

# Learning to Communicate My Needs

Watch closely—I am sending you signals. From crying, to gestures, then words...

## Stage 1 (Birth to around 3 months)

### I communicate by:

- vocalizing (crying, grunting, etc.) when I'm hungry, tired, or need to be held or comforted.
- using sounds and facial expressions to let you know what I need and want.
- responding to my world in different ways. I may smile, frown, startle, or cry when I hear or see something or someone new.
- moving my head to follow your voice.
- looking clearly at you or objects when you hold me close.
- looking at human faces, especially yours!
- fussing when over-stimulated by sound, movements, temperature, and light. There may be many times during the day when I need a break.

*Watch for signs of over-stimulation like hiccupping, falling asleep, avoiding eye contact, or becoming fussy; there might be too much going on for the baby. Provide a quiet place for you and the baby to regroup.*



### My caregivers help me by:

- responding positively and quickly to my vocalizations. This will help you learn what I'm saying.
- talking using descriptive words (describe what is happening and what you are doing) during playtime, transitions, and routines.
- providing many opportunities for me to see your face. Hold me close during feeding and playtime. Place me on your lap, facing you, so I can find your face and hear your voice.
- taking it slow and giving me time to watch, listen, and respond.

## Stage 2 (3 to around 6 months)

### I communicate by:

- changing the volume and pitch of my sounds to let you know how much I need something.
- smiling, using eye contact, vocalizing, or reaching out to get your attention.



- watching you when you enter a room.
- starting to show a preference for certain things. I may like to be wrapped tight when I'm sleeping, or I may only fall asleep if my blankets are loose.
- not becoming over-stimulated as easily as before. I am able to play and interact for longer periods of time.
- responding to your voice using body language or vocalizations.
- using body language to tell you when I've had enough or I'm hungry or tired. I may arch, kick, or turn away before I get fussy.



**My caregivers help me by:**

- imitating my sounds when talking to me.
- spending time watching me to learn the special ways I try to communicate my needs with you.
- talking out loud when trying to find out what I need. For example, ask “Are you hungry?” or say “Let’s see if your diaper needs to be changed.”
- watching for my natural routine. Notice the time of day when I usually get hungry or tired, or when I want to play.

**Stage 3 (6 to around 12 months)**

**I communicate by:**

- starting to imitate sounds and gestures to ask for something or someone (like “bababa,” or “dadada”).
- showing strong preference and dislikes for certain people, animals, and activities.
- starting to show a routine my body likes.
- starting to use a single word or gesture to send a message (like saying “Up!” to mean “I want up.”)
- communicating interest or concern by moving my body toward or away from people or objects.

**My caregivers help me by:**

- watching me to learn the specific ways that I communicate my needs.
- interpreting and giving meaning to what I do. Try saying “You are saying ‘baba.’ Do you want your bottle?” or “You are reaching for the cup. Do you want the cup?”

**Separation Anxiety**

*When children discover that people and things exist even when they can't see them anymore, they may become sad or scared when parents or guardians leave.*

*Encourage parents to say good-bye when they leave to build trust. Sneaking out can make children feel more fearful and insecure.*

- using signs and gestures during daily routines for me to imitate.
- playing simple turn-taking games like patty-cake to encourage communication.
- playing disappearing and reappearing games like hide and seek or peek-a-boo.
- placing pictures of my family and friends where I can see them. Create family picture books and posters and place them around the room for me to look at.



## **Stage 4 (12 to around 24 months)**

### ***I communicate by:***

- being shy or fearful of new people or places.
- seeking your attention by grabbing your hand or coming to get you.
- using simple words, gestures, or sounds to call you from across the room.
- observing other children my age with interest.
- communicating with my body to tell you when I need help. I may come close to you when I need support, or become aggressive with others when I'm tired, bored, or lonely.
- using one or two word sentences to tell you what I want or need, like “car” for “Let’s go bye-bye in the car.”
- beginning to use objects to pretend, like using a block as a phone to call grandma.

### ***My caregivers help me by:***

- paying attention to me and talking out loud when problem-solving with me, like saying “I’m sorry, Andrew, I need help understanding. Can you show me what you want?”
- providing opportunities for me to play around other children my age.
- expanding on what I say. Try saying things like “You are saying ‘more.’ Do you want more milk?” or “You are reaching for the cup. Do you want the cup?”
- continuing to use signs and gestures during daily routines for me to imitate.

### **Stranger Anxiety**

*Children may become fearful of other adults at this age, even grandparents if they don’t live nearby. Providing support and extra time for the child to watch and greet new adults can help them overcome their fear more quickly.*

## **Stage 5 (24 to around 36 months)**

### ***I communicate by:***

- using two or three word sentences to ask for help.
- learning and saying new words every day to communicate with you.
- starting to play with other children with interest. I will need an adult close to help with communication.
- watching and learning from you how to communicate, gesture, and respond to others.
- using objects and other children or adults to pretend play.

### ***My caregivers help me by:***

- playing simple turn-taking games to encourage communication.
- expanding on my words, gestures, and play by providing a variety of open-ended questions, language, and new words (like saying, “Oh, are you cooking spaghetti?”).
- providing appropriate wait time for me to respond when asked a question.
- staying close when I’m playing with other children. Provide language and support to help expand my play.

*To learn more about communication, view the Resources and References found at the end of these materials.*