

FOR PARENTS OF LATE TALKERS

Speech Delay **or** Autism?

A calm, plain-English checklist to help you understand what you're seeing — and exactly what to do next.

This is a guide, not a diagnosis 🧡

If your little one isn't talking much yet — **breathe**. You're not behind, and you're not failing them. Noticing early and looking for answers is the single best thing a parent can do. Most late talkers catch up, especially with a little support. This guide helps you tell what you're likely looking at, and turns worry into a clear plan.

1. First — what's typical by age?

A rough map. Every child grows on their own timeline; these are gentle guideposts, not pass/fail lines.

By 12–15 mo	A few words beyond "mama/dada"; points at things; responds to their name; babbles like a conversation.
By 18 mo	Around 10–20 words; points to show you things; follows a simple direction ("get your shoe").
By 2 years	50+ words and starting to put <i>two</i> together ("more milk", "mama go"); you understand about half of what they say.
By 2½–3 yr	Short sentences; asks simple questions; strangers understand much of their speech; pretend play (feeding a doll, "driving" a car).

Not there yet? That alone doesn't mean autism — it means it's worth a closer look. Here's how to tell the difference.

2. The plain-English difference

A speech / language delay

is mostly about **the words**. The child still *connects* — they look at you, point, share, play pretend, and want your attention. The talking is just running late.

Autism

is about **social communication** and patterns of behavior — how a child connects, shares attention, and plays — not just how many words they have.

The good news either way: the same warm, playful, everyday support helps *both* — so you never have to wait for a label to start helping.

THE CHECKLIST

Tick what you actually see

Think about the last week or two. Be honest and gentle — this is just for you.

Points toward a speech delay

Ways your child still connects

- ☐ Understands far more than they can say (follows directions, knows names of things)
- ☐ Points, reaches, or gestures to tell you what they want
- ☐ Makes eye contact and shares smiles with you
- ☐ Brings you things or shows you things ("look!")
- ☐ Usually responds when you call their name
- ☐ Enjoys back-and-forth play (peekaboo, chase, rolling a ball)
- ☐ Copies you — sounds, waving, clapping, actions
- ☐ Pretends (feeds a doll, talks on a toy phone)

Worth an autism screen too

Not a diagnosis — a reason to ask

- ☐ Rarely responds to their name, even when they can hear
- ☐ Limited or fleeting eye contact
- ☐ Doesn't point or show things to share interest with you
- ☐ Little or no pretend play
- ☐ Very strong routines; big upset with small changes
- ☐ Repeats movements (hand-flapping, rocking, spinning)
- ☐ Lines up or sorts toys more than plays *with* them
- ☐ Strong reactions to sounds, lights, or textures
- ☐ Used words before and then seemed to lose them

How to read your ticks: lots of ticks on the **left** and few on the right is encouraging — it points toward a talking delay that support tends to help quickly. Ticks on the **right** are *not* a diagnosis and don't mean the worst — they simply mean a professional screen is worth booking. Only a qualified professional can diagnose, and getting checked early only ever helps.

3 things you can start saying today

- **Offer a choice.** Hold up two things: "Milk... or water?" Choices invite a word or a point.
- **Pause & wait.** Ask, then count to 5 silently. That quiet gap is where first words appear.
- **Name the play.** Narrate simply as you go — "ball... up... go!" One clear word beats a long sentence. Celebrate *every* try.

What to do this week

1 Tell your pediatrician — and ask for a screen by name.

You can keep it simple: *"I'd like my child screened for a speech delay and for autism."* Ask about the **M-CHAT** screen (18–30 months). Trust your gut; you know your child best.

2 Get a **FREE** evaluation — no referral, no insurance needed.

In the U.S., **Early Intervention** (birth–age 3) and your **school district** (age 3+) must evaluate any child for free, on request — it's the law ("Child Find"). Search **[your state] early intervention** or ask your pediatrician to connect you.

3 Start tiny daily practice at home — 10 playful minutes.

Support helps while you wait for appointments, and it works for a delay *or* autism. Keep it short, silly, and pressure-free — use the 3 phrases on page 2, and let your child lead the play.



Make daily practice easy with SpeakBright

A gentle app your toddler thinks is a game — first-words practice, tracing, and playful prompts, built with speech-practice basics. A calm way to do step 3 every day.

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Please read: This guide is for education and support only. It is **not medical advice and not a diagnosis**, and it can't replace an evaluation by a doctor, psychologist, or speech-language pathologist. Every child is different. If anything here worries you — or your instinct says something's off — reach out to a professional. Early help is always worth it, and you are already doing a great job by being here. 🧡

Want the next step? Our *"First Words: 30 Days of 10-Minute Activities for Late Talkers"* turns this into a simple day-by-day plan — one tiny, playful activity a day, with printable trackers. Ask us where to get it, or visit the link above.