



Top Tips for First Words



These tips will benefit children who are using a range of ways to communicate such as body language, pointing, gestures, looking, facial expressions and may have started saying some or several first words.

1 Building Blocks of Communication

Communication is made up of lots of building blocks before children are ready to use spoken words. It is important to continue to build the foundation building blocks of back and forth interaction, attention and listening, play skills and understanding language to help your child grow in expressing themselves using the later building blocks of words and sentences.

2 People play

Help your child learn back and forth interaction by playing games that don't need toys like peekaboo, tickles, chasing, hide and seek. Finger rhymes such as 'round and round the garden' or 'this little piggy' are great for building anticipation. Pause to see if your child shows you they want more. Action rhymes like row row your boat, ring a roses or this little monkey jumping on the bed are great for holding hands while you complete the actions together and pausing to let your child take turns or show you they want more. These are also all great opportunities for simple repetitive language and pausing to allow children to fill in words if they can.

3 Joint or Shared Attention

This is when you both pay attention to the same object or event and is an important skill that helps children learn language. You can build joint attention by playing simple turn taking or 'ready steady go' routines for example passing a ball or car back and forth, taking turns on a slide or ball drop/ click clack track or blowing bubbles – use your child's interests. When you are both paying attention to the same object or action it allows you to model language your child can learn from. For more ideas see Attention & Listening 0-2s or 2-3s top tips sheets.

4 Listening and Understanding

Before children learn how to say a word they will first need to be able to listen to and then understand the word. You can help your child understand language by chatting to them during daily routines and play and looking at books together while pointing at the pictures. Show your child what you mean as you talk by holding up objects, pointing and using gestures. Makaton signs are a great way to teach children their first words – always speak as you sign and you can model the word for your child when they sign. This can be a great bridge for children learning words.

5 Follow your child's lead

Children will learn words they are interested in so it's very important to follow their lead during interactions. Observe your child to see what's caught their attention and what they are communicating. It is important to accept all forms of communication rather than waiting for your child to say the word. When your child communicates a message with you through for example: looking, facial expressions, pointing, body language, Makaton signs or giving you objects this is your opportunity to teach words. Model the word that goes with their communication as you respond to your child. For example if your child gives you their cup, say 'cup' or 'milk', if your child puts their hands up to be lifted you could say 'up', if your child points to an object or picture name it.



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Modelling First Words

First words tend to be loved one's names and social words like 'bye' / 'hi' and everyday or favourite objects so model these at every opportunity. Fun words and sounds such as 'weee!', 'uh oh', 'mmm yum', 'pop', 'sh', animal sounds, vehicle sounds are also a favourite at this age and a great chance to experiment with sounds needed for speech and language – there are lots of fun repetitive activities you could practice these words in as well as songs like 'Old McDonald Had a Farm' and 'Wheels on the Bus'. Clear speech will be the last thing to develop so don't worry if your child misses out or mixes up lots of sounds in words, simply model back the correct version. Children often go through a phase of copying words before they learn to spontaneously say them so it is very important to provide these models for them to first understand and then attempt to copy when they are ready.

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Offer Choices

Hold up objects for your child to choose from, naming each on as you offer it. For example 'water' or 'milk'? for snack time, 'car' or 'ball'? at playtime or 'dinosaur book' or 'digger book' at for story time. When your child shows you which one they want (may be with or without words) give the object straight away, modelling the name again.

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'Whats in the bag' activity

Put everyday objects meaningful to your child and some favourite toys in a cloth bag or pillowcase and take turns to take them out naming the objects and chatting about them as they explore it. Examples could include cup, spoon, socks, teddy, ball, book.

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Joining words together

Usually when children have learned to say around 50 single words, they are ready to start joining 2 words together so you can model this by adding a word on to what they say, for example if your child says 'car' you can say 'big car', 'mummy's car', 'bye car' etc. This is also a good time to introduce more action words such as 'eat, drink, sleep, push, play, throw, kick, cuddle' and describing words like 'big', 'little', 'hot', 'cold', 'soft'.

