



Ideas to support the development of first words

General strategies

- Modelling language. Label objects and actions in real life and in pictures. Use slow, simple, repetitive speech when talking to the child. Always use real words not 'babytalk'. Remember that the child will need to hear the words many, many times before they'll start to use them.
- Wait for the child to ask, gesture, or sign for a toy on a shelf, rather than just getting it for him/her. Do not anticipate the child's need or desires before s/he has a chance to make them known to you. If the child gets what he wants without communicating for it, s/he will be less motivated to point, gesture or ask.
- Delay your responses to the child's pointing, gestures or babbling when s/he wants things. Pretend you don't understand what s/he wants to see if the child will try to verbally communicate. Pausing allows the child another chance to verbally express himself/herself.
- Use sign language. The use of sign language with young children encourages language development and does not hinder it! It helps children develop communication skills even if they are still struggling to speak with words
- Read books with them. Choose colourful books with large, simple pictures. Talk about the pictures rather than just reading the text. Encourage interaction from the child by sometimes leaving a gap e.g. 'this one's a'. Point to what you are talking about.
- Enjoy making sounds – animal sounds, silly sounds (raspberries, sneezing etc), 'babble' sounds (bababab, mememe, dodododo etc) Good practice and improves child's confidence to 'have a go'.

Specific activities and games for one-to-one time or a small group

For all of these activities first check that the child understands the vocabulary. We are working on their expressive language, i.e. the child using words, so need to be sure s/he knows the vocabulary.

- Decide which target words to work on first – choose about 10 object words – things that the child is interested in e.g. ball, car, teddy. Collect up the objects and put them in a box or bag. Play games with the objects on a daily basis. First check that the child understands the vocabulary – ask him/her to post the objects back into the box when you ask, or give you the object you ask for. Then encourage the child to start naming the objects. Don't worry if speech isn't clear – praise any attempt to try the words. Use the 'fill in the gap' technique, e.g. 'It's a – yes, it's a car! – good talking!' Vary the activity – put the objects in a feely bag, use a box with a slot cut out as a post box, play hide and seek with the objects under a cloth - but always focus on the child saying the names.

- Use 'first words' type picture books, ideally with one large picture on each page and photos are best if possible. If you can't find commercial versions make your own using scrapbooks (these are often better as you can then personalise the contents to fit the child's interests). Use the book on a regular basis – naming the pictures with the child and then encouraging him/her to tell you what's in the picture.
- Simple picture lotto or snap type games – many commercial games have too many pictures or the pictures aren't really clear, so choose carefully, or make your own using photos of real objects. 6 pictures on a lotto board and 6 sets of pairs for snap or pairs games is plenty. Focus on the child listening to you modelling the vocabulary and then naming the pictures themselves as you play.
- You can use the pictures for lots of other games too e.g. posting into a post box or attach them to plastic bottles or skittles and try to knock each one over with a bean bag –'what did you knock over Sam?'.
 - For all the activities above keep a simple record of new vocabulary the child is starting to use. Record when the child uses the words during target activities and also when you start to hear the words during the child's free play.
 - Once the child is using 20-40 single words start to work on putting simple 2-3 word phrases together e.g. kick ball, car gone, more bricks. You may well find that this starts to happen naturally as you work on the above activities together.
 - Make sure all staff (and parent/carers) know the words you are working on so that they can reinforce them during free play and at other times.
 - Think about:
 - Body parts
 - Action words – jump, sit, run, cuddle, paint etc
 - Animal names
 - Clothing
 - Household objects - cup, plate, spoon
 - Toys
 - Transport
 - People – children's names, staff, family
 - Food
 - Things outside – tree, sand, fence, grass

Don't try to introduce concepts such as colours, shapes, size, prepositions (under, on top etc) until the child has a good core vocabulary of nouns and basic verbs.