

Developing Vocabulary



West Midlands
Speech & Language
Therapy

Why is Vocabulary Important?

A good vocabulary (the number of words you know and can say) is important for children of all ages. It helps children talk in sentences, tell stories and engage in conversations, and is key for learning to read and write.

Vocabulary knowledge can affect a child's school performance. Children with weak vocabulary will have problems learning new words in class, have a limited understanding of topic words from their curriculum, and need words repeated a significant amount more than other children will need to learn them.

A child's vocabulary when they are five years old can tell us how well they do at school age 11. As children grow older, the gap in reading skills between them and their peers can widen up to a five year difference. So, helping children to develop a good vocabulary is vital.

What to Expect and When?

AGE RANGE	HOW DOES THIS PRESENT?
4-5 years	Understands a range of words to describe, e.g. early, soft, soon, rough. Knows that words can be categorised into groups, e.g. animals: dog, chicken, horse. Starting to use words to make the meaning clearer, e.g. 'I saw a monkey today. It was a spider monkey'.
5-7 years	Can compare words by what their meaning is, or the sounds, e.g. 'you see with your eyes and there is a sea at the beach'. Can guess the word when given clues about its meaning, location etc. Will use newly learnt words appropriately, e.g. 'a pride of lions'.
7-9 years	Uses a range of words related to time and measurement, e.g. century, breadth. Uses verbs to express thoughts and ideas, or to express the concept of cause and effect. Joins in about group discussions using topic specific vocabulary.
9-11 years	Makes choices from a wide and varied vocabulary, e.g. 'leap' instead of 'jump'. Uses sophisticated words but sometimes use them incorrectly. Knows that words can have two meanings.
14 years	Starting to have an understanding of instruction words, e.g. consider, generate. Uses prefix and suffix additions to words, e.g. un-, dis-, -able. Can add sophisticated words appropriately to formal text.
16+ years	Can understand a large range of instruction words, e.g. evaluate, compile, find themes. Uses a range of descriptive words and expressions, e.g. swaggered, noxious.



Activities to Develop Vocabulary at Home

Sorting games: Cut up pictures from two different categories, e.g. food vs. clothes, farm animals vs. zoo animals. Get your child to sort these into the correct categories. You can add in three different categories for a challenge. **For older children...** make this more difficult by sorting into more specific categories, e.g. healthy vs. unhealthy food, positive vs. negative emotions, mammals vs. amphibians.

Category naming: Give four or five items belonging to one category, and ask the child to identify the category. E.g. whale, dolphin, shark, octopus – all live in seas or oceans.

Odd one out: The child is given three or four pictures or words, and only one of them is from a different category. Identify which one doesn't belong, and discuss why, using the category names, e.g. 'wind, typhoons, fog and blizzards are all types of weather, but seagull is an animal'. You can use pictures from [this pack](#) or [this worksheet](#) for older students to get you started.

Name 5... Give your child a category, and ask them to name 5 items from this. You can use these [challenge cards](#), or use your own categories. **For older children...** You can increase the number to 7 or 8 to make this more difficult, and categories can become more specific. Use action and describing words too, e.g. 'name 5 things we use to clean' 'that are ancient' 'that are spherical'.

Verbs: Vocabulary words that describe actions are called verbs. Developing the use of verbs on their own, in sentences and in short stories is key to language development. Use [flashcards](#) and ask your child, 'what is he/she doing?'. Once they are confident in labelling a verb/action, you can support their use of these verbs by adding another word for e.g. a person (boy is climbing) or an object (eat apple). To extend this further, model adding a person and an object (he is climbing a wall).

Pronouns: Pronouns are words used in place of a name or item, such as 'he / she / it / them / his / hers'. Children are easily confused between these. Instead of correcting your child when they use the wrong pronoun, model the correct use, and discuss it. E.g. 'she is holding an umbrella. We say she when talking about a girl'. Worksheets are available [here](#).

Prepositions: Prepositions are words that describe a location, direction or time. These words can link sentences together and develop spoken and written language. Here are some [worksheets](#) which can be used to support a range of basic and later developing prepositions.



Activities to Develop Vocabulary at Home

Describing games: Show your child an item or picture and discuss its appearance / location / why we use it. You can use a word map here as a visual support. Once confident, you can play describing games, where the child is given a word/picture and this is hidden from the adult. The child has to describe the item, and the adult guesses what it could be. **For older children...** Older children really enjoy this game, and readily available games/apps can be downloaded, including 'Heads Up' and 'Guess Who'. This is good practice if your child forgets a word, as they can describe it instead.

Similarities and differences: Choose two words from one category, and talk about how they are the same. Then talk about how these words are different. For example, 'how are a sink and a bath the same? And how are they different?' Check beforehand that your child can identify whether two items are the same or different. You can use a list of [features](#) to choose words from for your child to compare. This list offers guidance for a range of development stages. **For older children...** Once your child is confident in discussing similarities and differences, ask them to identify how words are linked. Give them two pictures / words, and ask 'why do these go together?'. For example, 'why do mop and bucket go together?'. This encourages your child to use sentences to explain why items are linked.

Word associations: Start with a word which your child knows, and the child then has to think of an associated (linked) word. If there is more than one player, each person has to think of a different word. For example, 'pilot'.....plane – sky – sun – holiday – beach – sand'. This is a fun game to get the whole family involved.

Synonyms / Antonyms: Words that mean the same thing are called synonyms, e.g. terrible and horrible. Words that mean the opposite of each other are called antonyms, e.g. terrible and brilliant. Naming and discussing antonyms can be more difficult than naming synonyms, but both are good for word retrieval skills. **For older children...** try to name two synonyms and two antonyms for each word.

Mind maps: Mind mapping is an easy way to brainstorm ideas to help with learning and recall. Give your child a word, and ask them to write it in the middle of a page. Around the word, get them to write down any linked words which will help them to understand and remember the word in the centre. For e.g. 'apple' – 'green / red, circle, stalk, fruit, grows, tree, eat'

With older children this can be used to develop understanding of more abstract words. These words are not always physical objects, that can be seen. For example, the word 'tomorrow'. Linked words could be: calendar, date, after, future, time, diary, journal'. [Related words lists](#) can be used as a support.



Activities to Develop Vocabulary at Home

Fill in the blank: This is best used with older children, and it encourages them to look at the sentence around the word to understand it. Give them a sentence, and miss out a key word, e.g. 'Camels can live for a week without water, making life in the _____ easier'. Start with familiar phrases so that they understand the activity.

Scrapbook: Following a day out / holiday / event / learning, add an entry into a scrapbook. For younger children, you can include pictures or drawings too. Add in key vocabulary words which they learnt or were exposed to that day, and describe these words / items to each other (Category? Appearance? Location? Synonyms?). They can show this scrapbook to other family members / teachers and use these key vocabulary words in a different environment. This will consolidate their understanding of these vocabulary words, and encourage them to use them again in their talking. Remember – repetition is key!

Top Tips

Repetition is really important. Use the words you want them to learn in lots of different places, when doing different activities, and when talking about different things.

Labelling and modelling words supports vocabulary development better than asking questions such as 'what's this?'

There are different types of words that children need to learn. Develop their vocabulary of naming words (door, telescope), describing words (filthy, exotic), and action words (stumble, prevent).

