



How to help your child learn new words

A guide for preschool children, aged 3-4 years

Preschool children benefit from conversations about past and future events, as well as explanations, when they learn new words. Remember, it's not just how much you say these words, but what you say and how you say it that can make a big difference. You can help your child learn new words with the following tips.

Follow your child's lead

This means saying words that come up during everyday conversations with your child. If you talk about what interests your child, it is more likely your child will pay attention and learn a new word. You can provide explanations for pre-schoolers like, "he needs to get a new tyre because his tyre is flat". You can talk about past events such as, "remember when we had to take our car in to be repaired?". You can also talk about future events such as, "our car is dirty - maybe we should go to the car wash".

Children need to hear a word several times before they start to use it

This means that you might use a word with your child many times before your child actually says the word himself.

Don't bombard your child with words

You should aim for a balanced conversation between you and your child. For example, you say something, then your child says or does something, and so on. It is important to wait after you say something so you give your child enough time to talk.

Help your child understand what a new word means

By giving details about new words or explaining what words mean, you build your child's understanding of new words. For example, if you are playing with cars and introduce the word "passenger", you might say something like: "A passenger is someone who rides in a car or a bus or a train. A passenger goes for the ride but doesn't drive the car or the bus." Relating new words to your child's personal experiences also helps them connect with new words.

Actions can speak louder than words

Using words with actions, gestures or facial expressions can help your child understand the meaning of the words. For example, when saying the word "weary", you could do a sleeping action (hands under your head) or yawn so that your child understands what the word means.

References: 1. Weitzman, E. & Greenberg, J. (2010). ABC and Beyond: Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings. The Hanen Centre: Toronto. 2. Rowe, M. (2012). A Longitudinal Investigation of the Role of Quantity and Quality of Child-Directed Speech in Vocabulary Development. Child Development: 83(5), 1762-1774. 3. Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. (1995). Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children.