



Teaching children new words

Helping children learn new words

A good vocabulary (knowing and understanding words) is so important for children when they are learning to talk; it has an impact in lots of different ways.

I've heard staff at my child's nursery talking about vocabulary being important. What's the big deal?

Well, they are absolutely right, 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 5 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.

I don't really know how many words my child should know. Are there guidelines about it?

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

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- 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.

So, you can see that their vocabulary develops rapidly and we expect them to understand lots more words than they say (but this does change as they get older).

Is there anything I can do to help my child 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 your child'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 your 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.
- Encourage your child 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?"
- 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!
- 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.
- 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.

Are there any fun activities I can do to help my child learn new words? I've run out of ideas!

Helping your child learn new words can be part of everyday activities; there's no need to have a special time to teach words. Things like shopping (finding things in different categories like fruit or things in tins can be fun), doing the housework or washing (sorting clothes into groups, for example dad's clothes or things for your legs, or talking about how things feel as you wash them) or getting ready in the morning (naming clothes, and talking

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about the different actions like brushing, pulling, finding) are simple to do and really can help.

Other ideas are:

- Grab a 'treasure' box (any old box will do!) and fill it with everyday items. Younger children will enjoy pulling the things out and telling you what they are. If your 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. Your child 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?"
- 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.

My child isn't saying very many words at all. 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 your 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.

Useful links

[Talking Point](#)

[I CAN Help](#)

[Babbling Babies](#) activity pack

[Toddler Talk](#) activity pack

[Chatting with Children](#) activity pack

[The Communication Cookbook](#)

You can also email any questions to help@ican.org.uk

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