

# Social Communication and Autism

## Spotlight on: Toddlers



COMMUNICATION  
ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

Better Hearing & Speech Month

The toddler years are a time when interactions with kids get a lot more fun for many parents and siblings (minus the outbursts). Growing vocabularies, budding personalities, more conversation and play . . . kids are developing and honing social skills, communicating their feelings and emotions, and forming deeper relationships with family and friends.

**Milestones galore!** Social communication skills in the toddler years include:

- Points to objects or pictures to show them to parents **(by 18 months)**
- Waves or says “bye-bye” **(by 18 months)**
- Responds to simple directions, like “come here” or “get your coat” **(by 18 months)**
- Goes to people for affection and comfort **(by 24 months)**
- Takes turns when talking **(by 24 months)**
- Asks for help **(by 24 months)**
- Plays pretend games or make believe **(by 36 months)**
- Shows emotions or uses feeling words, like “I love you” **(by 36 months)**
- Takes part in circle time or other group activities **(by 4 years)**
- Changes a message when not understood **(by 4 years)**
- Talks in different ways to different people, such as a baby versus an adult **(by 5 years)**
- Understands that others have different thoughts and feelings **(by 5 years)**

Children do not develop social communication skills at the same rate. Social communication skills also may be influenced by a child’s cultural background.

**Increasing Parental Concern:** This is also a time when parents start to feel more strongly that something is amiss. A child may seem to be in their own world. They may not relate to others. They may focus on only one topic, like trains. A child may have a *social communication disorder*, which involves trouble with social uses of language, or *autism spectrum disorder*, which involves social communication problems in addition to restricted, repetitive behaviors.

**Identify the Signs:** Signs of a **social communication disorder** include difficulty with:

- Sharing a common focus with another person about the same object/event (such as playing together with the same toy or reading the same book), called *joint attention*
- Understanding and using words, having conversations, and following directions
- Playing with others, understanding feelings, and making/keeping friends

Those signs, in addition to those below, are among the signs of **autism spectrum disorder:**

- Flapping hands, rocking, or spinning
- Difficulty changing from one activity to the next
- Having limited or unusual interests

**Don’t Delay—Get Help!** There is nothing to lose but a lot to gain from early diagnosis and treatment. **Speech-language pathologists are experts in social communication and treat children with these disorders.** They can help toddlers develop communication and social skills. For children who have trouble developing spoken language, speech-language pathologists may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), which includes sign language, electronic devices, and other alternatives to verbal speech.



**Speech-language pathologists can help!**

Learn more at [www.asha.org/public](http://www.asha.org/public).



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