



DEAF
CULTURE,
HERITAGE AND
DIVERSITY

Deaf Studies workshop

Sign Language

Language acquisition and development



Co-funded by
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Introduction



- Who are you?
- Ice breaker questions!
 - How many languages do you know or speak?
 - Which language would you like to learn and why?



Introduction: aim

We will dive into the world of language development, bilingualism, and language deprivation — to learn why early and accessible language is essential for every child.



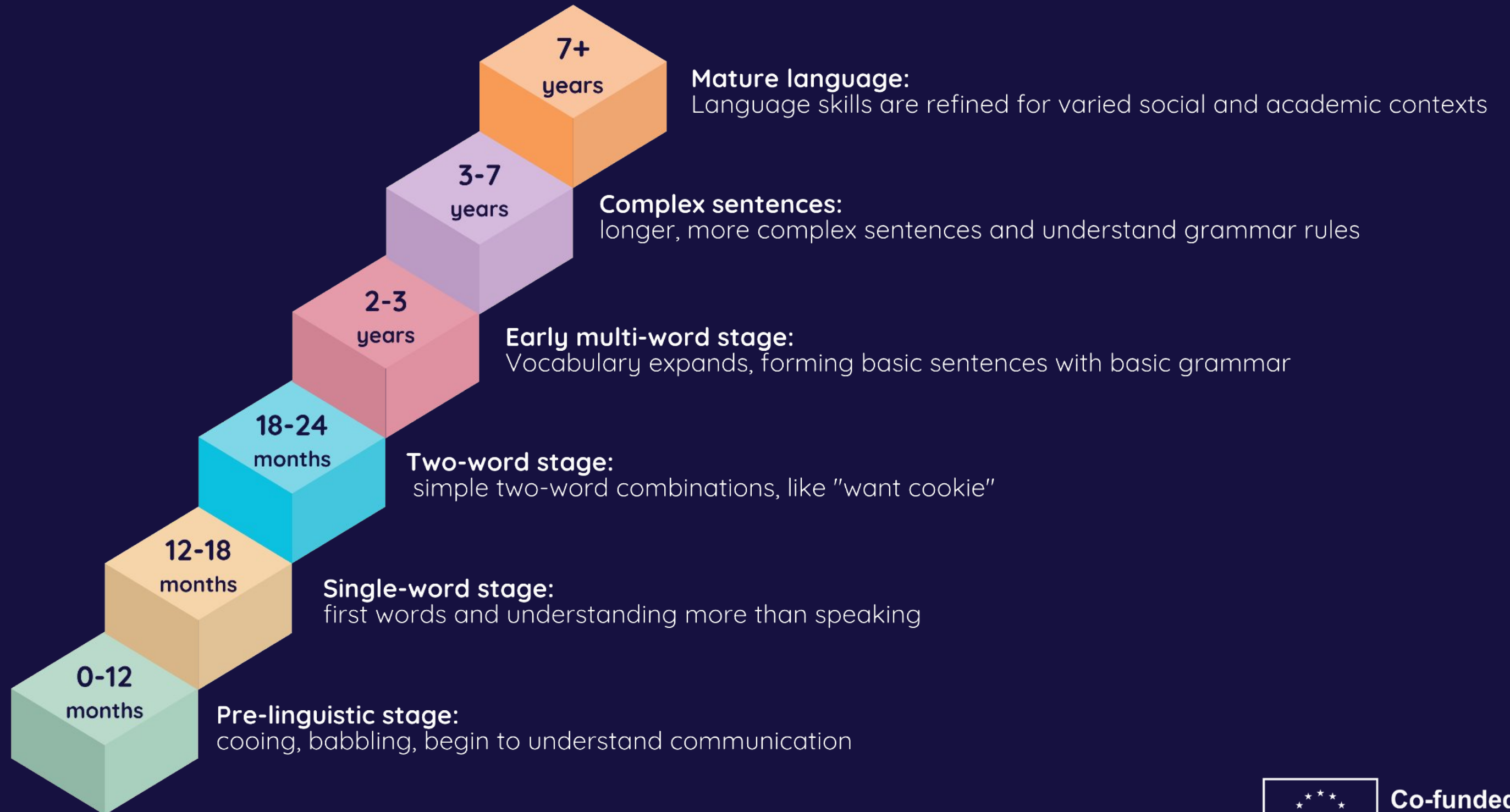
Theory: language development

What is language development, and why is it important?



Standard language development

Language development occurs in six stages:



Language development in deaf children

What is the difference in deaf children?

No access to spoken language through hearing
→ Sign language



Sign language -> a natural visual language, with full grammar and it activates the same language centers in the brain as spoken language.

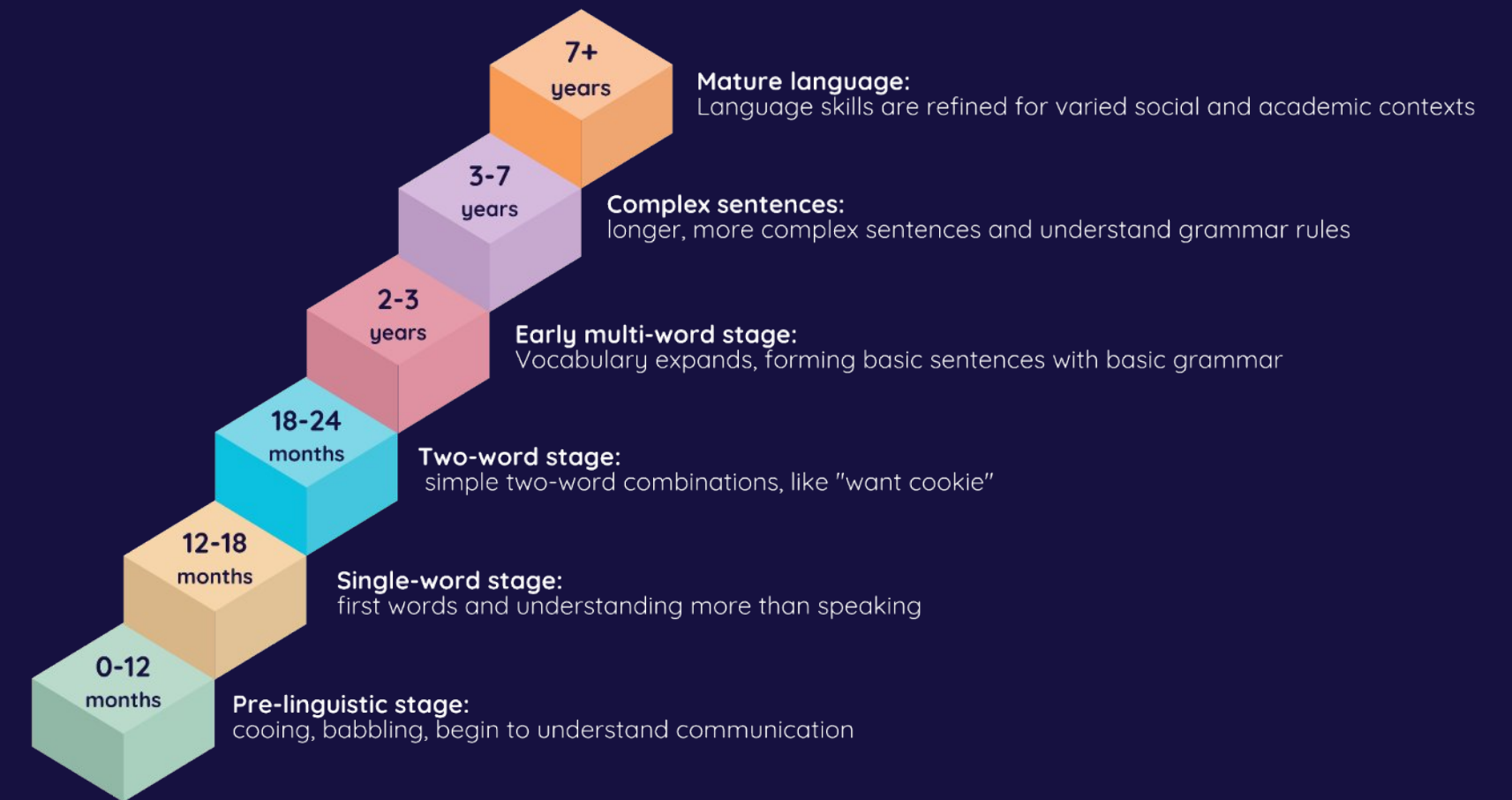
Children need **language** — **not speech** — for healthy development.

Language development in deaf children

Connecting to the language development

stages:

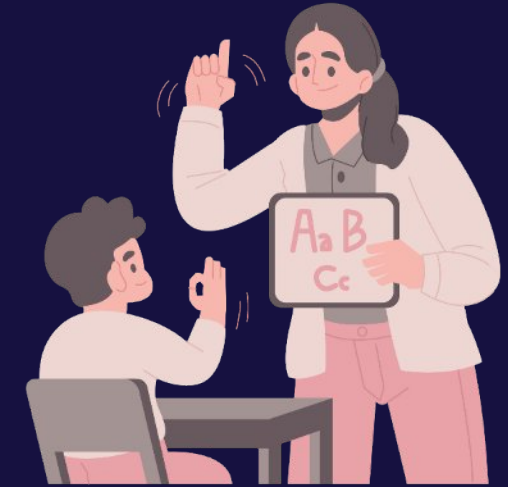
- Early access is essential → Language networks in the brain are formed at a very young age.
- Sign language can support every stage of language development, but “**the earlier, the better!**”
- Children can learn **both** sign language and written/spoken language.



Discuss: How can sign language be offered in each stage of language acquisition?



Common misconceptions



“They can just learn to lipread, right?”

Lipreading is limited — only about 30–40% of speech sounds are visually distinguishable.

“Sign language delays speech development.”

There is no proof for that. On the contrary: visual language supports and stimulates overall language development.

“They should learn spoken language first, then sign later.”

Children don't learn language later — they need access to language from the very beginning.





Common misconceptions

“If a child has a CI, there's no need for sign language.”

- A cochlear implant provides access to sound, but not to language itself.
- It is not a guarantee of full language development.
- Sign language remains essential — as a foundation or as support.
- Bilingualism (spoken and signed languages) is powerful and possible.



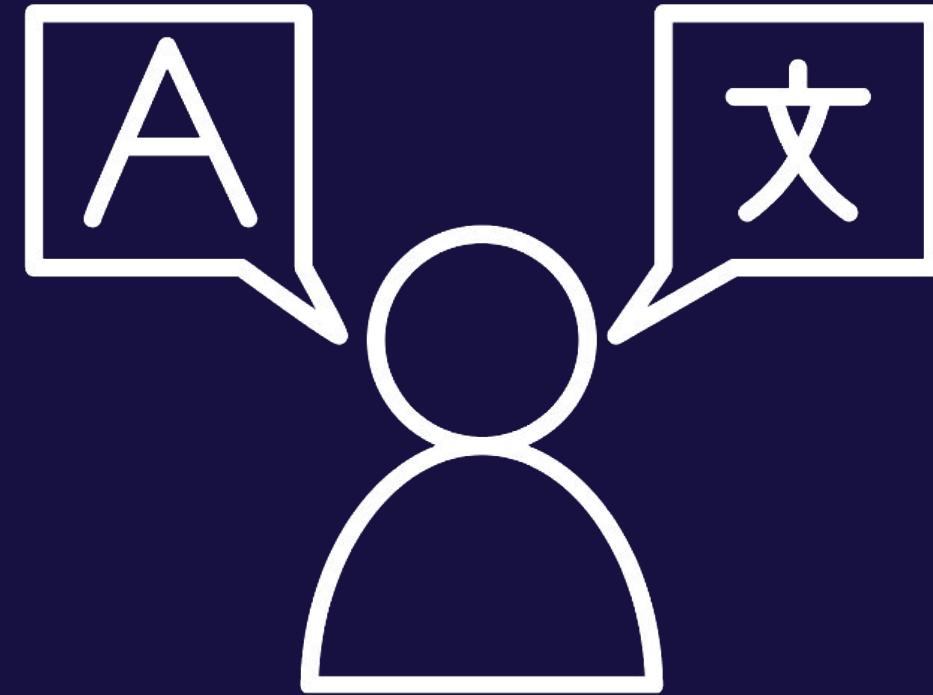
Bilingualism

What is bilingualism?

- Using or understanding TWO languages
- Multilingualism: THREE or MORE languages
- Can include sign/written/spoken language

Examples:

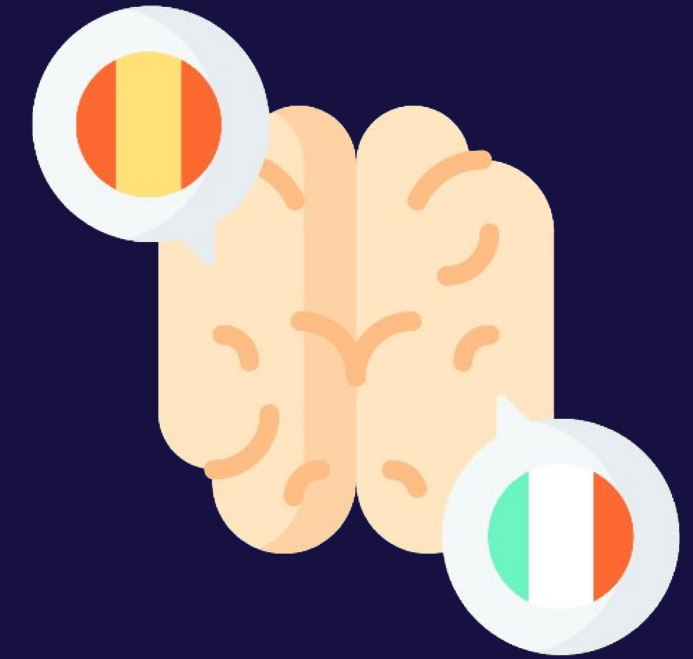
- NGT + written/spoken Dutch
- Written/spoken Dutch + written/spoken English
- NGT + written/spoken Arab
- NGT + written/spoken Dutch + written/spoken English (multilingualism)



Bilingualism

Benefits of bilingualism (research):

- Supports full access to **communication** and **learning**
- Stronger **language skills** and **memory**
- Helps develop **flexible thinking** (cognitive flexibility)
- Makes it easier to **learn more languages** later
- Strengthens **cultural identity** and awareness
- Encourages better **academic and social success**
- Builds a strong foundation for **visual learning** (through sign language)





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Video:



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What did you see?

- What did you see in the video?
- What exactly happened to the person in the video?
- What impact did this have on their life?
- Why do you think this situation happened?
- Do you think there is enough awareness in society about this issue?



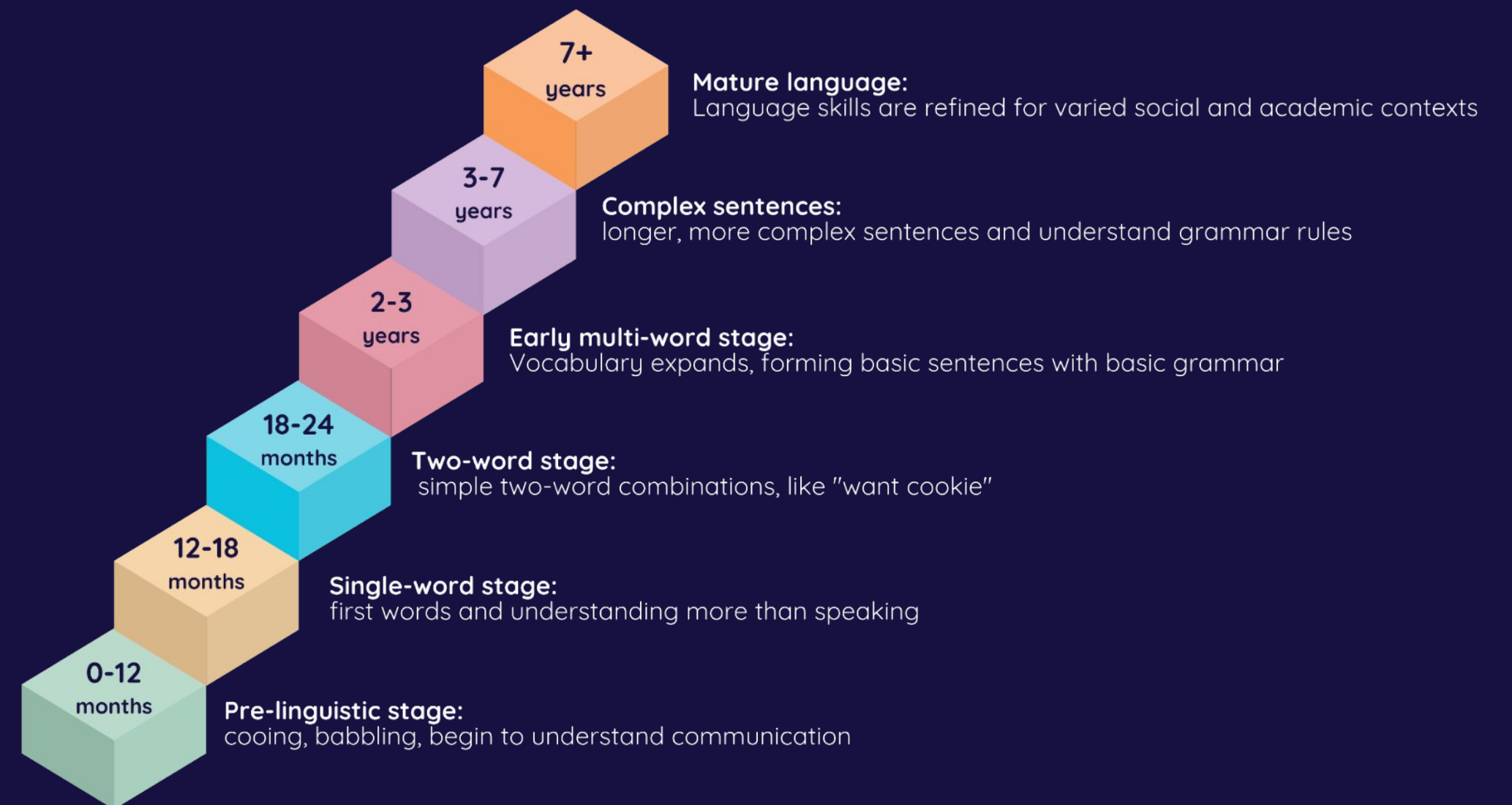
What is language deprivation?

No access to a language in the critical development phase
(0-5 years)

Consequences:

- Cognitive delays
- Social and emotional difficulties
- Difficulties with reading and writing
- Mental health risks

Impact is lifelong



Facts

Less than 2% of deaf children have **early** access to sign language.

Approximately 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents.

Most hearing parents and families do not use sign language.

Why do you think that is?



Individual work: Your language profile

<i>Question / Explanation</i>	<i>Answer</i>
Language at birth / first language What language(s) were you first exposed to as a baby? Think about home or early care.	
Language of parents/caregivers What language(s) do your parents or caregivers use at home when communicating with you?	
Language at school What language(s) are used in your education?	
Language in social contact What language(s) do you use with friends, family, or online?	
Language you understand best In what language(s) do you best understand instructions, explanations, or stories?	
Language you prefer to use In what language(s) do you feel most comfortable communicating?	
Language used in thinking/dreaming In what language(s) do you think, talk to yourself, or dream?	

Exchange experience

If you'd like, please share your language profile.

Questions:

- What languages did you write down?
- How did it feel to think about your language background in this way?
- Were there any surprises while filling in your profile?



Reflection

- What did you learn?
- What surprised or challenged you?



Contact



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