



Speech Sound Milestones by Age

Two ages matter for every sound: "just emerging" (50%) – about half of children have it – and "should be mastered" (90%) – the age clinicians actually watch. Ages are written years;months (3;6 = 3½). The big picture: **most consonants are mastered by age 5, and all by age 7.**

Sound	Just emerging (50%)	Should be mastered (90%)	What's typical
/p/ /b/ /d/ /m/ /n/ /h/ /w/	1;6–2;0	3;0	The early seven – solid by age 3
/t/ /k/ /g/ /ng/	2;0	4;0	"Tat" for "cat" fades as k and g arrive
/f/ /y/	2;6	4;0	Coming online during the preschool years
/l/	3;0	5;0	Often a "w"-like l before age 5
/s/	3;0	5;0	A mild lisp before 5 is common
/sh/ /ch/ /j/	3;6	5;0	Settling in across ages 4–5
/v/ /z/	4;0	5;0	Among the later "by 5" sounds
/r/	4;0	6;0	High variability – "wabbit" is normal until ~6
"th" voiced (<i>this</i>)	4;0	6;0	Often "d"- or "v"-like before age 6
"th" voiceless (<i>thumb</i>)	4;0	7;0	The latest English consonant – "fumb" is normal

Stranger test (intelligibility)

How much should a *stranger* understand?

Age 2	about 50%
Age 3	about 75%
Age 4	approaching full (75%+ typical)

Flag: over age 4 and strangers follow less than about two-thirds → worth an evaluation.

Right on schedule

- "Wabbit" for rabbit before age 6
- "Fumb" for thumb before age 7
- A mild lisp at age 4
- "Tat" for cat, fading by ~3½
- Past a 50% age but under the 90% age

Check in now – at any age

- Drops the **first** sound of words ("at" for cat)
- Back sounds replace front ones ("key" for tea)
- Sounds replaced by a throaty catch
- **Loses** speech skills they used to have
- Frustrated, avoids talking, or teased

Informational, not diagnostic. This chart supports a conversation with a qualified speech-language pathologist – it does not diagnose. Ages apply to children whose main language is mainstream American English; bilingual children and speakers of other dialects follow different, equally typical timelines. Sources: McLeod & Crowe (2018); Crowe & McLeod (2020), *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*. Full guide with examples: soundsafari.app/blog/speech-sound-milestones-by-age • © 2026 Sound Safari