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First Words

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There isn't a more exciting time in a parent's life than when his/her baby starts doing things for the first time... his first smile, first time pushing up from lying on his tummy, first time rolling over, first time sitting up without support, first time crawling, his first words (especially when those first words include "mama" or "dada")... So when does a baby begin to talk?

Before a baby even begins making sounds, he/she is watching and listening to the people surrounding him/her. The baby is observing gestures, sounds, facial expressions, actions, and movements. At the age of 3-6 months, babies begin gurgling, cooing, and babbling (i.e., playing with different sounds). They start understanding some words at 6-9 months of age and imitating sounds at 5-10 months. Then finally, as children transition from being "babies" to being "toddlers" at 12-15 months of age, they begin using their first meaningful words. (Common first words include "mama," "dada," "hi," "bye," "juice," "milk," "doggy," etc.)

Why Do Toddlers Begin To Communicate?

Toddlers begin using words for many reasons. Their first words are often nouns such as words used to label objects, people, or pets (e.g., "ball," "mama," "dada," and "doggy") or words used to satisfy their wants and needs (e.g., "juice," "milk," and "cookie"). They can also use their first words for greetings such as "hi" and "bye."

As toddlers experience success at communicating with words, their vocabulary will grow. It grows slowly at first but around the age of 19-20 months, new words develop rapidly. Toddlers will start adding verbs (e.g., "go," "play," and "eat"), adjectives (e.g., "big," "loud," and "hot"), and prepositions (e.g., "up," "out," and "off") into their vocabulary. They also start putting words together and asking simple questions (like "What's that?").



What Can I Do To Make My Baby/Toddler Talk?

Some toddlers take a little longer to start talking. While you can't make a baby/toddler talk, there are some things you can do to lay the foundation for him/her to begin using words:

- Pay attention when your child makes sounds or uses gestures.** Your child may be attempting to communicate with you. When you respond to your child's attempts at communication, it shows your child that communication is important and helps to obtain his/her wants and needs.
- Imitate your child's vocalizations, facial expressions, and gestures, then wait for a response.** This shows your child that what he/she is communicating is important and means something to you. It also teaches him/her the back-and-forth pattern of communication.

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- **Play and interact with your child.** When you play with your child, model language for him/her. The more you interact with your child and model language for him/her, the more he/she will learn about words, their meaning, communication, and language.



- **Give your child the opportunity to communicate.** While it may be easier to anticipate your child's needs and give them what you think they will want, encourage your child to make attempts to request what he/she wants. Reward any attempt your child makes to show him/her the effectiveness of communication.



- **Talk to your child often and label everything.** Daily routines present parents with great opportunities to label objects and activities that are familiar to their child. This helps the child learn that words have meaning, and it helps him/her to associate the words with their meanings.

While there are some approximate milestones for typical language development, there are no set-in-stone deadlines. Some children may achieve milestones early while others may take a little bit longer to develop these skills. If you have concerns about your child's development, consult your pediatrician. For more information about earlier speech and language development (from Birth to 12 months), see Handy Handout #15: Early Language Development.



Resources:

"Baby Talk: A Month-By-Month Timeline," accessed July 26, 2017, <http://www.parents.com/baby/development/talking/baby-talk-a-month-by-month-timeline1/>

"Your Baby's First Words," accessed July 21, 2017, <http://www.webmd.com/parenting/baby-talk-your-babys-first-words#1>

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