



# Vocabulary Learning in the Early Years

## **Helping children learn new words in your early years setting**

A good vocabulary (knowing and understanding words) is really important for children when they are learning to talk; 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 for learning to read. 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:

- Children say their first words about the age of one (although they understand them for some time before this).
- By about 18 months children should use about 20 words, but they'll understand more

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- By two years old, we expect children to say 50 words and understand between 200 and 500.
- 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.

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:** think about the children you support - how is their vocabulary developing?

If you are not sure you can try keeping a word diary to see how much they say throughout the day. You can also suggest to parents that they keep track of this.

### **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:

- Having a child's attention is important for word learning. Saying an object's name while helping a child to look at it helps them to learn and remember names for objects that they haven't seen before.
- We know that having words and objects together is really helpful for early language development, from around six to 18 months. So, it helps your child to see the object you are talking about, as well as hearing its name. This helps them to make the connection and gives you the chance to explain what new words mean. Young children will learn more from seeing, feeling and touching an object than from a picture of it. For example, if you say cat when they see a cat they know that the sounds c-a-t make up a word and it matches the fluffy animal with four legs in front of them.
- 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, in the home corner you talk about them 'putting baby to bed...she's under the blanket'.

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- Encourage children to use new words by giving them choices. So, rather than saying “would you like a snack?” ask them “do you want raisins or cucumber?” You can do this when you’re joining in with play during any activity e.g. ‘shall we splash the water or pour it?’ ‘Do you want the big bucket or the small bucket?’
- Repetition is really important. Children need to hear new words 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 gives 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, playdough, 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 are 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’.
- 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, eating, pushing, describing words (like big, heavy, red), and words that can be used to name things (like dinosaur, shark, juice).

**In your setting:** what strategies or approaches do you use to help children learn and use new words?

You could also have this as an agenda item on a team meeting so that you can share ideas.

### **Do I need to set up separate activities to support children’s vocabulary?**

Helping children learn new words can be part of everyday activities and routines; there’s no need to have a special time to teach words. However, it can help to think about the words you use for each activity or lesson and build these into your planning. This way you

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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.

**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 adult led activities that focus on learning new words you can try these:

- Grab a 'treasure' box (any old box will do!) or a mystery bag and fill it with everyday items. Younger children will enjoy pulling the things out and telling you what they are. If a child is a bit older, try to see if they can guess what you've got from your clues... "It's round and hard" "a ball!"
- Play shops. Children can come into your shop and pretend to buy something. If there's something they don't know the name of, you can give them choices "do you want the comb or the glasses?"
- Set up different types of settings e.g. a hospital, 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.
- Play hide and seek or have treasure hunts to help learn position words..."I'll give you a clue, it's **under** the cushion". 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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[Toddler Talk](#) activity pack

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