

Your Child's First Words

(Reprinted from Parent-Child Guide Book, Volume 4-2, December 1997)

One of the first questions that parents will ask a speech-language pathologist is "How many words should my child be saying?". Just because it is the most common question, doesn't mean it is the easiest one to answer. You will probably get an answer that sounds something like this: "There is a wide range of differences between children in their learning to say words. Some children begin talking very early, saying their first word at eight or nine months; while other children may not produce their first word until almost two years of age."

Children often produce their first meaningful word at around one year of age. First words are usually the name of favourite toys (such as "Barnie") or foods ("juice"), family members ("Momma") or pets. Besides naming things, single words can also be used to make requests ("Up" means "I want up"), comments ("Hot" means "The stove is hot"), and inquiries ("Allgone" means "Is my juice all gone?"). "It Takes Two to Talk" is a parent's guide to helping children communicate, which is published by The Hanen Centre in Toronto. This guide provides a list of early single words in the following categories: food, body parts, household objects, clothing, outside objects, toys, important people, words that describe, social words, words that express feelings, action words, and location words.

Parents may attempt to teach young children words that are too abstract to have any meaning for the child. Concepts such as numbers, shapes or colours are not usually among the earlier words that a child says. Children like to talk about things that are very real to them. For a child just learning to use words, it is very difficult for them to know what "three" is or what "red" is. These words come later, when they begin to expand their single words into two-word sentences, as in "red cup".

It is common for parents to focus on teaching children names of things, so the child can go around the room labeling every object in sight. However, this kind of vocabulary is limiting for a child; without verbs or action words, the child may not be able to take the next step in language development: two words at a time. These two-word phrases are the beginnings of the grammatical sentences that we use in adult language.

If you have any concerns about your child's words or other aspects of speech and language development, contact a speech-language pathologist, or ask your family physician.

This program was offered in September 1997; however, insufficient families expressed an interest in the program.

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