



DEAF  
CULTURE,  
HERITAGE AND  
DIVERSITY

Deaf Studies workshop

# Sign Language

Language acquisition and development

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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.



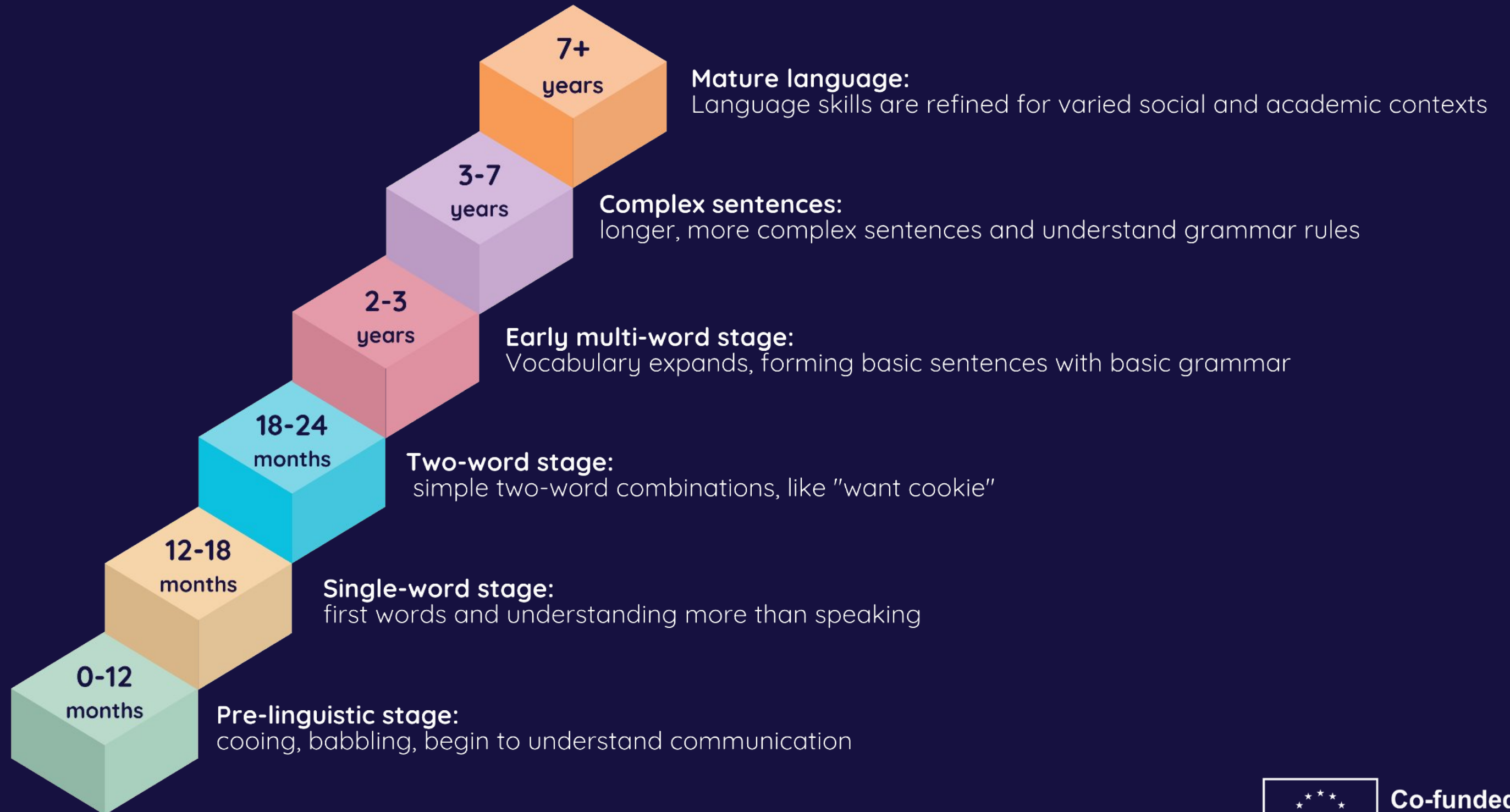
# Theory: language development

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.

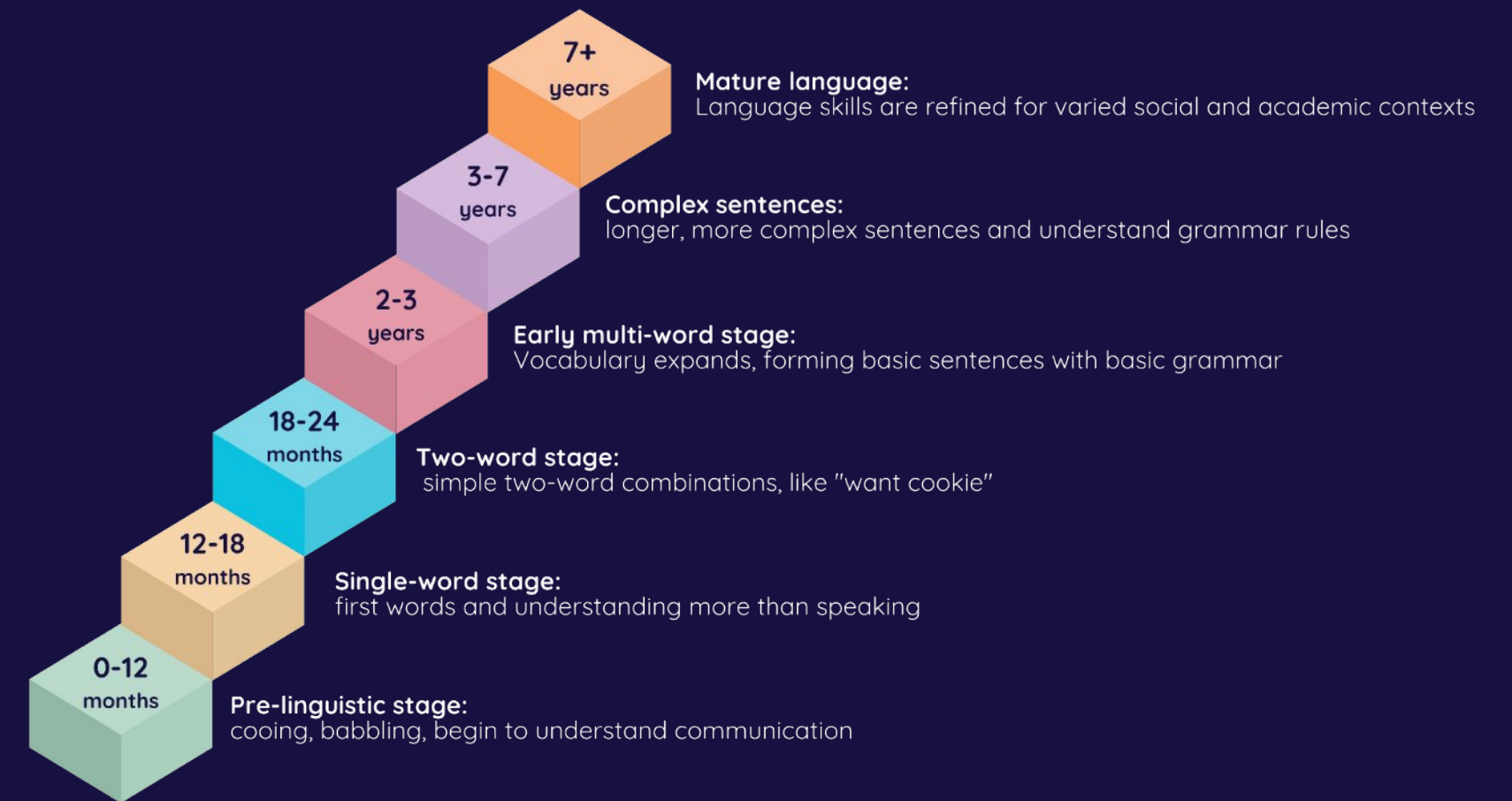
Children need **language** — **not speech** — for healthy development.

# Language development in deaf children

## Connecting to the language development

### stages:

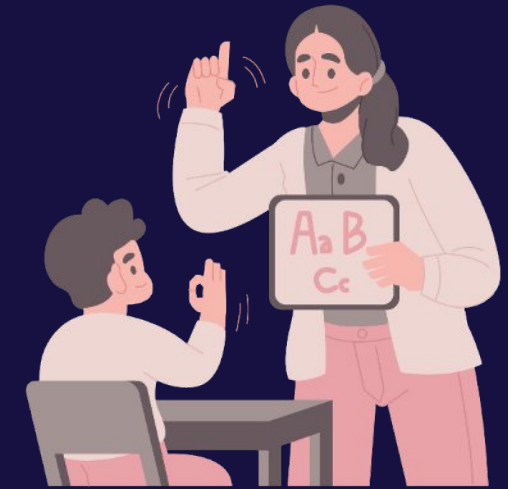
- Early access is essential → Language networks in the brain are formed at a very young age.
- Sign language can support every stage of language development, but “**the earlier, the better!**”
- Children can learn **both** sign language and written/spoken language.



*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.



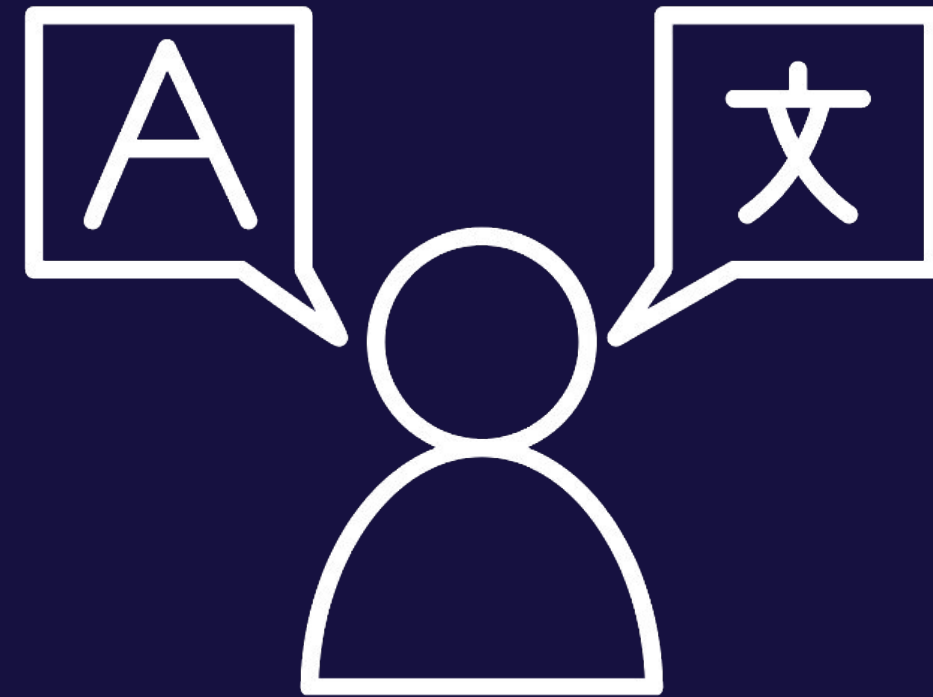
# Bilingualism

## What is bilingualism?

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

## Examples:

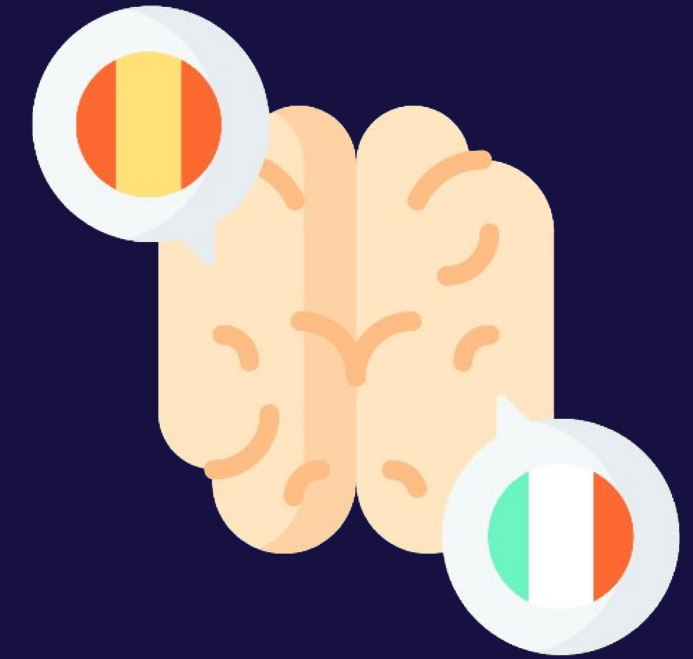
- NGT + written/spoken Dutch
- Written/spoken Dutch + written/spoken English
- NGT + written/spoken Arab
- NGT + written/spoken Dutch + written/spoken English (multilingualism)



# 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?



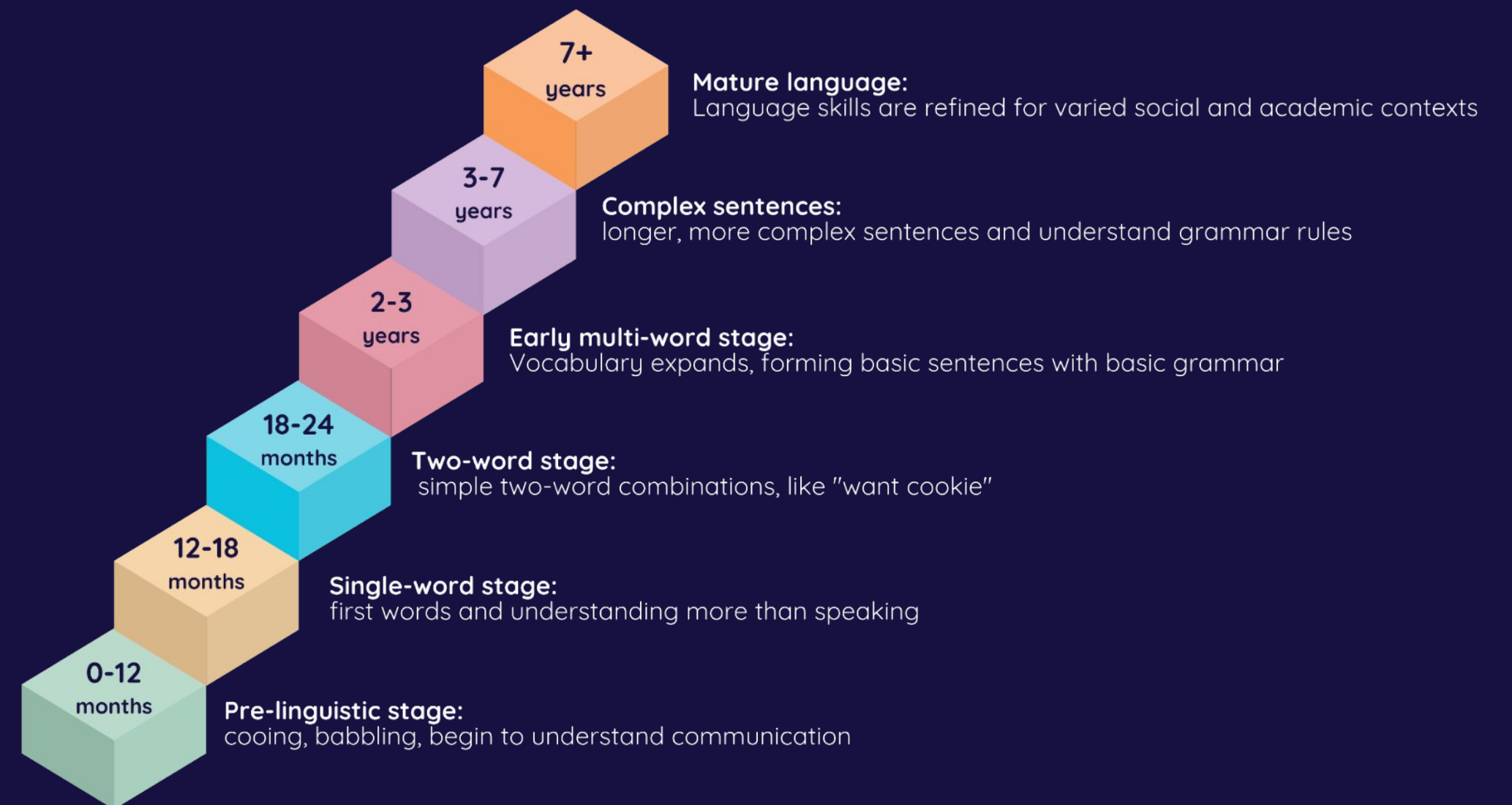
# What is language deprivation?

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

# 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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