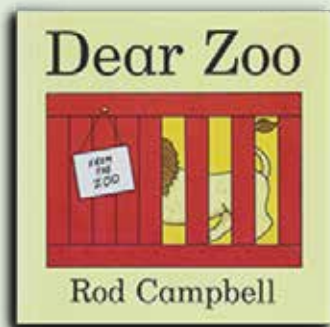


Book Nook

This month's Book Nook topic is...



Building Early Vocabulary with *Dear Zoo*

Book reading is an ideal activity for introducing new words to children who are just starting to talk. Young children are often very interested in books, and the pictures and story help them understand word meanings and provide them with opportunities to use new words.

My chosen book:

Dear Zoo by Rod Campbell

Why I chose it:

This book is about a child who writes to the zoo and asks them to send him a pet. The text is repetitive, with each page including: "I wrote to the zoo to send me a pet, they sent me a..." followed by a page where you can lift the flap to see which animal was sent.

This book is effective for building vocabulary since:

- Even children with few words can participate by lifting the flaps while you name the animal underneath
- Children can practice saying words by filling in the blanks at the end of the repetitive sentences. For example, "I wrote to the zoo, to send me a ___" and wait to see if your child will fill in the word "pet"
- The variety of animals and describing words (a tall giraffe, a scary snake) in the book provide many words to consider introducing as new vocabulary
- The illustrations are appealing and clearly show what is happening in the story and convey the meaning of unfamiliar words

Selecting first words:

The first step is to select appropriate words for your child to learn. These are words your child will first need to **understand** before he can go on to use them herself.

Words that you want to help your child **understand** should:

- **be interesting to your child** – Build on your child’s curiosity by labeling her interests. In Dear Zoo you might notice that your child really likes the picture of the lion. If that’s the case, be sure to name it.
- **be specific** – Sometimes we get stuck using imprecise language. For example, in Dear Zoo, you might say “Let’s open that”. When introducing new words to your child, it is important to be specific, so instead of “let’s open that” you could say “let’s open the flap”.
- **involve a variety of word types** – Include names of things, actions, and describing words. In Dear Zoo, some action words you might focus on are “open”, “go”, or “move”. Some describing words might be “big”, “scary”, or “tired”.
- **occur throughout the day** – Chose words that you can say in a variety of contexts. The more a child hears a word, the more likely they are to say it. In Dear Zoo, a word that comes up repeatedly is “pet”. If you have a pet, this might be a great word to start with.

In Dear Zoo, some great words to help your child understand are: “open”, “big”, “tall”, “lion”, “giraffe”, “dog”, and “pet”.

Once your child understands a word, she may then start to use it. Your child will be most likely to use words that:

- **are motivating for her to say** – In Dear Zoo, your child might be most motivated to name the animals as they appear, or to say “open” when it’s time to lift a flap.
- **start with a sound she can make** – If your child already has words that start with “b” (for example “baby” or ball), you could consider choosing a word that starts with the sound /b/, like “bye” or “back”.
- **can be used by your child in many different situations throughout the day** – For example, words like “no” and “open” are useful words that are likely to come up over and over again!

Shoot for the SSTaRS

The next step is to make new words “sparkle”, or stand out for your child, by using a strategy called “**Shoot for the SSTaRS**”. This is an acronym that stands for: **S**tress, **S**how, **T**ell and **R**elate, and **S**ay it again.

Here is an example of how to shoot for the SSTaRS with the word **open**:

Stress

Make the word stick out from the other words by saying it louder and slower than the rest of the text. You can also pause before and after saying the word. You could say, “let’s **open** the flap and see who is underneath.”

Show

You can show what a word means in a variety of ways – the easiest of which is using the flaps in the book. On every page you can tell your child to **open** the flap to see what animal is hiding underneath.

Tell

You can tell your child what “open” means by giving a short explanation. You could say, “**Open** means we’re lifting the flap to see what’s inside.” Or, tell your child what open is not: “We’re not closing the flap, we’re **opening** it.”

And Relate

Relating the new word to other concepts or experiences helps your child associate the word with other situations, and will make the word much more meaningful to your child. You could relate this word to other experiences by saying “We’re **opening** the flap, just like we **open** the door when we want to go outside.”

Say it again...!

This is another essential step to help your child learn new words: repeat the word both by re-reading the book, and by saying the word again in other situations. If your child likes Dear Zoo, chances are he or she will want to hear it again and again. This will give you many opportunities to shoot for the SSTaRS with **open**. You will also want to shoot for the SSTaRS with **open** throughout the day. For example, if your child hands you a container with a tight lid, you might say “let’s **open** the box.”

Selecting first words:

Introduce **open** by **Stressing, Showing, and Telling** the word. You might only **tell** and **relate** the word once, but you can **stress** the word and **show** the word every time you need to **open** a flap.

After you’ve said **open** several times, and your child becomes familiar with the story, you can wait before saying the word open to see if your child will use a sound, a word, or a gesture, to say it for you. For example, you could say, “Let’s find out what’s in the box – we need to...” and then wait to see if your child will attempt to say **open**. Consider any look, gesture, sound, or word as your child’s attempt. After they take their turn, you can say **open**, modeling the full word for them and giving them another opportunity to hear it.

The more times you read the book, the more “shooting for the SSTaRS” you can do! Over time, your child will understand (and hopefully use) many of the words in the story.

Happy reading!

-Tamara

I hope you enjoyed this Book Nook topic. I’d love to hear which books you use to build vocabulary. Please send me your feedback.



A little more about me

I'm a Speech-Language Pathologist working at The Hanen Centre as a Program Specialist. I combine my background in language and literacy development with my knowledge of adult learning to offer evidence-based face to face and online trainings to early childhood educators, SLPs and parents.

The Book Nook combines my passion for children's literature with my knowledge of language and literacy development. I hope you enjoy it!

Tamara