First Words

Developing First Words

The first words children learn tend to be those they hear around them every day and the words that are important to them. The first words to develop are the names of familiar people (mummy, daddy), social words (hiya, bye-bye), words like ‘all gone’ which are good when playing hiding games and the names of objects (book, cat). At a later stage your child will start to learn action words (drink, kick). Your child will understand words before they can say them, e.g. they may be able to find a cup before they can say the word, ‘cup’.

It is important not to demand speech from your child, as this will increase the pressure on your child and does not help them to use words.

Ways to help your child develop their first words:

- Name objects when you do everyday tasks as this will help your child to understand words
- Talk about what you are doing together using simple language e.g. ‘up stairs’, ‘down stairs’, ‘wash your hands’
- Use pointing and gestures as well as speech to help your child understand. Remember to respond if your child uses gestures or pointing
- Repeat new words often and in different situations, as your child needs to hear a word many times before they can use it

Help your child to use greetings, for example waving, and saying hiya or bye-bye.

- Avoid using “empty” words, such as “this” and “that”
- Comment on things rather than ask questions
- Give your child chance to talk by offering them choices e.g. “do you want an apple or a banana?”
- Slow down your speech as this will help your child to understand
- Give your child a chance to say a word by leaving a short gap before you finish your sentence e.g. ‘I have found a …. (truck)
- Do not correct your child’s speech. Accept your child’s attempts to name things and model back what they are trying to say, e.g. the child says, ‘gog’ and you say, ‘Yes, it’s a dog’
- Repeat and expand what your child says, e.g. your child says, ‘dog’. You can expand this by saying, ‘Yes, the dog’s eating’

Activities to develop first words:

- Encourage your child to play with teddies and dolls in everyday activities – e.g. pretending to feed the toys and put them to bed. Remember to talk about what your child is doing
- Help your child use early words such as
  - ‘more’ when wanting more drink or food
  - ‘again’ using wind up toys and when blowing bubbles
  - ‘go’ when playing ‘ready steady go’ games e.g. on the swings
- **Sharing books**
  - Let your child take the lead. You don’t have to start at the beginning of the book, as the main aim is to keep the child’s interest at this stage
  - Look at a book together and encourage your child to find things, e.g. ‘Where’s the dog?’ ‘Can you see the house?’
  - Remember you can say the words for your child
  - You can expand your child’s language by repeating what they have said and then adding a little more e.g. if your child says ‘car’ – you could say ‘Daddy’s car’

- **Play hide-and-seek with objects**
  - Scatter the objects around the room (but don’t make them too hard to find)
  - Tell your child to find a specific object (find the ball)
  - Let them have a turn to tell you which object to find

- **Posting game**
  - Make a post-box from an old cereal or shoebox
  - Gather a selection of objects or pictures.
  - Ask your child to post objects or pictures that you name (remember to only ask for one object at a time)
  - Let your child have a turn to tell you what to post

- **Feely bag**
  - Find a bag or pillowcase
  - Collect a few familiar objects (about 3 to 6 items depending on your child’s level of concentration)
  - Place the objects in front of your child and name them one at a time. As you name each object, encourage your child to find it and put it in the bag
  - Once all the objects are in the bag you can play a ‘naming game’. Encourage your child to put their hand in the bag, select an object and name it
  - When your child has a good variety of naming words, try some action words like, kicking, jumping, drinking, eating, walking, washing
  - Have a teddy or doll each and act out the actions. Take turns at giving instructions to each other. Ask your child to ‘Make teddy jump,’ and encourage them to tell you what your teddy should do
  - Use action words to comment on real life situations e.g. at bedtime talk about sleeping (“Adam’s sleeping”) or at meal times talk about eating (“Daddy’s eating chips”)

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