as they grow 0-12 MONTHS

Listen Carefully!

Your child doesn’t talk yet—but she does have a language of her own. We’ll tell you what she’s communicating with her funny little noises and sounds. BY TAMEKA REECE

Babies cry. A lot. After all, it’s the best way they have to communicate with you. But between the wails, you’ve probably noticed your infant trying out other noises. In fact, your baby will actually make a range of sounds in her first year—from the delightful to the downright strange.

“Babies are very social,” says Prachi Shah, M.D., a developmental pediatrician at Texas Children’s Hospital, in Houston. “Making different sounds is their way of connecting with you and telling you what they want and need.” Those sometimes-wacky noises are also a sign that your baby is developing the skills required to get ready to talk. But what do her sounds mean? Our cheat sheet will help you decode her communication.

Squeals
These high-pitched noises will get your attention every time. Squealing usually means your little one is delighted (like during a game of peekaboo), but it can also indicate that he isn’t thrilled...
(think: the shriek he unleashes when you cut his nails). So if the squealing doesn’t stop, make sure he’s not in any discomfort.

To encourage your baby’s newfound ability, you don’t have to squeal yourself. It’s more helpful to respond to what’s inspiring his excitement. “Wow, you love it when Mommy blows bubbles.” He can’t totally understand what you’re saying yet, but he can pick up on your tone and notice your facial expressions. This kind of back and forth is one of the best ways to boost your baby’s language development, says Dr. Shah. Using vocabulary to describe what your baby is experiencing will help him pick up words, understand his feelings, and learn the rhythms of conversation.

Growls
Although this throaty noise isn’t as common as some other baby sounds, within the first six months many babies do growl—and it doesn’t mean they’re unleashing their inner animal. At first, it’s just a reflex, like crying or gurgling. But your infant may start making growling sounds (grm) on purpose because he likes the feeling it produces in his throat, says Diane Paul, Ph.D., director of speech-language pathology for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

As your baby gets older, he may also growl to express displeasure, like when he doesn’t want to be smothered in kisses by Aunt Gretchen or he’s mad that you’re not feeding him fast enough. Growling back will show him that you get it—and it’s fun.

Grunts
You might initially hear this guttural noise when your baby is having a bowel movement, but she may also do it at other times to relieve tension or to express frustration or boredom. As your baby grows, her grunts may become demands. “Toward the end of the first year, your baby will grunt, with or without pointing, to indicate that she wants something she doesn’t have the words for yet,” says Roberta Golinkoff, Ph.D., professor of education, psychology, and linguistics at the University of Delaware in Newark. Pay close attention when you suspect that your infant’s not just letting off steam. If she sees that you respond to her requests, she’ll understand that language can equal action.

Chuckles
At around 4 months, your little one may surprise you with a small chuckle or even a full-out belly laugh. Initially, chuckles and laughs are a physical response to something you’re doing like tickling her knees or blowing air on her tummy. Later on, when your baby laughs at something external—the look on your face when she flings all of her food onto the floor, for instance—it means she’s starting to develop a sense of humor, and she clearly finds you amusing. Encouraging her newfound funny bone is easy: Just keep doing silly things.
Sighs
Your child will start sighing naturally when he's just a few weeks old because it feels good and eventually because he likes the way you react to it. In fact, sighing may actually serve a useful function: It can be your baby's way of relaxing and letting you know that he is content. So try responding in kind using different lengths and pitches and giving him time to imitate you.

Babbles
Don't be surprised if you hear your baby engaged in a full monologue, in a language of her own. Babies start to babble at around 4 to 6 months, producing a steady stream of different vowel and consonant sounds that seem like they could be words but aren't quite there yet. Your child will start with the easiest sounds, like "a," "b," and "m," according to Dr. Paul. You'll hear a lot of "puh puh phuh" or "buh buh buh" at first.

After your baby has had more practice, you'll hear additional variety, and she may produce groups of sounds like "ah ah ah, ba ba, bee bee." These are the precursor to talking, so "muh muh" may become "mama" and "ba ba" may become "bottle."

There are lots of things you can do to help: When she pauses, babble back. Try new sounds and pitches to see if she'll try to imitate you and make up babble songs. Being responsive will help teach her the patterns of speech and conversation.