



Building Vocabulary

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Young Childrens' Vocabulary Learning

A variety of techniques can be used to promote the development of language and literacy skills in young children. Building a child's vocabulary is a great way for parents and teachers to nurture children's oral language skills and influences a child's ability to comprehend written words in the future (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Children's vocabulary learning is dependent on the range of words to which they are exposed. Therefore, it is important to facilitate children's vocabulary learning within natural teaching environments (Christ & Wang, 2012).

Use of New and Challenging Words

Teachers and parents need to introduce and define new and challenging words everyday. These words must be discussed in ways that are meaningful to children and spoken throughout the day. Parents and teachers can help to facilitate children's use of the new words by showing excitement for words during playful interactions with children.

For example, in a preschool classroom the teacher read a story to the children called *Doctor Ted*, which is about a bear pretending to be a doctor. The teacher told the children that when you visit a doctor for an appointment, you are the doctor's "patient," or someone that visits a doctor. During center time, several children pretended to be doctors in the housekeeping area. The teacher joined in and told the children she wanted to be their "patient." Later when the teacher was involved with another group of children, a girl asked the teacher, "*Will you come and be the doctor so I can be the*



patient?" The preschooler demonstrated she knew how to use the new word in a meaningful way.

Conversations That Build

One of the best ways to build vocabulary is through conversations with children. They learn by listening and watching what adults say and do. Teachers and parents should purposefully use new and challenging words. At first, young children might not remember the new words or understand the meaning of the words. However, through multiple meaningful experiences, unfamiliar words become familiar to children.

Think of words that can be used within everyday conversation. "*That is a dilemma – what can we do to solve the problem?*" "*I like how you are being agreeable.*" "*Let's make a prediction – what do you think will happen?*"

Use Child-friendly Definitions

Keep it simple. Provide definitions that are easily understood by children (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). For example, tell the children that a carpenter is someone who builds things with wood. Use the definition frequently. If a child builds something with wood, comment that carpenters build things with wood. Talk to the children about things in the home or classroom that a carpenter could have built.

Encourage the children to develop their own definition of the word and continue to use the word in everyday conversations. Introduce words that relate to themes that are interesting to children, such as dinosaurs or transportation. Let parents know the targeted words and encourage them to use the words at home.

Stories, Songs and Poetry

Stories, songs and poetry build children's vocabulary. As you share stories, songs and poetry, point out specific words and provide the definition of these words. Then, carry these words into the day's conversations.

Use Pictures and Objects

When possible, use pictures and objects to help children make connections with new words. Bring in a kaleidoscope for children to look through and explore. Talk about their reflection as they look in a mirror. "*I can see my reflection when I look at the sink faucet – where else can you see your reflection?*" Give children a stethoscope to use to listen to their heartbeat. Have them draw pictures about unfamiliar words or act out the meaning of a word.

Create a Pictionary

Children can create a Pictionary (dictionary with pictures) that illustrates the new words with an accompanying picture. Continue to add new words and refer to these words. When children ask a question or do not understand the meaning of a word, encourage them to be a researcher. Prompt children to find out the answer and add it to their Pictionary.



Teachers and parents need to support children's vocabulary development in a variety of ways. Children benefit from multiple meaningful experiences with new vocabulary words. These experiences with challenging words help young children learn and develop their language and literacy skills.

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