

First words - understanding

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

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

Key strategies for supporting understanding of first words:

Talk to the child when you are playing together.

Have fun with **nursery rhymes and songs**, especially those with actions.

Encourage the child to **listen to different sounds** in their 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.

Offer choices whenever possible e.g. 'banana or grapes?', 'milk or juice?', 'a book or a ball?' Show them the options and name them. They may point or reach to the one they want, then you can name it e.g. 'oh you want a banana'.

Use simple language to **comment on what the child is doing or playing with** using single words or short phrases. Label the objects and actions with single words e.g. 'ball', 'cat', 'car', 'jump', 'walk' and so on.

Use lots of **repetition** e.g. say shoes off, blue shoes, mummy's shoes etc.

Create verbal routines – use the same words each time you do something e.g. night night sleep tight, or ready steady go!!!

Emphasize the important words e.g. '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 e.g. 'Let's post the letter' rather than 'Let's post it'.

First words – speaking

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.

Remember that communication is not just about "talking". It can start with signing, an attempt at a word, a noise, a gesture, eye pointing, or any other attempt to get your attention – all steps in the right direction!

Key strategies for encouraging your child to say words:

Use choices whenever possible e.g. 'banana or grapes?', 'milk or juice?', 'a book or a ball?'. Accept pointing or reaching, and model the name of the one they wanted.

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.

Always **give a response** when the child tries to communicate – this reinforces the success of talking to you.

Encourage any attempt at a word – if a word attempt was unclear, simply model a clear word that you think they might have meant e.g. your child says 'gi', you can say 'yes it's your drink'.

Allow your child **plenty of time to communicate**. Have your turn and then pause and wait for them to communicate back verbally or through gesture. The more we stimulate the child, the less opportunities there are to communicate spontaneously – we need to back off sometimes!!

Create opportunities to use words by setting 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 that they want one.

Sabotage familiar routines – for example, start a song or put your hand on the door handle, and then pause expectantly. Allow them time to request the next bit – model the word they could use if needed.

Try to have a **special talking time** with the child each day. Take 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. Fit in more "talking times" each day if you can!

First words – some ideas to try

It is helpful to choose just a few words to focus on over a period of time. Repeat your chosen words in lots of different activities. Here are some different types of first words to try.

Do not put pressure on the child to copy or say words. Have fun with the activity and don't worry if it's you saying the words most of the time. Your child will be listening and will use words when they are ready.

People's names

Often a child's first words are the names of the people close to them, e.g. Mummy, Daddy, Nana.

- Repeat people's names lots of times, e.g. 'It's Mummy!', 'Look at Mummy', 'Mummy's eating an ice-cream'.
- Look at photographs/videos and talk about who you can see and what they are doing.
- Don't forget pets' names!
- Take turns with ball games, bubbles or building bricks. Use repetitive phrases to name the person whose turn it is, e.g. 'Mummy's turn', 'Daddy's turn', 'Jonny's turn'.
- When out for a walk/shopping, talk together about the people and families you can see, e.g. 'There's a baby', 'Baby's with her daddy'.
- The same applies to names of favourite characters e.g. Spiderman or Disney princesses!

Social words

'Hello' and 'Bye bye' are easy words to practice:

- Practice whenever anyone comes into view, or leaves a room. It will help to do an action like waving as well as saying the word.
- Say 'Hello' and 'Bye bye' to the toys when you get them out or put them away, e.g. 'Hello bricks', 'Bye bye dolly'.
- Use a toy phone to encourage greeting words.

'Thank you' or 'ta'

- Play give and take games. Say 'thank you' or 'ta' as you take the object or toy. Ta is easier to say than thank you. Children that start saying Ta easily move on to saying Thank you when they are ready.

'Boo!'

- Take turns to hide behind something – an object or your hands. Say 'Boo!' as you reappear.
- Look back around a door as you leave and say "boo!"

'Go!'

- Play games which involve 'ready, steady go' e.g. ball rolling, car rolling, running, building towers and knocking them down. Try and build the anticipation to make the 'GO!' really exciting.
- Add "go!" into walks, or playing on swings or slides.

First words – some ideas to try

Names for common objects and toys

Talk about the things your child is interested in – **use single words rather than sentences.**

- ‘Drink’, ‘bottle’, ‘nappy’, ‘dinner’, ‘car’, ‘bed’, ‘ball’, ‘teddy’, ‘book’.
- 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.
- Make a 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.
- Look at pictures in books and name them, or match them with real objects.
- Hide toys under a cloth and ask “where’s the car?” “Here’s the car!” and so on.

Making requests

‘**More**’ is a useful word for children to learn as it can be used in lots of different situations.

- Snack-time/dinner-time. When your child reaches out, or pushes his/her plate towards you to ask for some more, say ‘More’, ‘More please!’ as you give them more. Later pause before you give them more to see if they attempt the word.
- Play bubbles, making sure you only blow a few at once. When your child looks or makes a noise say ‘More bubbles?’
- Choose a favourite toy which your child needs your help to use properly, e.g. a spinning top. When it stops, ask ‘More?’

Important note: It is not recommended to insist on saying “please”, until your child is using lots of words to request things first – although it is polite, this word often ends up being used to ask for everything and can stop other words being learnt and used. This can happen with “more” too – be careful to make sure to work on the names for the objects as well.

Making comments

‘**All gone**’ or ‘**gone**’

- During snack-time/dinnertime give small amounts of food so that your child finishes what’s on his/her plate. Say ‘All gone,’ and offer more.
- Say “gone!” when bubbles pop.
- When someone leaves the room, e.g. Daddy, say ‘Daddy gone’.
- Say “gone” as you put each toy away in a box

‘**Uh-oh**’

- Drop a toy off a surface. As it falls, say ‘uh oh!’ with lots of facial expression and anticipation that your child might laugh / try to copy.
- Say “uh-oh” when mistakes happen naturally

Body parts

- During lap play, point out and name your child’s body parts, e.g. ‘eyes’, ‘nose’, ‘tummy’
- Name parts of the body as you wash or dry them, e.g. ‘Where’s your nose?’, ‘Let’s wash your nose’
- Sing ‘Head, shoulders ,knees and toes’ and carry out the actions.