

Building Knowledge Of Key Words in the Early Years

An Introductory Guide for Parents



Teaching Basic Vocabulary to your Child

Introduction

It is always useful to have a basic core group of words, also known as key words, which your child can recognise and respond to. This can build positive interactions and help to ease frustration both for you and of course your child! The following key words tend to be the ones that we use most often in everyday activities and routines. These words help children to express their basic needs and wants; as well as offering security and reassurance as they begin to predict familiar events or activities when they hear specific words.

Each Key word below will explain why that particular word/short phrase is important and give you a strategy to help your child to understand and respond.

Key Words

Some initial Key Words which are highlighted below include:

1. You're Child's Name
2. 'More'
3. 'Again'
4. 'Help!'
5. 'Stop!'
6. 'Drink / 'Eat'
7. Going Out
8. Change Nappy
9. Bathtime
10. Bedtime

Top Tip

The two important rules for learning are **REPETITION** and **CONSISTENCY**.

Other strategies that are regularly used to support little ones, who require it, with communication include:

Sign-a-Long



If you have experience of Sign-a-Long, use the sign along with the spoken word! This will reinforce the child's understanding of the word, support children who are visual learners, as well as reducing your children's frustration by offering them another method of communication to help the child express their needs and wants; while developing their understanding and skills using spoken language.

If you are interested in learning more about Sign-a-Long, parent's sessions are held regularly at Beatlie School Campus by the Speech and Language Therapy Team. To access these sessions please speak to your Speech and Language Therapist, Child Development Clinic, Health Visitor or your Home Teaching Key Worker. In the short term, take a look at the Sign-A-Long Website at: <https://www.signalong.org.uk/> or, the introductory sign-a-long booklet available on the Pre-School Home Teaching Service Blog at:

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/wl/public/pshts/uploads/sites/6459/2020/04/22220446/Free-Sing-A-Long.pdf>

Objects of Reference (OOR)

Also where possible think about what other visual supports e.g. everyday items or objects that might be helpful in supporting your child to understand key words, or can be used by the child to communicate their message.



Picture Exchange Communication (PEC's)

When your child begins to recognise that a word has a specific meaning and that word can also be represented by an object, photograph or picture.

Some children will benefit from being taught how to use PEC's to understand daily routines or make requests e.g. the word 'Cup' means a ceramic, circular shaped object; has a handle and you can drink from it.

The Photograph of the cup is flat, has no function, but I still know it is an identical image and represents the ceramic cup we know. When the child begins to understand this, they can also begin to practise that a picture/clip art of a random cup is still a cup and we know what a cup is and what it is used for. Again it might be a flat bit of paper and look nothing like my own personal cup...but I still know it represents a cup because the word 'cup' applies to many cups of different shapes and sizes but all cups have the same function as mine!

PEC Symbols are readily available from your local library however, to ensure the strategies you are using are at the correct level for your child's understanding and you have all the information you need to introduce PEC's to your child successfully, please seek the advice of your child's to your child's Speech and Language Therapist.



1. **Key Word:** The most important and treasured word of all **-Your Childs Name!**

'**Your Child's Name**' is really important! It is 'who' the child is. It gives them a sense of identity and belonging. Calling the child's name encourages them to focus their attention to the person who is talking to them. This not only builds relationships but also helps them to learn a whole host of new information. Finally, helping a child to recognise and respond to their name being called is essential to protect your child and keep them safe when they are in situations that could be potentially dangerous.

Teaching Strategy

-Use the child's name as you would in everyday situations.

-To teach your child, try to choose opportunities when your child is not too busy in a highly engaging/enjoyable activity. They might struggle to offer you their attention in this situation and could potentially find the interruption upsetting or distressing: you want the initial learning to be positive, fun and rewarding!

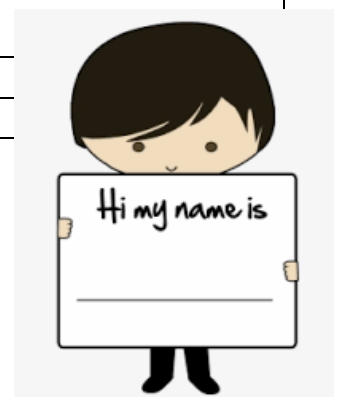
- Immediately after saying the child's name, place your hand on the child's shoulder and where possible come down to the child's eye level to encourage eye-contact or you could gently attempt to guide the child by the chin to encourage eye-contact, if the child allows. (Eye-contact can be challenging and uncomfortable for some children, never insist on your child offering eye-contact.)

-When your child shows any response, however small e.g. offering a fleeting glance; slightly turning in your direction or offering brief eye-contact - instantly offer the child a reward to help them to recognise that responding to their name can be useful and rewarding.

Rewards can be as simple as: a quiet smile, a well done stroke of the arm, clapping; full on totally over the top praise and excitement; a snack at snack time or favourite toy etc. The key thing is you know your child best. If too much praise is overwhelming for your child, choose a quieter strategy. If your child loves highly excitable rewards, use that!

Next step – When your child has begun to offer a response to their name with touch, try taking a step back and calling your child's name (without the use of touch). When they can do this, try calling from a bit further away e.g. the other side of the room, just outside the room, followed by the next room. When they can do this successfully, you can try increasing the distance (within safe distances) within new environments.

Top Tip – Be prepared to practise, practise, practise!



2. **Key Word: 'More'**

'More' is always useful! During meal times and snack times 'More' is especially important. 'More' help's children express their basic needs and is also great for building on your child's requesting skills. 'More' requires a child to recognise that they need to engage with other people to get 'more' of the thing's they want!

Teaching Strategy

-Sit down with your child, ideally at a small table and chair as this helps to keep the focus area small and easier for the child to concentrate.

-Use his favourite snack (for example cheese puffs) put one or two crisps into a bowl. When your child has finished, wait for your child to respond with a look, reaching out to you or pushing the bowl towards you.

-At that point say the word "More" and put another 1 or2 crisps in the bowl.

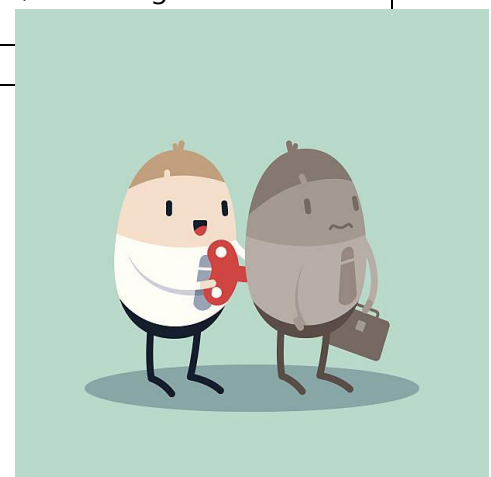
-Repeat this process until you feel your child has grasped the concept and you recognise their chosen method to request 'more'.

Next step – Waiting for a vocalisation – do the same as above but after saying the word "MORE" wait just a little longer (about 5 seconds) to see if you child will offer a vocalisation i.e. any purposeful attempts to gain your attention using a noise, sound or vocalisation. Immediately reward the child with more snack.

Top Tip - Be careful not to wait too long as the child might become frustrated or lose interest if the activity offers little reward for the child.



3.	Key Word: 'Again'
	<p>'Again' – This is very similar to “more” but can be really useful to use within fun games, activities and play. This again is about strengthening the requesting skills. Plus by requesting more fun activities (initially) with a familiar adult, it is beginning to form the foundations for social interaction, as they are choosing to engage with you by requesting the action “again”.</p>
	<p>Teaching Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Much the same as teaching “more” but instead of using food, people games such as tickling fun and rough and tumble games are a good starting point.-You initiate the game, then stop and pause after a few minutes of play.-Wait and observe your child to see if your child gives you some sort of sign to say what they want, using their own method of communication. 'Again' it might be: a look, smile they might run at you, or try to tickle you!-At this point immediately respond saying “again!!” and continue with the game. Repeat this strategy stopping at intervals during the game, to purposefully encourage the child to seek the play 'again'.
	<p>Next steps - As with teaching “more” extend the learning in the same way. Pause for a little longer and wait to see if your child will vocalise, no matter what the vocalisation is reward the child by saying “Again!!!” ...and continue with the game.</p>
	<p>Top Tip – Yet 'Again' be quick to respond to the child. The quicker you are to reinforce the gestures or vocalisations with a reward, the more likely the child will be to connect the behaviour they are displaying with the reward. By doing this, they will begin to make the the connection that they can make things happen for themselves by the things that they do, increasing child's motivation to communicate.</p>



4. **Key Word: 'Help' / 'Help Me'**

Help me – This is a very good one to have as often children who can't request help either don't persevere and give up, or go into a meltdown because they can't do something, or they get stuck. If they have a method of communicating they need help, the child's frustration can potentially lessen, resulting in less distressed behaviours and increased learning opportunities.

Teaching Strategy

- Choose an activity that your child enjoys doing but you know will need a bit of help with. It could be: everyday activities like going up and down stairs independently; doing a jigsaw or shape sorter activity; getting the lid off play tubs, lining things up correctly or climbing some apparatus in a play park.

-It's important to allow your child to have a try at these things independently but you need to be close by if they begin to feel insecure, apprehensive or showing early signs of irritability or frustration.

-At this point offer your hand and say "Help" or "need help" the latter put the emphasis on the word "Help" and offer any help required.

Next Steps: - Again if you see your child starting to struggle, offer to take their hand (if they allow, and gently guide your child's hand so they successfully manage to do what they want, with a little help i.e. hand over hand help. As you do this say the words "Help" or "need help" Which every you choose to use, for consistency, keep it the same.

You can also allow your child to lead you or use you hand (almost like a tool) to help them to complete fiddly activities e.g. manipulating the shapes into place on a puzzle. At this point, you will be doing the activity guided by the child. Again as the child leads you in the activity say the word 'Help' or 'need help'.



5. **Key Word: 'Stop!'**

STOP! - This word is so important to teach your children, from a safety point of view. If for example your child is running towards a road, being able to respond to this word could literally save their life. It is also useful to support the child's safety awareness towards others. If your child has a sensory need or sensory processing disorder, they can potentially display challenging behaviours that unintentionally put others at risk e.g. biting, pushing, throwing objects etc. Many young children cannot see the risks these behaviours pose to others so we need to support them by implementing strategies that encourage them to 'Stop' and re-direct their attention towards another activity that addresses the need in your child: but also ensures safety.

Teaching Strategy

-As with all our strategies keeping activities fun and light hearted wherever possible. Makes it fun for the kids to learn.

-When walking to the park for example or even in the garden, whilst holding your child's hand, stand still. Say "ready, steadygo!" and run with your child and after a minute or so say "STOP!" and stop in your tracks (with your child still holding your hand, hopefully!) Repeat this process several times.

-You could use any highly motivating game to reinforce this word using the above strategy e.g. On a swing; Holding the corners of a towel, make wave like movements and shout 'Stop', Tipping and pouring water from a jug while in the bath etc.

Next steps - When he has got the hang of the stop and go when holding hands, take him to a safe environment and try the same game without holding hands and allow your child to run ahead with you running a little behind, and repeat he above game, when you are confident they can stop on cue, you can widen the distance between you and the child (still within the safe environment)

Top Tips – When you are using 'STOP' to ensure safety'. 'STOP' should only be used for this purpose only if it is necessary to do so e.g. for destructive behaviours or safety reasons.

If it is possible, aim to distract your child with something interesting to re-direct their attention.

When using 'STOP' as a necessity try to consider in advance the tone of voice you will use and what you facial expressions/body language is communicating. The best thing to do where possible is to stay calm, speak clearly and firmly state 'STOP! Then gently re-direct the child.

You want your child to learn that 'STOP' means that particular behaviour needs to stop. They are highly unlikely intending to cause anyone any harm. When a child is unable to assess risk or communicate their needs, they need our help to support them to do this.



The following word/s demonstrate how words and communication strategies can be used to build your child's **independence**.

Being able to ask for food and drink when they are feeling hungry or thirsty is an enormous help to your child and potentially help avoid a meltdown due to his inability to make himself understood.

6. **Key Word: 'Drink'**

Drink - As with teaching " more", teaching 'Drink' or 'Eat' is possibly easier taught sitting at a table or in your child's high chair

Teaching strategies

-You will need a jug with some Juice (or whatever your child's preferred drink is) and a drinking cup.

-Give your child a very small amount in the bottom of his cup, when he is finished, wait for a sign from your child that they would like some more. That might be: tapping the cup on the table, or looking at you, offering you the cup etc.

-At this point you can take the cup and add another small drop and as you hand it back say "drink" (or Juice/Water/Milk; if it is only ever juice your child drinks feel free to use this, but whatever word you choose, be consistent and use that word all the time.)

Next steps – When you think your child knows what his cup is for and has begun to make the connection with the word and the action, then you can leave an empty cup around within your child's reach.

As soon as your child lifts the cup say the word "drink?" (or your chosen word) and immediately give him a drink, this will reinforce the connection of the word and the action.

Leaving a full cup of juice lying about is not ideal. Where possible, when your child is finished put it away out of sight and leave the empty one so that they have to come to you with the cup. This will encourage them to initiate an interaction with you and strengthen their requesting skills.

NB -The same strategy can be used for requesting 'Food'

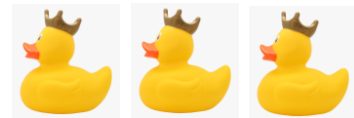


Where and How to Use Visual Aids

The next few words will give examples of where and how to use Visual Aids (Objects of Reference (OOR) and Pictures) to support children in their learning. Using visuals, particularly with young children and/or those who have difficulty processing language, gives the child clues they need to know what is coming next.

Top Tip - To minimise the possibility of tantrums, particularly when a child is highly engaged in an interesting activity, Always take the visual or OOR to your child rather than taking the child to the visual.

7.	Activity: 'Going out'
	Visual: The Child's Shoes As you take the shoes to your child, simply say "shoes on" over a period of time with lots of repetition your child will make the connection between the item (shoes) the words (shoes on) and the action (going outside). Like all other teaching strategies, the key is repetition and consistency.
8.	Activity: Nappy Changed / Going to the Toilet
	Visual: A Nappy / Pull Up's (or if they are toilet trained a pair of pants) Again take the nappy to your child and say "change nappy" or "toilet" This can sometimes be a tantrum trigger in itself as some children really don't like having their nappy changes. If this is the case allow them to take a favourite toy such as a car, fidget toy or book to look at whilst they are having their nappy changed. This strategy is called "distract and redirect". As above regularly linking the object, word and action, your child will soon learn.
9.	Activity: Bathtime
	Visual: A Bath Toy or Sponge Using the same strategy as above, state the word's "Bathtime". When the time comes to come out the bath, you could use a towel saying the words: "Bath finished" and perhaps allow your child to pull the plug out and let him watch the water go away.
10.	Activity: Bedtime
	Visuals: A Favourite Soft Toy / Comforter or Pyjamas Again, using the same strategies as above state the word 'bedtime'.



Links:

<https://www.signalong.org.uk/>

<https://www.lets-talk.scot.nhs.uk/Pages/default.aspx>

<http://www.hanen.org/Programs/For-Parents.aspx>

<http://www.facebook.com/NHSLothianSLT>

<http://www.facebook.com/NHSLothianAHP>