

# What If Those First Words Don't Come?

## Simple Signs May Help

by Linda Mawhinney &  
Mary Scott McTeague



The key to verbal communication is to make sounds or words in order to satisfy our needs. First words function to call the people we need, or get the comforts and objects that we want in our environment. Parents should not be concerned with the pronunciation of early words. Reward children for any attempt at a word by giving them the thing they were seeking. Use lots of praise such as, "good talking, you said, 'bottle'" even if the attempt may not sound like the actual word.

Two commonly used first words are "more" and "mine" because toddlers want everything they see, and usually when they get something, they always want more. Play lots of sharing games where the parent gets one and baby gets one, whether it's a block, a cracker, or a turn under the blanket for peek-a-boo. Keep saying the word "mine" or "my turn." Try to get your toddler to repeat "mine" or "mmm." Ask them, "Do you want more?" Help them to say, "More" or "Mmm." If the verbal communication is just not happening, sign language can be a wonderful tool.

A conversation may go something like this: "Was that cracker good?" "Do you want more?" "Tell me." "Tell me more." (Point to your own lips.) "Look at my mouth - mmmm." "Say, 'mmmm.'" "Can you say it?" "Here, let's make your fingers say it." (Hold your child's hands and bring her fingertips together - see next page) "Good job! You said more. Here's more crackers."

Remember! **Sign language is a temporary tool.** The goal is to teach your child that communication works. That magic word got him/her the cracker, even if his/her fingers were doing the talking. As children get comfortable with using a sign, they eventually add a sound to the sign, add a word to the sign, and then stop using the sign when it is no longer needed.

