



**Down's Syndrome
Association**

A Registered Charity No. 1061474

Communication Series



D3. Early Language: Developing First Words

Our resources and Information Team are here to help

Please see our website for up-to-date information: www.downs-syndrome.org.uk
If you would like to talk about the activities or where to start, then please get in touch with our helpline by calling 0333 1212 300 or by emailing us on info@downs-syndrome.org.uk.

Helpline Monday - Friday 10am-4pm | Telephone: 0333 1212 300

About First Words

First words are learned by copying and by hearing the word many times in different situations. Individual children take varying amounts of time to learn new words. Information in this section includes:

- [How to encourage talking](#)
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- [Developing first words](#)
- [Encouraging use of first words](#)

Children learn words with many different meanings. These include names, action words and describing words. Some common early words include:

- **Naming words:** mummy, daddy, car, dog, ball, shoe, banana, baby, own name
- **Action words:** fall down, push, sleep, drink
- **Social words:** hello, bye-bye, more, no, again
- **Describing words:** hot, cold, yucky, good, mine, broken
- **Location words:** up, down, in, out, down, here

How to encourage talking

This section focuses on naming words and action words. Children need to understand the meaning of words before they will say them. The activities in Early Language: Developing Understanding help to encourage spoken words. You can use these activities when you are certain your child understands the word.

When encouraging your child to say words:

1. Model the words so your child can practice by imitation. Modelling can include:

- Talking through routines and activities. This 'gives' your child the language.
- Playing with your child, following her lead and commenting on what she is doing. For example, 'push the car', 'hug teddy'..
- Singing nursery rhymes and songs.
- Short bursts of structured activities to practise targeted words. For example, posting pictures, pulling objects out of a bag, and structured play activities (play with chosen toys which are based on the words you are teaching your child).
- Use lots of repetition.
- Use simple, clear sentences, emphasising key words.
- Never force your child to say or copy a word. Just make sure he hears the word clearly lots of times, and in different situations.

2. Create opportunities for your child to speak:

- Talk about something that she seems interested in.
- Leave extra time for her to respond.

3. Respond to all vocalisations and word attempts as if your child is saying the real word.

4. Interpret your child's sounds as words by:

- Recognise the different ways your child tries to communicate. He may gesture, point, vocalise and/or attempt to say a word. First attempts to say words may be a single sound like 'b' for 'ball' or 'mm' for 'more'.
- Interpret what you think your child means, by saying the correct word. It is usually obvious what your child is trying to say, because first words relate to things in context. For example, your child might attempt to say 'ball' when looking at a picture of a ball, and may say 'more' when she wants more food.
- Emphasise the word as you repeat it.
- Say and sign the word at the same time.

5. Repeat your child's sounds and words.

If you do not know what he is trying to say, repeat back the sounds to acknowledge their vocalisation. If he says the word clearly, repeat back 'That's right! Ball'.

6. Expand your child's word into a simple sentence.

For example, she says 'ball', and you say 'kick the ball'; she says 'more' and you say 'more bubbles'.

7. Prompt your child by helping him to use the words he knows.

You can do this by starting a sentence and letting him finish. For example, 'Let's wash your...'. If he does not respond, you can try adding a visual cue. E.g. Give him the flannel, sign the word, point to the body part or a picture.

8. Provide choices so your child can say or sign a word to choose.

For example, 'Would you like the teddy or the ball?' Give her the toy even if the word she says isn't clear, and accept a sign as if she said the word. Say and sign the word again when you give her the toy.

9. Remember to facilitate communication rather than communicate for your child.

For example, when someone asks him 'Would you like juice or water?'. If he looks at you to respond for him, repeat the question, and say and sign the key words 'juice' and 'water' to him. Encourage him to point, sign and/or say the word to make his choice. Encourage him to look at and respond to the person originally asking the question.

First words and how to choose them

You may want to focus on one or two words for a week or a month, depending on what is right for your child.

Some suggestions: bye-bye, mummy, cup, biscuit, banana, drink, dog, gone, finished, more, mine, daddy, sit, down, up, look, no more, come here, pretty, stop.

When choosing which words to teach consider the following:

- Choose words that are familiar to your child and will be heard frequently so they can be practised every day.
- Choose words that offer your child control over her environment, things she is interested in and words that give her an opportunity to react to something other people say.
- Choose words from a number of different categories (e.g. food, toys, people, transport) to offer your child many opportunities to speak, or to react to something that has happened.

- Keep a list of words your child uses in each category. This will help you plan your target words.
- Choose between two and five target words at a time.

The first words you choose should occur naturally in everyday situations.

Emphasise them as you say them.

Sign them.

Repeat them.

Use them alone and in short sentences.

For example, 'Gone, Daddy's gone. He's gone to work.' 'Daddy's gone, bye-bye. Mummy's gone. Gone bye-bye.'

This will help your child hear the word clearly and understand its meaning. Give your child the opportunity to imitate the word, and then use it in the right situation.

Imitating: Encourage your child to repeat the word when you feel he understands the meaning. Correct pronunciation is not important at this stage. Reward your child for any efforts made eg. Gone? That's right. Daddy's gone.

Practice: When your child can copy the word, provide lots of opportunities for practice.

Pause to allow your child to use the word.

Use questions: 'Where's Daddy?'

Comment: 'I wonder where Daddy is...'

Generalisation: Use the word in different situations. This will help your child become familiar with the word and the different ways it can be used.

Put objects away. They're 'gone' or 'all gone'.

Hide object for finding. Ask 'where's X gone?'

Help your child to find it 'Here it is'.

Talk about all the things that can be 'gone' throughout the day eg. 'dog gone', 'bird gone', 'car gone'.

Remember...

You will need to model each new word **MANY** times before your child attempts to imitate.



Encourage by:

- Using gesture or signs to emphasise the new word.
- Use lots of facial and voice expression to make the new word seem interesting.
- Keep learning situations natural and fun.
- Ask family and friends to use the new word too.
- Create opportunities for you and your child to use new words.
- Siblings and other children provide particularly interesting models for children learning new words.
- Use daily events, such as car drives and shopping trips, to use new words
- Always reinforce your child's speech attempts with interest, attention, hugs, verbal praise etc.

Developing First Words

Most new words are best learnt by including them in your routine and daily activities. You can play specific games to encourage target words but this section gives suggestions for developing new words in everyday life.

When your child begins to copy words you can use this copying to develop her expressive language skills. Here are some ideas about how to do this.

When talking or doing activities with your child, focus on a few words or short phrases and repeat them many times. This repetition gives your child lots of exposure to a small amount of language.

Eg. Bricks: 'Building the bricks', 'up, up, up, up', 'Uh-oh fell down'.

Always talk about what is happening right now and what your child is interested in. This helps him to learn what the words mean.

Provide opportunities for your child to use a word by pausing after you speak or pausing before the last word in a phrase.

Eg. 'Uh-oh fell...', 'look a...'

If your child likes singing and music, use this to encourage her to talk.

Choose repetitive songs with actions.

Here are some to try:

- Old Macdonald.
- Five Little Ducks.
- Twinkle Little Star.
- Wheels on the Bus.
- Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes.

Sing the songs slowly so your child can keep up and has a chance to join in. Try pausing before singing the last word in a sentence to see if he will say it.

Eg. 'Five little....ducks'.

Here are some suggestions of words/phrases to target in different activities:

- **Meals:** hot, eat, drink, food/drink names.
- **Playdough:** roll, push, cut, snake.
- **Bath time:** wash, splash, hot, cold, bubbles, body parts.
- **Blocks:** up, fall down, big, on, uh-oh.
- **Craft:** cut, open, sticky, paint.
- **Music:** bang, move, noisy.

Encouraging Use of Action Words

Action words explain what someone or something is doing.

Choose three common action words from this list to work on.

Focus on one at a time. When your child can demonstrate that action (eg. sit down, make dolly sit, show the puppet how to sit down) 4/5 times in different situations, move onto another.

| | |
|--------------|--------------|
| Eat | Go |
| Walk | Sleep |
| Look | Jump |
| Stop | Wash |
| Pull | Take |
| Drink | Pat |
| Run | Sit |
| Watch | Kick |
| Stand | Brush |
| Push | Put |
| Dry | Love |
| Come | |



Activities

1. Give your child lots of practice at the actions in a range of situations

For example: wash self; wash doll; wash doll's hair; wash tea set after tea party; wash dog; wash truck, etc.

2. Use play to practise the actions in make believe situations

For example: cooking, playdough, cars, blocks, toy animals, toy people, miniature furniture, doll's house, toy garages/shops, etc. Say the word as you do the action.

- **Cooking:** eating, drinking, stirring, pouring
- **Playdough:** rolling, cutting, squeezing, poking
- **Ball:** throwing, kicking, pushing

3. Look through picture books with your child. Name actions and mime the action.

For example, say, 'He's brushing his hair' while miming brushing your hair.

Look at books as a part of your bedtime routine. Talk about what people and animals are doing. Avoid asking lots of questions. Model short sentences that describe an action.

For example 'The dog is running', 'the boy is kicking the ball', 'the children are playing'.

It is important to pause and allow time for your child to respond to what you say. Try to expand on anything your child says. For example: Child: 'girl swim' Adult: 'Yes, she is swimming in the pool.'

4. Your child can 'post' action picture cards in a 'post box'.

5. Look through old magazines, newspapers, advertisements together and cut out any pictures of action words.

You and your child can stick them in a scrapbook. Talk about what people and animals are doing.

6. Take advantage of or create situations where we use verbs.

Model sentences, expand on your child's sentences, use the same action word with different objects (e.g. wash dolly, wash hands, wash hair).

Here are some examples of action words you might target during daily activities:

- **Cooking and preparing food:** stir, open, cut, make, spread.
- **Bath time/water play:** wash, pour, gone, splash.
- **Outdoor play:** throw, catch, chase, push, swing.

7. Play a mime game in which you both do actions (e.g. sleeping, brushing hair and brushing teeth).

You can provide a model and encourage your child to repeat the model by starting the sentence and pausing for them to say the action; doing the action and looking at them to see if they will label it; signing the action.

8. Take turns giving directions

For example, one person tells the other to do something and the other has to do it. Then swap over. Have everyday items which prompt action words to encourage use of action words in this activity (eg. toothbrush, ball, brush, jars to open, pen and paper, cup and jug of water, etc.). Target words might be, 'brush hair', 'draw a tractor'.

The Down's Syndrome Association provides information and support on all aspects of living with Down's syndrome.

We also work to champion the rights of people with Down's syndrome, by campaigning for change and challenging discrimination.

A wide range of Down's Syndrome Association publications can be downloaded free of charge from our website.

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