just hit the stress, he didn't bother with the 'ma' bit.

Professor Julian Pine

Yeah, exactly.

Michael Rosen

Or he may have thought it was 'my sminge' of course, that's the other thing.

Professor Julian Pine

And the **classic example**, of course, is 'nana' instead of 'banana'.

Michael Rosen

Yes, I think I call them that!

Georgie

One **error**, or mistake, infants make is calling a giraffe a 'raffe' because they cut off the first syllable 'gi' because it's not stressed.

Phil

The classic example of this is when children say 'nana' instead of 'banana'. A **classic example** of something means the best example of it, one containing all the features you expect such a thing to have. For example, ants are a **classic example** of animals working together.

Georgie

The second skill babies develop as they learn to speak is correctly linking a word to the object it refers to, in other words knowing what the word means. As adults we do this without thinking, but it's actually much harder than it sounds, as Professor Julian Pine explains to BBC Radio 4 programme, 'Word of Mouth'.

Professor Julian Pine

Well, we **take for granted** the fact that it's kind of obvious what words refer to in the environment, but actually if you look at it from the child's point of view, it's really difficult to work out what a word refers to because there's so many things it could refer to. So, you know, the speech signal is very **ambiguous**. How does the child know that you're talking about the cup in front of you, or the pen in front of you when you say 'pen' or 'cup'?

Phil

As adults, we **take it for granted** that when a friend says, "apple", they mean that round, red thing on the table. To **take it for granted** means to assume something without question. But for a baby, the link between the word 'apple' and the object is not obvious, it's **ambiguous**, meaning it has more than one possible meaning.

Georgie

Wow! Who knew so much was going on inside babies' sponge-like brains as they soak up the sounds they hear? Right, Phil, isn't it time to reveal the answer to your question?

Phil

It is indeed. The question was, at what age do babies start to make babbling noises?

Georgie

And I said it was around six months.

Phil

And that is the correct answer.

Georgie

Yay!

Phil

Babies start to do this when they're about 7 months old. OK, let's recap the vocabulary that we've learned starting with **babble**, the meaningless noises babies make as they're learning to speak.

Georgie

The **stressed syllable** in a word is the sound which is emphasised by being longer, louder, or higher.

Phil

An **error** is a mistake.

Georgie

The **classic example** of something is the most typical example of it, containing its most important features.

Phil

If you **take something for granted**, you accept or assume it without question.

Georgie

And finally, the adjective **ambiguous** means having more than one possible meaning. Once again, our six minutes are up, but if you're ready for more you'll find the worksheet with a quiz and a transcript for this programme on our website – see you there soon!

Phil

Bye!

Georgie

Bye!