

Speech & language  
therapy

## Developing vocabulary

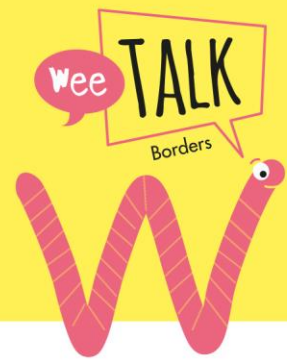
This pack is designed to support parents in developing vocabulary in young children. The pack aims to provide general strategies that can be used in everyday situations in addition to specific games and activities. Useful resources and websites are listed at the end.

While children from different backgrounds typically develop language skills around the same age, the subsequent rate of vocabulary growth is strongly influenced by how parents talk to their children. As a parent, you can make such a difference to your child's vocabulary development.

Although some children have poor vocabulary due to limited experiences, others may have difficulty as part of their language delay. In addition, there is a group of children who have difficulty finding or retrieving words. These children may for example, use non-specific words like *stuff* or *thingy* or may replace the target word with a word that is linked in meaning. Word finding difficulties can often be part of wider conditions such as specific language impairment or learning difficulties. Although this package focuses on developing vocabulary, the strategies should also prove useful for the child with word finding difficulty.

### GENERAL STRATEGIES (Elks & McLachlan, 2006; McCartney, 2006)

- Choose **useful** words for your child to learn. For example, vocabulary suggested by your speech and language therapist (SLT); words that label concepts such as position; and school topic words.
- Build up the **meaning** of the word by linking (i.e. semantic linking) with other familiar words. The following questions will enhance your child's understanding of words which in turn will facilitate his memory of words:
  - *Can you describe it?*
  - *What does it do?*
  - *What else can you do with it?*
  - *Where might you find it?*
  - *What group does it belong to?*
  - *What else is like this?*
  - *What else does it make you think of?*



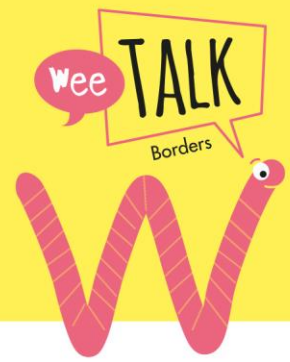
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- Reinforce the **sound pattern** of the word. For example, clapping number of syllables; thinking of sound at beginning of word; thinking of rhyming words. To help your child remember the word it will be helpful to teach semantic links and sound pattern together.
- Ensure your child hears and says the word a lot. In other words, think of ways of **bringing the word to mind**.

These strategies will help your child learn new words. In turn, these skills teach your child to think about his own word/vocabulary learning.

#### ACTIVITIES AND GAMES TO PLAY (Elks & McLachlan, 2006)

- **Introduce simple vocabulary first.** See Black Sheep Press Vocabulary Builder 1 & 2. These include useful word lists and pictures in addition to suggestions for games. Use simple versions of words first. For example, talk about trousers and then add jeans, jogging bottoms etc.
- Use a **variety of multi-sensory activities.** Ensure your child is given opportunities to explore the objects by sound, sight, feel and if appropriate, smell and taste.
- **Practical activities** act as a great motivator to children learning vocabulary. Selected vocabulary targets can be introduced into everyday activities such as play; books; puzzles; getting washed/bathed/dressed; travelling to/from school; going shopping; doing the housework; walking the dog.
- Frequent exposure to **school topic words** or vocabulary suggested by your SLT is important. Provide opportunities to use the set of words in as many learning situations as possible e.g. role play, books, painting, jigsaws and lotto type games.
- Select pictures or objects for the items of vocabulary that you wish to teach (up to 10 at a time). Ask your child to name the picture or object. Then ask the following questions, whether or not he is successful at naming the target word. Explain as appropriate.

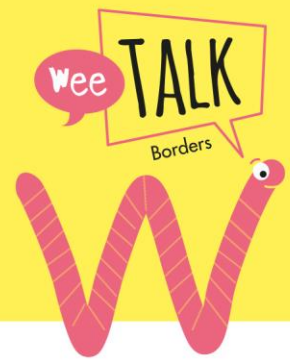


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- *Can you describe it?* For example, the sound it makes; what it feels like; what it smells like; what it tastes like; what it's made of; when it's used.
- *What does it do?* For example, what it does; what it's used for; when you might use it.
- *What else can you do with it?*
- *Where might you find it?* For example, where you see it; where it lives.
- *What group does it belong to?* You may need to lead your child in by an example such as *socks, coat and jumper are types of clothes. Apple is a type of .....*? Talk about other words in the group that your child may know.
- *What else does it make you think of?* (up to 5 examples) Suggest your child makes a picture in his head of the new word. Ask *what else can you see?* For example, with *planet*, your child may 'see' moon, sun, and rocket.

Some words have strong associations. For example, knife & fork; fish & chips. Therefore, when appropriate, think of word associations with your child.

- **Sort and classify objects** - This strengthens the links between words and provides opportunity to learn category names e.g. *fruit* and *clothes*. Name every item as it is sorted. Initially sort categories that are very different such as clothes and vehicles. Later sort more similar groups such as zoo and farm animals. You could also play games to increase the speed of word retrieval within a given category e.g. *how many animals can you think of in a minute?*
- **Which Ones Go Together?** Black Sheep resource (Ask your SLT for this).
- **Verbs** (i.e. action words) are essential for good sentence structure. Some children with delayed vocabulary development find it difficult to learn verbs. Useful activities:
  - **Modelling** - Say the verb while you/your child performs an action e.g. *mummy is kicking; mummy is kicking a ball*
  - **Video** - children in and outdoors carrying out a variety of actions. Play video, pause and encourage your child to copy the action while you name it. Eventually your child names the action.



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- **Teddy likes...**Collect objects such as a book, bricks, toy, apple and ball which are associated with simple actions. Take turns with your child in picking up an object, demonstrating how Teddy uses it and then name the action e.g. Teddy is sitting on the brick.
- **Musical actions** - Encourage your child to dance while you play some music. When the music stops, take it in turns to tell each other to do an action.
- **Lotto** - Use photos of your child carrying out a range of actions. You and your child must name the action of every card picked up
- **What am I doing?** Choose a selection of action pictures. Place them in front of your child. Mime one of the actions. Ask “*what am I doing?*” Your child selects picture that matches the action and names action.
- **Simon Says!** Take turns in being the teacher and giving the instruction – following your model. Then ask “*what did you do?*” This game could also be played with Teddy.

- Children begin to understand **adjectives** (i.e. describing words) around 3 years. Adjectives could be taken from the following categories: colour; size; number; texture & appearance (e.g. old, new, dirty etc.); pattern (e.g. stripy, spotty); and what things are made of. Useful activities:

- **Picture Lotto** - Asking questions such as: “Who’s got *stripy* trousers?” “Who’s got a *red* car?”

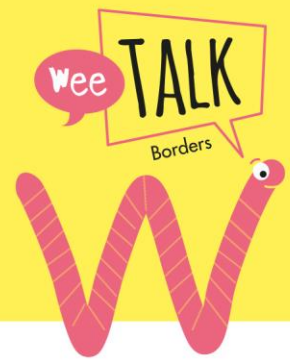
- **Feely Box** - Two sets of objects. Initially look and talk about objects. One set of objects set on table. Other set out of sight. Take it in turns to choose object, put in box so that can be seen only by person describing it. Other player tries to identify object from set on table.

- **I spy**

- **Prepositions** describe position of an object or person. For example, in, on, under, behind, in front, next to.

Useful activities:

- **Hide and Seek!** Your child tells you where the toy is.
- **Snap!** See Black Sheep Press preposition pictures or make your own. Child describes picture using correct position.
- **Obstacle course** (e.g. in the house or park) Give directions such as *sit behind the chair and under the table*. Reverse roles.



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## Useful resources

- Black Sheep Press *Vocabulary Builder, Levels 1 & 2*. These provide an extensive bank of pictures of the most common nouns and verbs in early language development.
- Elks, L & McLachlan, H (2006) *Advice and activities to encourage pre-school children's communication skills*.
- McCartney, E (2006) *Principles of Vocabulary Development: for Teachers*
- Lewis, S (2004) *Semantic Steps* [www.speelang.co.uk](http://www.speelang.co.uk)
- This resource includes lots of games which can be used according to your child's needs and ability.

[www.hello.org.uk](http://www.hello.org.uk)

[www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

[www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)

[www.wordsforlife.org.uk](http://www.wordsforlife.org.uk) is a useful website with downloadable worksheets appropriate for children aged 3 – 5 years.

**For more information on the Speech and Language Therapy Service (including how to request support from us) please see:**

**<http://www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/slt>**

**[Check out our Wee Talk Borders Facebook page or you can call us on 01896 826710](#)**