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topic facts

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"I want busgetti."

Common signs of learning difficulties in preschoolers

m *child asks for "busgetti" every night. We laugh; I guess we encourage such cuteness. But "busgetti" has been a favorite for a year, and we have stopped laughing. We're concerned about how hard it is for him to add new vocabulary words when he is talking.*

For most children, all the skills needed for early language are acquired naturally by the time they are five years old.

Some days he can't find the right word to express himself. When we don't understand what our son is saying, he becomes very frustrated and cries. I hold him and kiss away the tears. I am crying with him on the inside.

Many parents of preschoolers faced with this scenario wonder if anything is wrong with their child and if their child will have learning problems in school. With all our hearts we want our children to be successful, to have friends and to do well in school. During the preschool years, difficulty with language and speech may be indicators of a learning disability, or they may be warning signs. Warning *signs* are just that and don't necessarily mean *problems*. If parents are concerned, talking with their local early education program is a good place to begin. Early intervention for the child who is behind in social, fine motor, gross motor and/or language development can make all the difference between success and failure.

Early signs

For most children, all the skills needed for early language are acquired naturally by the time they are five years old. Prevention and intervention efforts are most effective during the preschool

years and should be provided as early as possible if language and speech are to develop. Parents are usually the first to suspect their child may have a problem, but they may deny the problem because they fear what it may mean for their child. The family is an important source of information about their child's needs. Acceptance and cooperation are critical for effective intervention to occur. Appropriate support for the child, family and child care providers will help in recognizing, understanding and accepting a problem.

Knowing the warning signs of learning disabilities and getting children the help they need can be key to acquiring the early literacy skills that are essential for later reading success. Research has shown that children may begin to develop phonological awareness (awareness of sounds in oral language) as early as two-and-a-half to three years of age. At this level, children become sensitive to syllables and rhyme. Research from the National Institute of Health (Lyon, et al.) has shown that the children most at risk for reading difficulties in the primary grades are those who began school with fewer verbal skills, less phonological awareness and less familiarity with books.



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We know that the greater the exposure to nursery rhymes at age three, the more developed the child's phonological awareness is by age six. The greater the exposure to various kinds of reading activities, the greater the child's readiness for kindergarten. Results of early intervention prior to kindergarten are promising in reducing children's risk for reading difficulties.

Parents should trust that they know their child best. If parents have concerns, they can seek help determining if common signs of a learning problem are warning signs or indicators of a learning disability. Parents can talk to health care professionals, have their child's hearing checked and work in partnership with their child's preschool teachers. Parents can also help their child play with language, listen to stories, tell stories, sing songs, and draw pictures, run and jump and eat busgetti.

Literacy tools for parents

Your child starts learning to read from the moment he or she hears your voice. Hearing your voice, songs and laughter makes your child take an interest in language. Language includes talking, listening, reading and writing.

You can help support your child in developing literacy skills by

- Playing labeling games such as asking, "Where is your nose?", labeling objects in the environment, in books, etc.
- Talking with your child during bath time, while eating, and reading
- Reading aloud, every day, books that take into consideration the developmental needs of the child, such as a cloth book or sturdy cardboard and can be chewed on by babies

- Going on outings and talking about new events and surroundings
- Picking books that connect to a child's life and talking about those connections, such as reading *Green Eggs and Ham* and then asking, "What color eggs do *you* eat?"
- Predicting what will happen next so that your child gets a sense of how a story is organized, with a beginning, middle and end
- Playing with sounds, singing songs, listening to nursery rhymes and identifying rhyming patterns to promote awareness of sounds and words
- Reading predictable books to help your child understand how a story progresses and giving her a chance to pretend to read it herself
- Using wordless books to help improve children's language and imagination
- Encouraging pretend play that relates to literacy activities, such as pretending to read and write, making pretend books and writing letters
- Visiting the library