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Encouraging First Words

Simple Strategies to Help Your Child Communicate

Every child learns to talk at their own pace, but there are many ways you can encourage communication during everyday routines. The best language learning happens through play, connection, and conversation.

What Counts as a First Word?

A first word is a word your child uses **consistently and intentionally** to communicate.

Examples:

- Mama
- Dada
- Ball
- Bye-bye
- More
- Up
- Dog
- Hi
- Uh-oh

Words don't have to be pronounced perfectly. If your child consistently says "ba" for "ball," it still counts as a meaningful word.

Remember

Your child doesn't need special toys or expensive programs to learn language.

The greatest gift you can give is your time, attention, and conversation.

Every cuddle, every book, every song, and every shared smile helps build the foundation for communication.



10 Ways to Encourage First Words

1. Follow Your Child's Lead

Join your child in whatever captures their interest.

If they're playing with cars, talk about cars.

If they're watching bubbles, talk about bubbles.

Children learn best when they are engaged.

2. Talk Throughout the Day

Narrate everyday activities.

Examples:

- "Wash hands."
- "Open the door."
- "Time to eat!"
- "Let's put on your shoes."

Simple, repetitive language helps children learn.

3. Use Short, Simple Sentences

Keep your language just one step above your child's level.

Instead of:

"Let's go outside because it's such a beautiful day."

Try:

"Outside!"

"Let's go outside!"

"Open door."

Shorter sentences are easier to understand and imitate.



4. Repeat Important Words

Children learn through repetition.

If you're playing with a ball:

"Ball."

"Big ball."

"Roll the ball."

"Throw the ball."

Hearing words many times helps them stick.

5. Pause and Wait

After saying something, pause for **5–10 seconds**.

Give your child time to:

- Look
- Gesture
- Make a sound
- Attempt a word

Children often need extra processing time before responding.

6. Offer Choices

Instead of asking yes/no questions, offer two choices.

Examples:

- "Apple or banana?"
- "Car or truck?"
- "Milk or water?"

Pause and wait for any attempt to communicate.



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7. Create Opportunities to Communicate

Sometimes it's okay to make your child ask.

Try:

- Put a favorite toy just out of reach.
- Offer only a few crackers at a time.
- Hand them a closed container.

Wait to see if they look, point, gesture, or vocalize before helping.

8. Read Together Every Day

Books build vocabulary.

You don't have to read every word.

Instead:

- Point to pictures.
- Name objects.
- Make animal sounds.
- Let your child turn the pages.

Even 10 minutes a day makes a difference.

9. Sing Songs

Songs naturally teach rhythm, words, and turn-taking.

Favorites include:

- Wheels on the Bus
- Old MacDonald
- Itsy Bitsy Spider
- Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star

Pause before a familiar word and let your child fill it in.



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10. Celebrate Every Attempt

Communication begins long before words.

Celebrate:

- ✓ Eye contact
- ✓ Pointing
- ✓ Gestures
- ✓ Babbling
- ✓ Sounds
- ✓ Word attempts

Every attempt is an important step toward talking.

Words to Teach First

Choose words your child can use often.

Great first words include:

- ♥ Mama
- ♥ Dada
- ♥ More
- ♥ Up
- ♥ Go
- ♥ Ball
- ♥ Book
- ♥ Car
- ♥ Dog
- ♥ Bye
- ♥ Hi
- ♥ Eat
- ♥ Milk
- ♥ All done
- ♥ Help



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Functional words are often more useful than simply naming objects.

Limit Screen Time

Children learn language from people—not screens.

The most powerful language builders are:

- Face-to-face conversations
 - Reading together
 - Playing together
 - Singing
 - Everyday routines
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When Should I Be Concerned?

Talk with your pediatrician or a speech-language pathologist if your child:

- Is not babbling by **12 months**.
- Uses few or no words by **18 months**.
- Has fewer than **50 words by 24 months**.
- Is not combining two words by **24 months**.
- Doesn't respond to their name consistently.
- Doesn't point, wave, or use gestures by 12–15 months.
- Loses words or communication skills they previously used.
- You have concerns about their communication at any age.

Early support can make a meaningful difference.

1st Foundations Pediatric Therapy

Helping children build strong foundations for lifelong success through expert virtual speech and feeding therapy.
Serving families across Virginia and North Carolina