

CORE SKILL: COMMUNICATE

Vocabulary



What You Need to Know

Vocabulary growth in the early years is fascinating and rapid. Children typically say their first word around the age of 1; by 2 years of age, they are using close to 300 words; and by three years of age they have a working, expressive vocabulary of about 1,000 words. It may seem that the word-learning of these young toddlers is hard-wired. However, there are real differences in children’s vocabulary learning that are linked to the environments in which they grow up. Some research suggests that children raised in language-rich homes have heard 30 million more words by age three than children raised in less interactive and language-rich environments. This translates to gaps in vocabulary size and rate of vocabulary growth; gaps which persist, and sometimes grow, during the school years. Support of vocabulary growth within early care settings is one of the most critical ways to support a child’s early development, school readiness, and later school success.

Things to Consider

All children – including toddlers – know many more words than they can say. The words that a child can say are referred to as their **expressive vocabulary**, and the words that a child knows are referred to as their **receptive vocabulary**. Typically, a young child will understand words, but it will take repeated exposures to a word in a variety of contexts until they can begin to use it as their own.

Development of Vocabulary

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 18 and 36 months, children may:
Look or point at a person/object that has been named, follow simple directions, and respond appropriately to the meaning of words or signs.	Comprehend an increasing number of words or signs used in simple sentences during conversation and interaction with familiar adults and children.
Imitate new words/gestures and use some words/gestures for naming or making simple one-word requests (e.g., saying or signing “milk” when asking for a drink).	Use an increasing number of words in communication and conversation with others and add new vocabulary words regularly.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of vocabulary:

- ◆ Books with varied topics (e.g., movement, animals, colors, shapes, cooking, eating, bedtime/bath or other routine-related words, food, emotions, sensations, thinking process, or quantity). Select multiple books on each topic.
- ◆ Theme- or topic-based toys (e.g., farm animals, wild animals, cars and trucks, planes, pretend food, utensil bin, firefighting supplies, blocks organized by shapes, writing tools, or painting tools).
- ◆ Concrete experiences (e.g., outings, activities, or visitors) that reinforce many of the vocabulary words that they may be learning.
- ◆ Create a visual word wall that features pictures of some key vocabulary that you are using and teaching. Try to use actual photographs or realistic pictures as often as possible. This wall serves as a conscious reminder to you and may also draw children’s attention or spark conversation.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Vocabulary

OBSERVE	<p>OBSERVE</p> <p>Observe your own use of language with young children and the ways that children mirror your words. Do you provide <i>specific labels</i> for objects that they are glancing, gesturing, or pointing to (e.g., “Look at this blue truck!” rather than, “Look at this!”)? Do children repeat these words? Do you elaborate on the labels that you provide – such as naming an object and also describing its color, shape, or size? Do children try to repeat these phrases or show a similar tendency of talking (or babbling) in extended ways?</p>
FOCUS	<p>Intentionally Teach Selected Vocabulary</p> <p>Plan to explicitly use selected vocabulary in multiple ways across the day and over the weeks of a certain planning period/unit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ At Circle Time: “I have a little stuffed <u>penguin</u> here. They can join our other animals living by the big snowy mountain (<i>in the play center</i>).” At book time: “This book is about animals in the cold arctic! Here is a <u>penguin</u> on the cover!” At the art center: “We have black and white play-dough – look I used mine to make a little <u>penguin</u>!” ◆ During play: “I am going to <u>push</u> the blue truck to you! Here it comes!” At Meal Time: “Oh, you <u>pushed</u> peas all the way off the tray! You <u>pushed</u> peas (<i>with a gesture</i>) like we <u>pushed</u> the blue car!” ◆ At book time: “The little bunny is <u>sleepy</u>. It is time to say goodnight.” At nap time: “Let’s close our eyes. As we quiet our bodies, we feel <u>sleepy</u>. We can rest now.” On a field trip: “Do you see the little calf by its mother. It must be <u>sleepy</u>. It is curled up quietly.”
SCAFFOLD I	<p>Provide Child-Friendly Definitions</p> <p>In the context of reading books or during activities, pause to provide a quick definition of key words.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ While reading: “‘Goodnight little <u>calf</u>.’ A <u>calf</u> is a baby cow.” ◆ “We have a <u>crunchy</u> snack today! <u>Crunchy</u> food is hard and makes a noise when we eat it!” ◆ “Let’s <u>tip</u> the watering can to let some water out. <u>Tip</u> means turn something just a little bit.”
SCAFFOLD II	<p>Repeat Words Often</p> <p>Within a single interchange, repeat a word multiple times by using it, elaborating on the word within a short story or comment, and/or sometimes prompting children to also use the word.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ “Now we can <u>mix</u> the two paint colors with our fingers. Or, you can use a brush to <u>mix</u> the paint. When we <u>mix</u> paints, we can make new colors!” ◆ “The Stone Soup sounded so good! I love to make <u>soup</u>. Whenever I make <u>soup</u>, I have a big pot like this. I put lots of vegetables in my <u>soup</u>. Who else likes <u>soup</u>?” ◆ “Look at the big wings on the <u>airplane</u>! The <u>airplane</u> needs such big wings to fly! That is the big, loud engine of the <u>airplane</u> that helps it fly. <u>Airplanes</u> fly high in the sky – <u>airplanes</u> can join the clouds!”
KEEP IT GOING	<p>Consider what you learned from observing children on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.</p>