

CORE SKILL: COMMUNICATE

Vocabulary



What You Need to Know

Vocabulary development in the preschool years is one of the most important factors for children's future literacy and school success. This is because children's vocabulary growth in the preschool years moves away from simply acquiring 'basic' words (e.g., food, animals, bedtime routine, or toys) to the acquisition of more types of words (e.g., verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, spatial words, and words noting time or order), more sophisticated words (e.g., gigantic, frustrated vs. big, angry), and content-specific words (e.g., comets, planets, and solar system). Children build these sophisticated words as a result of their exposure to rich learning experiences and their interactions with adults within these experiences. Thus, interactions with books, conversations with adults, and cognitively stimulating and content-rich lessons are important activities in which to embed support of children's vocabulary development.

Things to Consider

The words a child can say are referred to as their "expressive vocabulary" and the words a child knows are referred to as their "receptive vocabulary." Children's receptive vocabulary tends to be much larger than their expressive vocabulary. As such, you may not see children immediately using the words they are exposed to. However, research shows that repeated and consistent exposure to sophisticated language will have an important impact on children's receptive and expressive vocabulary development.

Development of Vocabulary

Between 36 and 48 months, children may:	Between 48 and 60 months, children may:
Show a rapid increase in the acquisition of new vocabulary words that describe actions, emotions, things, or ideas that are meaningful within the everyday environment.	Show a steady increase in vocabulary through the acquisition of words with increasing specificity and variety.
Use new vocabulary words to describe relations among things or ideas.	Show repetition of new words offered by adults and ask about the meaning of unfamiliar words.
Typically use known words in the correct context and, with support, show an emerging understanding of how words are related to broader categories.	Demonstrate an increasingly sophisticated understanding of words and word categories with support (e.g., identifying a synonym or antonym).
Show repetition of new words offered by adults.	

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of vocabulary:

- ◆ Select books that will build children's exposure to new, sophisticated words (e.g., literature with strong verbs and specific, sophisticated nouns) as well as exposure to many topics and their related vocabularies (e.g., emotions, health and bodies, earth and geography, vehicles, engineering and building, etc.). Select multiple books on each topic.
- ◆ Create theme or book-related displays that make abstract or sophisticated ideas more concrete (e.g., weather tools within a unit on weather; uniforms or equipment from different jobs for a unit on 'community workers').
- ◆ Plan outings and experiences that coordinate with topics you are reading and teaching about in the classroom.
- ◆ Create visual word displays that guide children's thinking about words in more sophisticated ways (e.g., descriptor words categorized into 'texture words' and 'color words'; word labels and corresponding pictures moving across gigantic-large-small-tiny-minuscule; words and their antonyms placed into parallel columns).



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Vocabulary

OBSERVE	<p>OBSERVE</p> <p>Observe children’s vocabulary. Consider the range of words they use, such as verbs, nouns, and adjectives, as well as more abstract words (e.g., think, feel). Consider the precision of the words they use (e.g., do they say, “not happy,” or, “disappointed”) and the extent to which they are conscious of words and their meaning (e.g., do they ask for labels for things; do they repeat new words you provide them).</p>
FOCUS	<p>Intentionally Teach Selected Vocabulary Words</p> <p>Plan to explicitly use selected vocabulary <i>in multiple ways</i> across a day and over the weeks of a certain planning period or unit.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ “We are going to <i>investigate</i> what happens when we mix these different ingredients into our tubes of water.” <u>At book time</u>: “George wonders what the noise is and goes to <i>investigate</i>.” <u>At the art center</u>: “Let’s <i>investigate</i> what happens when we mix different paint colors together!”◆ “You are a <i>gourmet</i> cook because you are making such delicious and fancy things for our party! <u>In a cooking center</u>: “We can use these cutouts to make our sandwiches into shapes. They will be delicious and fun to look at — just like a <i>gourmet</i> cook would make!”
SCAFFOLD I&II	<p>Provide Child-Friendly Definitions</p> <p>Pause to provide a quick definition of certain keywords.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ “This book is all about <i>mammals</i>. <i>Mammals</i> are animals that have fur or hair, instead of feathers like birds.”
	<p>Draw Attention to Word Relations</p> <p>Elaborate on the definition by drawing attention to words that are similar, opposite, or reflect a detail or category to the target word.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Opposite words: “This orange is a little bit <i>tart</i>. That means it is a little bit sour, instead of just all sweet.”◆ Similar words with “different shade of meaning”: “Just <i>sprinkle</i> the glitter across the page. That means you don’t pour it quickly, but let just a little bit go very slowly.”
SCAFFOLD III	<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 sometimes prompting children to also use the word.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ <u>During art</u>: “When you mixed blue, green, and white, you got <i>teal</i>! <i>Teal</i> is a blue that is very bright and a little green. Our sign over the art center is <i>teal</i> and I am wearing a <i>teal</i> sweater today! Do you see anything else in the room that is <i>teal</i>?”◆ “Look at the <i>gigantic</i> trees in this picture. The trees are taller than any tree I have ever seen. They are taller than houses. They are as tall as a <i>gigantic</i> building that reaches to the sky. This forest is famous for its <i>gigantic</i> trees.”
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 from Setting the Stage into your regular routines.</p>