

EARLY WORDS
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Toddlers (1-3-year-olds) toddle – they learn to walk. They also begin to talk. They thrive hearing basic functional vocabulary – words they hear over-and-over again with connections to real people, animals, objects, activities and places. Through play, children practice daily routines, creating rich scenarios, while gaining relatable vocabulary that reinforces and fosters their comprehension. Within these comfortable situations, they make connections to peers and caring adults, developing social skills. A lot happens at once. But let's look closely at early spoken vocabulary.

Typical first spoken words relate to usefulness (E.g., to get needs met), easy sounds in the word (E.g., *dada* vs. *father*), and environment (E.g., what is heard most often, such as pet or sibling names). Listen carefully as you might miss spoken words such as *this*, *that*, *there* and *here*. They often slip by unnoticed because they carry no emotional meaning, but they are very useful! Recognizing and acknowledging words in early communication efforts is important. Words are defined as:

- Having a vowel (typically in English, but not in all languages)
- A single production followed by a pause
- Recurring reference to a person, object, or situation
- Used in conversation

Naming colors, letters, and numbers are feats that await all children as they develop. But these should not be the first concepts taught as some children's media and apps may lead one to believe. Sure, it is important to hear color, number, and letter names, and to talk about these concepts when a child shows interest in them. But they are abstract concepts that are difficult to grasp – cognitively and physically.



Let's consider an example relating to a red apple and a green apple. If every time a child hears *red* when presented a red apple, they will associate *red* with the apple and eventually use it to fulfill a request, *I want red*. But their communication partner will be in the dark because *red* represents many things. It's best to initially focus on the concrete label, *apple*. It's tangible and recognizable and will lead to immediate satisfaction for child and adult. Colors change, but the basic apple doesn't. Distinguishing red and green, will come soon after. A child must understand the idea of color before knowing how to use it. Hearing the abstract concepts often is how they are embedded in memory. So, don't ignore them, but also don't expect full understanding or accurate use quickly.

Additional early non-abstract concepts that can be physically represented are words representing size, quantity and placement (prepositions). Some are even easy to say (*big*, *little*, *more*) and some prepositions start with a vowel (*in*, *up*, *on*, *off*), which are much easier to say.

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