

## CORE SKILL: COMMUNICATE

# Vocabulary



### What You Need to Know

Supporting infants' vocabulary in the classroom is one of the most critical ways to enhance early development, school readiness, and later school success! For infants, building vocabulary does not necessarily mean "teaching" words. Rather, vocabulary is built through your everyday interactions and play! Young children learn vocabulary through repeated exposure in various contexts, such as when you talk to them, and by hearing stories, rhymes, and songs. Typically, first words tend to be nouns, usually referring to familiar adults (e.g., 'mama,' 'dada') or meaningful objects (e.g., ball, doll).

### Things to Consider

It is developmentally typical for infants to say their first words between 9 and 18 months. Before saying their first words, infants may consistently use a sequence of sounds to convey meaning, which is referred to as "proto-words." For example, an infant may say "brmm, brmm," every time they play with a truck, or "ruff, ruff," each time they see a dog. Instead of proto-words, some infants rely more on "gestural words" to communicate with others at early stages. For instance, an infant might smack their lips every time they are hungry.

### Development of Vocabulary

Between birth and 9 months, infants may:	Between 8 and 18 months, infants may:
Look at familiar people, animals, or objects when they are named (e.g., mama, puppy, or ball).	Look or point at a person or object that has been named, follow simple directions, and respond appropriately to the meaning of words or signs.
Use signs or verbalizations for familiar people or objects.	Imitate new words or signs and use some words or signs for naming or making simple one-word requests (e.g., saying or signing "milk" when asking for a drink).

### Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of vocabulary:

- ◆ Read a variety of books:
  - For young infants:*
    - Books with simple pictures/designs with bright colors
    - Board books with familiar people or objects
    - Cloth and soft vinyl books
    - "Chunky" books that can be touched and tasted
  - For older infants:*
    - Books with photos of familiar things
    - Sturdy board books that they can carry
    - Books with only a few words on each page
    - Animal books of all sizes and shapes
- ◆ Sing songs or repeat simple rhymes.
- ◆ For older infants, create a visual word wall that features pictures of familiar objects (e.g., spoon, cup, pants, t-shirt, shoes, and diapers), people (e.g., mom, dad, baby, or grandmother), and animals (e.g., dog, cat, cow, and elephant). You may use this wall to draw infants' attention or to ask questions that spark conversations.



## Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Vocabulary

OBSERVE	<b>OBSERVE</b>  Carefully observe the vocabulary that <i>each</i> infant is using. Are some infants using “proto-words?” Are other infants starting to say their first words? What “gestural words” are infants using? Notice times when infants use these words to communicate with others (e.g., during Choice Time or when having lunch).
FOCUS	<b>Intentionally Select Vocabulary Words</b>  Identify words that are meaningful to each infant so you can support and help build them into their vocabulary. To identify words, pay attention to what infants engage with, point to, and say. For example, if an infant points to and plays with a ball during Choice Time, you could select the word ‘ball.’
SCAFFOLD I	<b>Repeat Words Often</b>  During your interactions with infants, repeat and expand words that they use (i.e., gestures, proto-words, word approximations, actual words). When you support and build upon what infants already know, you are following what is important to them!  <b>Within a single interchange:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ When an infant points to their cup, say, “That’s your <i>cup</i>. There’s water in your <i>cup</i>! Do you want to drink the water in your <i>cup</i>?”</li></ul> <b>Throughout the day/weeks:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ <b>During Arrival:</b> “Welcome! Let’s go and say <i>hello</i> (<i>waving</i>) to your friends.”</li><li>◆ <b>When singing a song:</b> “My hands wave <i>hello</i>, my hands wave <i>hello</i>!”</li><li>◆ <b>At pick-up time:</b> “Look! Your grandmother is here! Let’s go say <i>hello</i> to her.”</li></ul>
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing infants on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffold. Incorporate these strategies into your regular routines to keep building infants’ vocabulary.