Encouraging First Words: Understanding

Learning about first words means learning to understand words and then being able to say them.

A child’s first words are likely to be names of family members, familiar toys or social words such as ‘hiya’, ‘bye-bye’, ‘all gone’. Usually, first words are the ones the child hears over and over again.

Children usually learn to understand words before they attempt to say them.

Strategies to develop understanding of words

- Encourage the child to listen to different sounds in the environment such as cars, animals and the telephone.

- Gain the child’s attention, get down to their level and exchange eye contact when you want them to listen.

- Use simple language

  Talk about what the child is doing or playing with using single words or short phrases.

- Repeat, repeat, repeat

  e.g. “Let’s post the letter. Here’s the letter. You post the letter.”

- Emphasize the important words

  If using short phrases put an emphasis on key words:

  ‘It’s your dinner’,
  ‘Where are your shoes?’

- Use the names of objects

  Instead of using words like ‘it’ and ‘that’ use the object’s name:

  ‘Let’s post the letter’ rather than ‘Let’s post it’.

- Name the thing you child points to or is interested in
Strategies to encourage your child to say words

- **Use choices**

  Give the child choices whenever possible. E.g. ‘banana or grapes’, ‘milk or juice’, ‘a book or a ball’.

  Show him/her the options and name them. He/she may point / reach to what they want then you can name it e.g. ‘oh you want a banana’

- **Encourage any attempt at a word**

  Say the word back to the child even if it is unclear e.g. Child: says ‘gi’  Adult: says: ‘yes it’s your drink’, don’t correct the child, just repeat the right word for them to hear.

  Listen carefully and give the child **time to communicate**. Have your turn and the pause and wait for them to communicate back verbally or through gesture.

- **Take turns** to speak and always **give a response** when the child tries to communicate.

  Encourage the child to **communicate in any way** not just through words e.g. pointing, copying actions/ noises. You can then interpret and say back to the child what they would have said if they could. Next time they might copy you or attempt a word.

  Add one or two words to the child’s attempts to extend their language e.g. child says ‘ball,’ adult replies ‘you want the ball’ or ‘here’s the big ball’

  Set up situations to encourage the child to make a request e.g. put the biscuits in view but out of reach. Wait for your child to communicate they want one. Use the strategies above to model and extend their language.

- **Have a special time** with the child each day. Five to ten minutes where you play with toys, look at picture books or just talk about what you are doing. Use this time to focus on using the strategies to support early language development.
Encouraging First Words: Activities

Activities to Develop Early Language

- **Feely Bag**
  Fill a bag or shoe-box with a few objects. Encourage your child to pull out each object, play with the item while you name it and talk about it.

- **Pretend Play**
  Play with toys such as teddies, tea sets, cars, trains, shops etc. Talk about what your child is doing using single words or simple phrases.

- **Simple repetitive games**
  Play simple games such as rolling a ball to each other, blowing bubbles, tickles, ‘peekaboo’ and repeat the same phrases again and again e.g. ‘mummy’s ball’, ‘Ben’s ball’, ‘again’, ‘more’

- **Daily Activities**
  During daily activities (e.g. getting dressed, washed, brushing teeth) repeat the same words and use simple phrases each time you do the routine e.g. ‘coat on’, ‘gloves on’, ‘hat on’, ‘wash tummy’.

- **Singing Nursery Rhymes**
  Singing nursery rhymes with the child is fun. Do actions as much as possible as these help the children understand what they are singing about. Also use an object to that shows them what they are singing about.
  ‘Twinkle, twinkle’ – have a toy star shape
  ‘Wheels on bus’ – have a toy bus
  ‘Incy, wincy, spider’ – have a toy spider

  Leave a pause at the end of a line and wait for the child to fill in with either an action or a word.