

# First Words

by Linda Mawhinney &  
Mary Scott McTeague



During the first year of life, a baby reaches out for an object and can't quite get it. The baby cries, an adult turns to him/her, and says, "*Here sweetie, let me get that for you.*" Ahhh communication!

Children learn early that their voice makes all the big people accommodate their needs. Speech, however, is a difficult skill, requiring sharp thinking skills as well as motor coordination. We have to make our lips, tongue, and jaw move in the correct ways in order to make words.

The key to verbal communication is to make a word that will get others to meet our needs. First words usually identify the people and objects in our immediate environment. Later, words are used for functions like, to call attention, to label, to request, or to protest. "*Da*" may mean "*There's my Daddy*"; "*Where is my Daddy?*"; "*I want that, Daddy*"; or "*I don't want that, Daddy!*"

How can we help a child learn words that will help him/her to function in a verbal world?

- Model simple short words and phrases (verbalizations). Toddlers will have a tough time isolating a word from a lengthy paragraph of words. Repetition of single words and short phrases is best. Example: "*Ball. My ball. Where's ball? Ball. Get that ball. Ball. Go ball!*"
- Hold a toy or object next to your face when you say a word. This action gives the child a view of your mouth, which helps develop oral motor skills needed to produce words. Get on the same eye level as your child to develop face-to-face communication.
- Respond to gestures. If your child reaches for an object, you know that he/she wants it. Pick it up and hand it to him/her while saying the word. Gradually, delay your response to gestures, allowing time for your child to try and say the sound or word.
- Praise all early verbalizations as words, even if the intelligibility is poor.
- Try not to anticipate your child's every need. A delay of a few seconds before picking your child up or handing him/her the desired object will give the child a chance to attempt verbalization.

Microphones work well. Look for the inexpensive microphones that echo, or try using the paper tube from an empty roll of paper towels.