

Working On Vocabulary

A child's vocabulary, the words a child understands and uses, is the foundation of all other language skills. A child must reach a certain level of vocabulary development before they can begin joining words to express ideas, answer questions and state preferences. In order to learn new words a child must have an understanding of what words mean and how they relate to each other. This is often referred to as semantic development. Semantic skills are vital for learning to communicate and to understand the world around you.

Some Facts About Vocabulary

- 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).
- Although vocabulary development is crucial for school success it does not receive the attention that work on literacy does (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001).

Some Disturbing Figures

| Age 5 years | The top 25th percentile (Standard score of 115 or above) | The bottom 25th percentile Standard score of 85 or below) |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| At school entry words children know | 7100 root words | 3000 root words |
| Each day they learn | 3 new root words | 1 new root word |

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

However, there is also clear evidence that a consistent structured daily approach to vocabulary development can make a difference (Block & Mangieri, 2006).

Vocabulary problems are a common part of language difficulties.

Vocabulary skills are sometimes broken down into:

- *receptive vocabulary* - the words you understand
- *expressive vocabulary* - the words you use

The receptive vocabulary will be much more extensive than the expressive. If a child is having problems it may be because they have difficulty understanding the meaning of words, or because they have difficulties making links between words.

Word Finding Problems

A word finding problem is a specific difficulty accessing or retrieving words you know. This frequently occurs as a feature of Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), although we all struggle with word finding at times. A child with a word finding problem may sound hesitant or disjointed. When the child has difficulty accessing a word, a filler such as 'er' or 'thingy' may be used or they may retrieve the wrong word. It is always worth noting these errors. This can be useful in determining what sort of difficulty the child has and which cues are likely to be the most useful.

The main types of errors are as follows:

- *Phonemic* - where a similar sounding word is used, e.g. train for chain
- *Semantic* - where a word with a similar meaning is used, e.g. leopard for giraffe
- *Unrelated* - where an apparently unrelated word is used, e.g. red for post box

Supporting Vocabulary Learning In The Classroom

In order to improve a child's vocabulary skills or to support word finding difficulties it is important to work on strengthening the child's semantic system. By helping children to see links and associations between words you will help them learn new words more easily and access the words they know more efficiently.

- Try to identify words that are likely to cause problems and work on those before the child needs them in a lesson.
- Use the same word in different contexts and sentence constructions.
- Link a new word to other words the child knows, e.g. 'What other words do we know that mean the same thing?'
- 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. See the verbs programme for more hints and ideas.

- Use a structured approach to introduce new vocabulary. When introducing new words provide structured definitions and lots of experience of how the word sounds and looks. Ask parents to use this approach at home.
- Use word walls to introduce and reinforce new topic vocabulary. Make sure words can be removed and added and moved around on the wall. Use string or wool to link words together and encourage the children to explain the links.

The approaches outlined below are for developing the key skills that are essential for vocabulary learning.

Similarities And Differences

Appreciating similarity and difference is a very important skill and forms the basis of the whole semantic system. The concept of 'same' and 'different' develops early but if a child struggles to grasp this concept then they are likely to have problems storing and retrieving words.

Check the child understands the concept of 'same' and 'different' before you begin. You could do this using any matching or 'odd one out' task. Coloured bricks are useful for this.

Choose two items that are familiar to the child. It is usually easiest to start with items from the same category but that look quite different, e.g. bicycle and car, apple and orange, cat and elephant, etc. First talk about each one, encouraging the child to help you describe it. Then ask the child to tell you how the two are different. It is usually easier to start with differences. When the child can do this easily then ask them to think of things that are the same. You may have to cue them by asking questions, e.g. 'The bicycle has wheels, what about the car?'

Remember that some features can be the same and different for two items, e.g. the car and the bicycle are similar because they both have wheels but different because they have different numbers of wheels. These subtleties are important for the child. Each bit of extra information builds up a richer picture of the items and how to link it to other items in many different ways.

When the child can spot simple similarities and differences, try using items that are more similar, e.g. cat and a tiger, or car and a bus, to practise differences.

When the child can identify small differences then introduce items that are very different from each other to work on subtle similarities, e.g. table and elephant both have legs!

Remember to sometimes do this activity verbally, using words instead of pictures. This encourages the child to use general knowledge skills rather than visual skills.

Web type structures and diagrams are useful for working on similarities and differences. Put a picture in the middle and several round the outside. Ask the child to link the pictures on the outside to the one in the middle. There are several good commercial resources available that use these types of web.

Describing

This is another important skill. It can be broken down into the following areas:

- *Function* - what do you use an object for or what can an object do
- *Location* - where do you find an object or where does it belong
- *Attribute* - what special features does the object have
- *Category* - what group is the object from

Work on describing pictures or objects by answering the questions.

When the child can do this easily you could use these questions to compare pictures, e.g. bee and a bird to spot the similarities and differences.

Remember to do the activity verbally, using words instead of pictures sometimes. The child may get distracted by the detail in the pictures. When describing a bee you want the child to think of a bee in general and not just the image of a bee in front of them.

Categorisation

This is an important skill for memory. In order to save 'space' in the memory and improve access items need to be grouped together. Many children find this hard and need practice at grouping items.

Practise sorting pictures into main categories, e.g. animals, food, clothing, etc. When the child can do this easily try grouping the items into smaller subcategories, e.g. animals with tails, animals that like water, animals that live in hot countries.

Remember to explain to the child why the pictures go together and to use the category label.

Encourage the child to name items that belong in categories as well as sorting. Many children can learn three or four items per category and use these when asked to name things. This can be misleading as you could overlook that the child had a problem. To avoid this happening ask for long lists or for different items from the child's usual responses.

It is important to show the child that groups are flexible and any particular item can fall into several groups at the same time, e.g. if working on animals with tails and animals who like water, a beaver would fit into both.

The Word Itself – Phonological Analysis

Another crucially important skill is to be able to store the sounds that make up the word. This is called phonological analysis. Difficulties with phonological analysis can lead to poor representations of words being stored which in turn can affect learning of new words and word retrieval.

This can be broken down into the following skills:

- Onset - the first sound or sounds in the word
- Syllables - how many syllables are there in the word
- Rhyme - What other words sound like the word

Practise identifying the first sound in words. You could use the *Speech Link Onset Lotto Game* resource for this. Choose an onset board and the corresponding initial sound cards. Give the child the lotto board. Get them to take a small card from a pile and then decide which sound is at the beginning of the word to place it on the lotto board.

Place objects or pictures in a feely bag. Ask the child to take out an item and decide what the first sound they can hear is when you say the word. At the end of the game you could ask the child to find all the words or pictures beginning with the same first sound. Or you could ask the child to think of another word beginning with the same sound.

You can also use odd one out activities. Place several objects or pictures beginning with the same first sound and one beginning with a different first sound on the table and ask the child to find the odd one out. This can also be played with you saying the words and the child listening for the odd one out rather than showing them the objects. You may need to remind the child to listen to the way the words sound and not think about what they mean.

Practise clapping out syllables in words. You could use the *Speech Link Syllable Dominoes* or the *Syllable Count* games. To play syllable dominoes first cut out all the dominoes and divide them equally between the players. Start by placing one of the doubles in the middle. Each player has to try to link one of their cards to the line of dominoes by matching the number of syllables, i.e. the cat could be placed next to the dog but not next to the biscuits. The winner is the first player to place all their dominoes down.

To play syllable count give each player a syllable count board and place the syllable cards on the table. Players take turns to choose a card and to work out how many syllables there are in the word. They can then cover that number on their lotto count board by placing the card on top of the number. The winner is the first player to cover all the numbers.

It is important to work on both production of rhyme and also detection of rhyming words. The ability to produce rhyming words develops before children are able to make the decision whether two words rhyme or not. Rhyme detection skills do not usually develop until the child is around 6 years old. Start with rhyme production games. Place some everyday objects in a feely bag. Ask the child to take an object out and then think of some words that rhyme with it. Or you could use the *Speech Link Rhyme Production* game.

It is possible to work on rhyme production during the day, e.g. when lining up to go out to play each child must think of a word that rhymes with a given word before they can go through the door.

Once children can produce rhyming words they need to work on rhyme detection. Place some rhyming objects on the table and ask the child to find the one that doesn't rhyme. You could use the *Speech Link Rhyming Lotto* and the *Rhyme Detection* game.

As literacy skills develop the overall shape of the words can also provide useful information to help retrieve a word.

References

BALDWIN, L. (2008) 'Receptive Language Difficulties: Practical strategies to help children understand spoken language.' LDA

BIEMILLER, A. (2003) 'Vocabulary: needed if more children are to read well' *Reading Psychology*, 24:323-335.

BAUMAN, J.F. & KAME'ENUI, E.J. (2004) 'Vocabulary Instruction: Research into practice.' NY: Guilford Press.

BIEMILLER, A. & SLONIM, N. (2001) 'Estimating root word vocabulary growth in normative and disadvantaged populations: evidence for a common sequence of vocabulary acquisition.' *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93, 498-520.

BLOCK, C. COLLINS & MANGIERI, J (2006) 'Vocabulary in all classrooms' (4th edition) Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

CUNNINGHAM, A.E. & STANOVICH, K.E. (1997) 'Early reading acquisition and its relation to reading experience and ability 10 years later'. *Developmental Psychology*, 33:934-945.

DCSF, Department for children, schools and families (2008) *Teaching Effective Vocabulary*. www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications. Search using ref: DCSF-0037 6-2008.

HAYDEN, S. & JORDAN, E. (2007) 'Language for Learning: A practical guide for supporting pupils with language and communication difficulties across the curriculum.' Routledge.

SPEAKE, J. (2003) 'How to identify and support children with speech and language difficulties.' LDA