**Social Communication Development**

Interviewer: Welcome. Thank you for joining us on Byte-Sized Brain. I’m Dr. Corinne Webb and today I have Dr. Todd Kopelman joining us to discuss social communication and development in kids. He is a Board-Certified Analyst and Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at UIHC. He obtained a Bachelors degree in psychology from Grinnell College then went on to obtain a Masters degree in Social Work and a PhD in Psychology, both at the University of Iowa. Honestly, he is one of the “go to people” we have in the clinic when we have a question on development or how to manage behaviors. Thank you for joining us.

Interviewer: Parents often wonder if their child’s development is a concern or not. Can you share some thoughts about when we should expect a child to communicate in different ways? And when we talk about communication, we mean both things they say and things they do.

Todd Kopelman: Sure. Researchers have found when different language milestones usually emerge in children. It’s really important to keep in mind that these are broad guidelines and a child may not meet them for a lot of different reasons.

With respect to early speech (expressive) milestones,

Around 12 months:

Uses simple gestures, such as shaking head for “no”

May say a few words like “dada” and “mama”

Uses exclamations, such as “oh-oh!”

Tries to imitate words

Around 18 months:

Says several single words

Says and shakes head “no”

Points to show someone what he wants

Around 24 months:

Points to things or pictures when they are named

Knows names of familiar people and body parts

Says sentences with 2 to 4 words

Follows simple instructions

Repeats words overheard in conversation

Points to things in a book

Around 3-4 years:

Sentences are becoming longer, combine four or more words. At this age, a child about things that have happened away from home, and is interested in talking about pre-school, friends, outings and interesting experiences. Speech is usually fluent and clear and "other people" can understand what your child is saying most of the time.

Around 4-5 years:

Your child speaks clearly and fluently in an easy-to-listen-to voice.

Puts together long and detailed sentences ("We went to the store and I got chips and two bananas").

Most sounds are pronounced correctly, though he or she may be lisping as a four-year-old, or, at five, still have difficulty with "r", "v" and "th".

Your child can communicate easily with familiar adults and with other children.

Your child may tell fantastic, dramatic, inventive, "tall stories" (sometimes even scaring themselves!) and engage strangers in conversation when you are out together.

Interviewer: That is helpful to know more about the stages kids go through in their speech development. What about the changes we may expect to see in a child’s ability to understand what we ae saying and to follow instructions? What should we expect developmentally?

Todd Kopelman: Along with guidelines for speech, there are also developmental markers for receptive language, or a child’s ability to listen and understand.

Around 1 year:

Points to pictures in a book when you name them and can point to a few body parts when asked (nose, eyes, tummy).

He or she can also follow simple commands ("Push the bus!", "Don't touch; it's hot!") and understand simple questions ("Where's the bunny?", "Who likes Miffy?", "What's in your purse?").

Your toddler now likes listening to simple stories and enjoys it when you sing songs or say rhymes. This is a stage in which he or she will want the same story, rhyme or game repeated many times.

By around 2 years:

Understands two step commands ("Get your socks and put them in the basket") and understand contrasting concepts or meanings like hot / cold, stop / go, in / on and nice / yucky. He or she notices sounds like the telephone or doorbell ringing and may point or become excited, get you to answer, or attempt to answer themselves.

By around 3-4 years:

Understands simple "Who?", "What?" and "Where?" questions. They can hear you when you call from another room.

By around 4-5 years:

Children enjoy stories and can answer simple questions about them. He or she hears and understands nearly everything that is said (within reason) at home or at pre-school or day care.

Interviewer: As adults, it is sometimes hard to remember about when kids play in different kinds of ways. Also, it is great that kids can play. However, is there something vital about kids being able to play? If you go through history there is all these examples of earlier play toys. Why is it important for kids to play?

Todd Kopelman: There’s a famous quote I like by Albert Einstein: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.”

Pretend play is also known as "symbolic play" because it involves the use of symbols. When we use symbols, we use something to stand for something else. In the case of pretend play, children may use one object to stand for another, such as pretending a spoon is a hairbrush, or a tablecloth is a cape. This type of symbolic thought is also needed for language, as our words are symbols. Our words stand for our thoughts and ideas. Therefore, pretend play and language both involve the same ability to use something to refer to another (Weitzman and Greenberg, 2002). It's no wonder children start to engage in pretend play around the same time they start to speak (between 12 to 18 months). Also, children who have problems with language (or developmental disorders such as autism) sometimes also struggle with pretend play.

How Pretend Play Develops (Learning Language and Loving It, Weitzman and Greenberg, 2002):

In typical development, pretend play progresses through stages. Children with developmental delays may progress through these stages at a slower rate.

Interviewer: So now that we have talked a little about the development of speech and play, are there things that parents should be aware to look out for?

Todd Kopelman: Yes, if you notice delays in certain areas, it could suggest that an evaluation is appropriate. Again, though, it’s important to keep in mind that it’s common for children to have some mild delays with some of the milestones we’ve been talking about. In addition, delays can happen for a lot of reasons including hearing difficulties, attention difficulties, or they can be related to broader developmental concerns.

Here are some of the more common delays that parents might observe:

Things to flag (Expressive, Receptive, Pretend Play):

Not babbling with change in tone by 12 months

Not responding to name by 12 months

Not responding to simple commands by 15 months (“No,” “Up”)

Not pointing to simple pictures, basic body parts or waving bye (by 18 months)

No single words by 15 months; not combining words into simple phrases by 2

Don’t seem to understand question type (“wh” confusion) - by 4

Any loss of language, play, or motor skills

If you notice any of these types of concerns, you should bring them up with your child pediatrician or primary care provider.