

Communication breakdown

On the morning of Frank's second birthday, Collin was more excited than the boy of the hour about the events of the day.

As I was getting the boys into their Orioles party gear, Collin chattered away: "And we're going to have cupcakes ... and all my friends and cousins are coming over ... and they're bringing presents! And now Frank will talk the right way because he's two!"

I thought back to Collin's second birthday and remembered him speaking in complete sentences. I thought about how clearly my cousin in Boston's little girl speaks, and she turned two a few weeks earlier. Frank, "a man of few words," according to my aunt, has a vocabulary of about a dozen words and gross motor skills more sophisticated than Collin's. I revealed this information to my cousin in New York, an elementary school teacher, in a recent phone conversation, and she grew quiet.

I didn't think anything was wrong because Collin's verbal skills were always off the charts. I just assumed (there's that word) that Frank was at a normal level. The second and third times around I haven't been as vigilant about reading up on milestones, and now I wish I had.



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When I took Frank for his two year check-up, my pediatrician had me fill out a questionnaire including questions like "can string two words together," "follows multiple step directions," and "behaves aggressively when unable to communicate" (Frank bites and head butts when frustrated). Frank scored a 20 percent. The doctor diagnosed him with a speech delay and recommended we contact an organization called "Infants and Toddlers" through the local school district.

Like most mothers I know, I began Googling "speech delay" to learn more about it. I searched for milestones and found this. At 24 months, Frank should know about 50 words. His vocabulary consists of the names of his immediate family and grandparents, "no," "ball," "shoe," "apple," "bubble," "more," and "me." He also knows most of his ABCs and can count to 15.

Of course, when I continued my search, what I found was extreme. I began panicking about autism, something Frank shows some other signs of. Would I be able to handle raising a child with a severe disability?

I began to question what I've done wrong? Do I give Frank less attention because he's my middle child? Do I work too much? Do I not read to him enough? Is it what I feed him or his sleeping patterns or the toothpaste we use?

I consulted another cousin, a speech therapist in Seattle, who'd recently visited. She reassured me that Frank would receive the care he needs and that it's common for boys, especially the second son, especially when the oldest brother talks incessantly. She also said he seemed quite social during her recent visit, so autism shouldn't be my first concern. I made appointments for Frank's hearing test and evaluation and called two of my friends whose sons received speech therapy through Infants and Toddlers. They informed me that the program helped their boys make great strides, one over the course of two years for a congenital defect and the other over a much longer time for autism. The therapists come to the house or in the case of more intense treatment, a bus comes to the house to take the child to a school setting. When I started putting speech therapy in the context of tutoring, rather than radical medical treatment, I started to feel better. I want my child to have the gift of communication and will build a nest of support through research, friends and family (including my many wise and talented cousins), and speech therapy programs. I will also pray, particularly requesting the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, for me and for him.