



Vocabulary learning in the primary years

Helping children learn new words in your primary classroom

A good vocabulary (knowing and understanding words) is really important for children when they are developing language; it has an impact in lots of different ways.

I know learning new words is important for children but why?

A good vocabulary (the number of words you know and can say) is really important for all children. It is an important building block for helping children to talk in sentences (and beyond!) but it's also really useful all aspects of learning. In fact, research tells us that it affects a child's school performance – a child's vocabulary when they are five years old can tell us how well they do at school at 11. So, helping children to develop a good vocabulary is vital.

Is there anything else it can help with?

Knowing and using lots of different words is also really important when children are learning to read and write. They need words to be able to understand what they read, and to be able to make guesses when they can't understand. They work things out using the words they know...their vocabulary. It helps them to be able to write in a more interesting way, and to explain themselves to other people.

How many words should children know by when? Are there guidelines that I can share with parents?

Yes, we do have typical milestones for how and when children learn new words. Usually:

- By three years old they'll be able to use about 300 words.
- By the time a child reaches five years old they'll know and use as many as 2,500 words.
- From around five children start to use describing words (gloomy, stormy, clever) and words to describe emotions.
- Between five and seven years children learn to be able to compare words: the way they look, sound or what they mean.

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- Between seven and nine years they develop a range of words related to time and measurement.

Children's vocabulary develops rapidly and we expect them to understand lots more words than they say (but this does change as they get older).

In your setting: How does this information relate to the children you work with?

Is there anything else I can do to help children to learn new words?

Learning new words is tricky. There are lots of things children have to be able to do to understand and say a new word and get it right. They have to remember the sounds they hear and the order they come in, they have to find a meaning for the word and then they have to work out where it might go in a sentence.

There are lots of different things you can do to help children's vocabulary development. Here's just a few:

- Watch what children are exploring and doing then you can say the name of an object or action. This way you're modelling the word for them – saying what something is called, showing them the way to say it and letting them know the speech sounds that make up the word. For example, if you're doing science you might have a microscope or a magnifying glass you are using to find out more.
- Repetition is really important. Children need to hear a new word lots of times before they learn it properly, so keep saying the word you want them to learn! They may try to copy you and will often take a few attempts to get it right. Repeating experiences give children a chance to try out things they're learning and the words for these experiences.
- Building on what they know already can help children to extend and expand their vocabulary. This is why open ended activities such as sand, water, painting, craft, home corners (inside and out) can be used as a basis for varying the activities and the vocabulary that goes alongside. For example, the objects in sand or water can open up a new world when there are fish, sharks, and an octopus swimming around.
- Talk about how words are linked together and how they link to words they already know. They might be similar in what they mean (tall, high, long), or be words in the same group (cat, dog, hamster). Talking about these things helps children learn words well. You can also start naming different types of one thing, for example, if you're playing with dinosaurs you might say 'dinosaur' for younger children but as children get older you can name the different types of dinosaurs e.g. 'that's a tyrannosaurus – he's got really sharp teeth' or 'that one is a herbivore'.

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- There are different types of words and children need to learn them all. So, they need a good vocabulary of doing words (like walking, swimming, driving), describing words (like big, heavy, red), and words that can be used to name things (like dinosaur, shark, juice).

Do I need to set up separate activities to support children's vocabulary?

Helping children learn new words should be part of everyday activities and routines; there's no need to have a special time to teach words. However, think about the words you use for each activity or lesson and build these into your planning. This way you can remember to name objects, use action words and describing words with children or help older children develop a 'words we need to know' word bank to help with their learning. Some children with difficulties learning new vocabulary may need extra support: pre-teaching subject specific vocabulary can be helpful.

In your setting: Do you include vocabulary teaching in your planning?

As a staff team do you think about the vocabulary children are experiencing and how you can extend and support these opportunities?

You can also think of how to offer new experiences to children as an opportunity to learn about them, for example having a variety of foods at snack time. Allowing children to be hands on helps them to build up their own meanings of words. For example, by peeling a satsuma you can talk and learn about what the peel feels like, that 'peel' is the outside of the satsuma, what colour it is in the inside, is it hard or soft? And that's before you've even tasted the satsuma and worked out that it's in 'segments' or 'pieces'!

If you do want to focus on to adult led activities that focus on learning new words you can try these:

- Set up different types of settings e.g. a hospital, a vet, an airport, a train, a garage and role play working there. There are lots of opportunities for learning new words about different situations and experiences.
- For younger children, play hide and seek or have treasure hunts to help learn position words..."I'll give you a clue, it's **under** the cushion; it's behind the book". Remember to show them too, if it's a new word.
- Help older children learn more complicated words by using a diagram to help (or a 'word map'). Have a picture in the middle of a page and then think of all the different things you know about a word and describe it. What does it look like? What does it feel like? Are there other words like it? Where would you find it? This helps children to get a really deep understanding of a word.

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- For children learning topic vocabulary using an extended version of the word map can also help them know more about how the word is made up: 'what sound does it begin with', 'can we clap the beats/syllables?' 'what sounds make up the word?' 'Can we say it?' Add to the word map by asking children what they know about the word and what they think it means.
- Making a dictionary with children can help them to have their own definitions for words. This will help them to remember the word and also understand what it means, which can help them to read for meaning. It also means it is there for them to refer back to if needed.
- Play 'Word storms' – ask children to choose a setting like a forest, a house, or school and then ask them to think of all the words they can to build a picture of it. They can use describing words until you have a full description of the setting. This can be great for story starters. You can also do this when you're describing characters, what they're doing and how they're doing it to support literacy skills.
- When children come across a word they don't know encourage them to ask what it means and to map it out. This encourages their deeper understanding and knowledge of words.
- 'I Spy' is a great game to play with children once they have enough phonic knowledge to know about the sounds that make up words.
- You can also play describing games without objects to encourage children to guess what you're talking about. For example, 'it's an animal. It has four legs. It has a big trunk. It's grey'. You can see how quickly they can guess the word.

One of the children in my class is struggling to learn new words. Should I be worried?

It's really important to keep an eye on our children's language development. Have a look at some [milestones](#) information and try the Talking Point [Progress Checker](#). If you are concerned about a child's talking, get in touch with your local speech and language therapy service, or contact [I CAN Help](#) for a free call back from one of our speech and language therapists.

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[Chatting with Children](#) activity pack

[Communication Cookbook](#)

[Talking Strategies KS2](#)

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You can also e mail your questions to help@ican.org.uk

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