

Encouraging Spoken Language

The Language Link evaluation is aimed at identifying children who are having difficulty understanding spoken language. You may have concerns about children in your class experiencing difficulty using spoken language. These 'expressive' language difficulties can be in addition to speech difficulties or difficulty understanding spoken language or may be present in the absence of any other difficulty.

Many children with 'expressive' difficulties will also have difficulties in the areas of understanding language and attention and listening skills.

The pressures of the curriculum often leave little room for developing spoken language skills yet in life these are the skills we use the most. The table below shows that we spend the most time teaching the skill we use the least in later life.

Skill	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Develops	first	second	third	fourth
Used	most	second most	second least	least
Taught	least	second least	second most	most

Vocabulary Is The Key

A child must reach a certain level of vocabulary development before they can begin joining words to express ideas, answer questions and state preferences. Many children coming into school have poorly developed vocabularies and have not laid down good strategies for learning new words.

Vocabulary is a strong predictor of academic and reading success. (DCSF, 2008 from Biemiller, 2003)

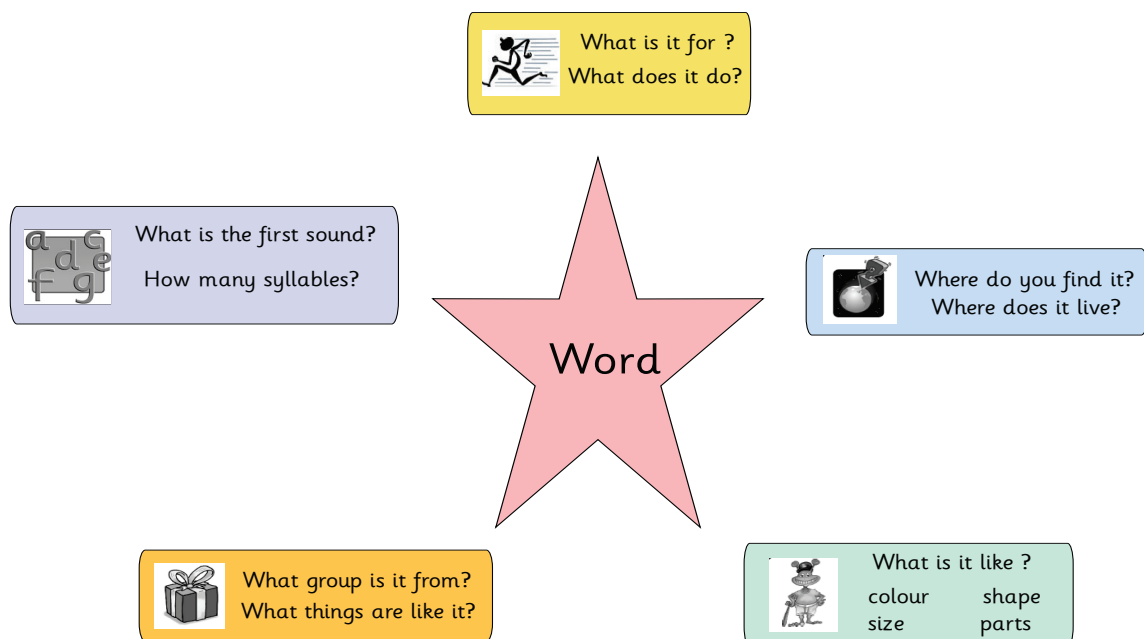
Vocabulary at age 5 years is the best predictor of reading comprehension at 10 years. (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997)

Lack of vocabulary underlies academic failure for many children especially those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. (Block & Mangieri, 2006)

For the children in the bottom 25th percentiles to catch up by year 5 they would have to learn nearly 3 times as many words a day as their normally developing peers.

Ideas for boosting vocabulary skills are covered in more depth in the vocabulary section of this website.

- Try to identify words that are likely to cause problems and work on these before the child needs them in a lesson.
- Use the same word in as many different contexts and sentence constructions as possible.
- Use lots of repetition and explain links between words or ideas.
- Pay particular attention to verbs. Every sentence needs a verb and children with vocabulary difficulties may find verbs hard to learn.
- Use word walls to introduce and reinforce new vocabulary.
- Use a structured approach for new vocabulary. When introducing new words provide definitions and lots of experience hearing how the word sounds and looks. You could match the word shape or clap out the rhythm of the word. Ask parents to use this approach at home.



Experience

Children learn language through listening and interacting. If their experience of using language and interacting with adults is limited it will be harder for them to develop language skills.

- Try to increase their experience of hearing and using language interactively through special time with an adult.
- Make sure you 'talk around' topics. Picture dictionaries can be useful for this.
- Use lots of repetition and explain links between words or ideas.
- Use role play and any school trips to broaden the child's experiences.
- Use experiential learning rather than learning through talking whenever possible.

Your Language

The way you speak to a child is crucial in encouraging spoken language development.

Technique	Description
Choices	Try to give the child a choice in order to encourage a specific response. <i>e.g. 'Do you want to play with the cars or the play dough?'</i>
Questions	Be careful not to ask too many questions. This can be very off putting for a child with language difficulties. When a child says very little it is tempting to jump in with a question however if you leave a silence the child is more likely to talk.
Expansion	Expand the child's utterances to give them good models of language. <i>e.g. 'That's right we used the pink paper to make the pig.'</i>
Your language level	Keep your language simple. Use easy words and short sentences. That way the child doesn't feel they have to try and keep up with you in terms of complexity.
Time	Give the child lots of extra time to formulate responses. Also try to slow down the rate at which you speak. This will help the child as they won't have to try to keep up.
Commentary	A good way to boost language opportunities is to provide a commentary on what the child is doing during child initiated activities. <i>e.g. 'Molly's playing in the sand. She's picking up the spade. Oh, now she's making a sand castle. Pat the sand down pat pat pat. Look a sand castle.'</i>

Selective Mutism

There is a small group of children who have well developed language skills but are unable to speak in certain situations. Children and young people with Selective Mutism (SM) may have no idea why they can't talk – they want to talk but something prevents it happening.

SM is a phobia. For children with SM, the act of talking creates a sense of panic which can lead the child to be unable to speak to certain people or in certain situations. The same child will be able to speak freely in other situations, for example at home. It is important to understand that the name 'Selective Mutism' is not meant to suggest that the child is choosing not to talk and these children are not simply being naughty. A child with SM simply cannot speak in certain situations or to certain individuals as it is too distressing an experience. In these situations they often appear frozen with fear and they have no control over this.

It is important to differentiate between the terms "reluctant talker" and "Selective Mutism". Reluctance to talk is not a milder form of SM or a 'softer' name for SM. We are all reluctant to talk at times for a number of reasons. A reluctant talker is anxious about speaking and may have low-confidence in speaking. These children are at risk of developing SM if they do not receive timely and appropriate support.

If you have concerns about a child, you can consider appropriate support strategies using advice from your local speech and language therapy or psychology service or The Selective Mutism Resource Manual, second edition (2016), by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens. A full guide can be downloaded at selectivemutism.org.uk/info-where-to-get-help-with-selective-mutism/

References

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