16 Gestures by 16 Months

16by16™

Children Should Learn at Least 16 Gestures by 16 Months

Good communication development starts in the first year of life and goes far beyond learning how to talk. Communication development has its roots in social interaction with parents and other caregivers during everyday activities. Your child's growth in social communication is important because it helps your child connect with you, learn language and play concepts, and sets the stage for learning to read and future success in school. Good communication skills are the best tool to prevent behavior problems and make it easier to work through moments of frustration that all infants and toddlers face.

By observing children's early gestures, you can obtain a critical snapshot of their communication development. Even small lags in communication milestones can add up and impact a child's rate of learning that is difficult to change later. Research with young children indicates that the development of gestures from 9 to 16 months predicts language ability 2 years later, which is significant because preschool language skills predict academic success. So it's important to remember that by 16 months, children should have at least 16 gestures.

Let's consider how gestures develop. While the order or specific gestures may vary slightly, children should be using at least 2 new gestures each month between 9 and 16 months.

Earlier is Better

Catching communication and language difficulties early can prevent potential problems later with behavior, learning, reading, and social interaction. Research on brain development reminds us that "earlier IS better" when teaching young children. The most critical period for learning is during the first three years of a child's life. Pathways in the brain develop as infants and young children learn from exploring and interacting with people and objects in their environment. The brain's architecture is developing the most rapidly during this critical period and is the most sensitive to experiential learning. By age 3, most of the major brain circuits are mature, and later it becomes more difficult to make significant changes in a child's growth trajectory. For more information, see "The Science of Early Childhood Development" at the **Center on the Developing Child | Harvard University.**

9 Months: Give, Shake head

At 9 months, children's earliest gestures begin to develop from their actions—and the reactions of others. Children first learn to take an object. Then, as they are able to control their hand movements to release and drop an object, they gain experience from their parent holding out their hand to catch it—and they learn to **give**.

Children learn to **shake their head** to indicate "no" by turning away from food they do not like and then looking back to see their parent respond by moving the undesired food away.


10 Months: Reach, Raise arms

At 10 months, children learn to **reach** through exploration and experiences with others, as they reach to take an object and to be picked up.

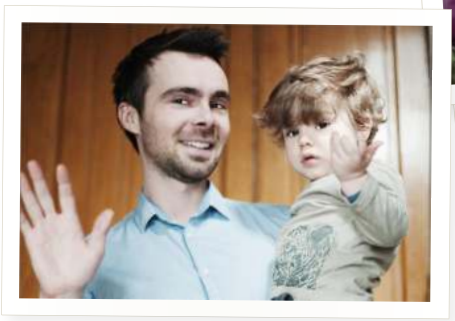
As they learn to anticipate the reactions of others, they use a reach gesture as a signal—first, with their arm reaching out, then, with their open hand facing up, and with their **arms raised** to ask to be picked up.



11 Months: Show, Wave

At 11 months, children are motivated to share their interests with others. They learn to hold up and **show** objects to get others to look and notice what they're interested in.






Children are also motivated by the social experience of greeting in everyday routines where special people are coming and going. They learn to wiggle their hand to wave, with a mature **wave** developing later.

12 Months: Open-hand Point, Tap

At 12 months, children use an **open-hand point** with the fingers spread, and a **tap** with the fingers together, as an indicative gesture to draw the attention of others to things of interest. Children's gestures become more clearly intentional and are often produced with emphasis and are now accompanied by grunts or early speech sounds.



13 Months: Clap, Blow a kiss

At 13 months, children begin to learn through observation— by observing others and copying what they do and say. They learn to use gestures, such as to **clap** their hands and **blow a kiss**, by watching others and imitating them. The gestures and words children are exposed to shape their vocabulary and drive their interest in learning.

14 Months: Index finger point, Shhh gesture

At 14 months, children **point with the index finger** to reference things at a distance, a sign that observational learning is solid and they are on the cusp of becoming a symbolic communicator. Children also use the index finger for the "**shhh**" gesture. Their growing repertoire of gestures propels the unfolding of spoken words.

15 Months: Head nod, Thumbs up, Hand up

At 15 months, you see symbolic gestures that are like words—a **head nod** or **thumbs up** to indicate "yes", a **wave** in front of their face to indicate "stinky", or a **hand up** to indicate "wait". Gestures now reflect not only what the child is thinking about, but also that they know they are sharing ideas with others.

16 Months: Other symbolic gestures

At 16 months, other symbolic gestures develop– such as "**I dunno**", "**high 5**", or even the universal **peace sign**. Gestures now bolster the learning of spoken words.

Having 16 Gestures is a Critical Milestone to Launch Language and Learning

Watching the growth and sophistication of gestures tells you a lot about your child's symbolic communication—and whether to be concerned if your child is not yet talking. While the specific gestures a child learns may vary depending on their family or culture, having 16 gestures by 16 months is a critical milestone for all children because it launches them from early first words into a vocabulary burst at 18 to 21 months. Children now get the idea that everything has a name and they learn new words rapidly.

The richest moments for early language learning are when the child and caregiver are sharing attention on the same thing and the caregiver talks about the child's focus of attention, creating opportunities to learn that stem from social interaction. If a child is not using these early gestures, then the parent may not have the chance to respond and follow the child's focus, which in turn limits the child's opportunity for both language learning and social connectedness.

As a child's gestures are developing between 9 and 16 months, you should also see other social communication milestones—the use of eye gaze and facial expressions to share attention and emotion, an increasing rate of communicating with sounds and gestures, a wider variety of actions in play, and an emerging ability to comprehend the meaning of spoken words. If these early social communication milestones are not solidly in place, it is likely that language will be delayed. It is important to keep in mind that delays in many social communication milestones may indicate risk for autism or other developmental delays. By detecting small gaps in early social communication skills, you can get extra help to support your child's development before significant delays are evident.

About the 16 by 16™ Series

This document is part of the 16 by 16™ series developed by the **FIRST WORDS® Project** to help families and others learn important early social communication milestones that launch language learning and literacy. We hope this information can provide a roadmap for you to support your child's early development. This information can also help you notice small delays early in order to prevent bigger delays later. Some children who are late in communicating outgrow delays, but others need extra help to reach their potential.

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