



## Using Early Childhood Classroom Activities to Build Vocabulary

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Young children are constantly learning new words. The number and type of words they learn largely depends on the opportunities they have to hear new words used in their everyday life. A large study back in the 1990s found that some preschool children had been exposed to 45 million words by age four, while others had only been exposed to 13 million [1,2]. These differences (often referred to as the “30 million word gap”) had a major impact on the size of the children’s vocabularies and their later academic success.

### What’s the connection between vocabulary and academic success?

It may not seem obvious why vocabulary is so important for children’s academic outcomes. However, the more words children know, the more information they have about the world. This results in their being able to use their understanding of words to build their knowledge. Having a rich vocabulary allows children to understand the “[academic language](#)” used in formal schooling, which involves words and grammar that are more complex than those used in other settings. Studies have also shown that children’s vocabularies play a particularly important role in their reading comprehension [3].

As an early childhood educator, you are in a key position to provide a vocabulary-rich environment because almost any classroom activity and routine can be used to introduce new words.

### New research about vocabulary support in preschool classrooms

A recent study looked at the times during the day when preschool teachers supported children’s vocabulary development by talking about new words and what they mean [3]. They discovered that:

- **Vocabulary support happens mainly during teacher-led activities** – teachers provided the most vocabulary support when reading and discussing books with children, and during teacher-led activities with large groups of children.
- **Informal activities weren't used to teach vocabulary** – even though teachers spent over 50% of the day in informal activities like meals, free play, and transitions, they did not use vocabulary strategies during these activities.
- **Teachers provided the most vocabulary support during science** – they provided some support during writing instruction and “morning meeting” (discussions about the weather, calendar, and greetings), less support during social studies, and almost no support for new vocabulary during art, reading or math instruction.

There were also big differences between the teachers in terms of how much vocabulary support they provided. One teacher talked about new vocabulary during large group activities almost 12 times more than the others. Over the school year, this would add up to 8,660 instances of vocabulary support, as opposed to 734 instances in the other teachers' classrooms.

The researchers concluded that:

- children in different classrooms may be exposed to very different amounts of vocabulary instruction
- there may be many more times during the preschool day that can be used to encourage children's vocabulary development

## Making the most of the preschool day to support vocabulary

By making the most of preschool activities and subjects, we can ensure children have as many opportunities as possible to learn about new vocabulary. Here are some tips to help you introduce and talk about new words throughout the day [3]:

By making the most of preschool activities, we ensure that children have as many opportunities as possible to learn about new vocabulary.

- **Pick the right words** – preschool children are ready to learn about words that are more sophisticated than those used in everyday life. More advanced vocabulary naturally comes up during subjects like science, where words like “evaporate,” “hibernate” or “decay” might be part of the curriculum. But you can introduce sophisticated words during any activity by thinking about a more advanced version of an everyday word. For example, instead of “tired”, try introducing a word like “exhausted”; or instead of “happy”, try “delighted” or “ecstatic”.

- **Take advantage of informal activities like transitions, meals, and daily routines** – conversations during informal activities tend to happen “on the fly”, but they still offer many opportunities for new vocabulary. For example, you could discuss “raw” vegetables or the “temperature” of the food at snack time, how we need to “apply” sunblock when we go outside, or how to “lather” the soap when washing hands. New vocabulary can be incorporated into almost any conversation or activity. Remember to repeat these words after they have been introduced.
- **Use free play to teach vocabulary** – when children are playing, it’s a great time to use their interests to introduce new words. For example, when children are playing at the water table, you could take turns pouring water with them, talking about how the different “containers” hold different “amounts” of water. If you see a child assembling train tracks, you could join in with him and talk about how you can “connect” the tracks so that the train can “travel” even farther.
- **Make use of all subject areas** – new vocabulary can be incorporated into any subject. For example, words like “portion,” “fraction,” and “measure” can be used during math instruction, and words like “create,” “decorate” and “sculpt” might arise during art.
- **Plan in advance** – coming up with a list of target vocabulary related to specific activities ahead of time can help you introduce new words, even during busy routines. Reminders like writing new vocabulary on a clipboard or whiteboard, or near the location of the routine can be helpful (such as posting “humid” and “foggy” near the children’s coat hooks so you can discuss the weather as the children are getting ready to go outside).
- **Introduce new vocabulary with books** – sometimes books have sophisticated vocabulary built right into the story, but when they don’t, you can always introduce a new word during your discussion about the book. Take a look at this [Book Nook article](#) for an example.
- **Build children’s understanding of new words with the “Shoot for the SSTaRS” strategy** – this strategy summarizes the many ways you can emphasize new words to help children understand what they mean. [Here are some tips to Shoot for the SSTaRS.](#)

By making use of the many activities and subjects during the preschool day, we can provide children with as many opportunities as possible to hear sophisticated vocabulary, and this will give them the language foundation they need to be successful in kindergarten and beyond.

Many of the tips above are based on information from our programs for early childhood educators:

- [Learning Language and Loving It™](#) provides practical strategies for the classroom to help children build language and social skills using everyday activities, routines and play.
- [ABC and Beyond™](#) helps educators of preschool children promote the emergent literacy skills they need in order to learn to read and write successfully, including vocabulary.

## References

1. Hart, B. & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes & Publishing Co.
2. Hart, B. & Risley, T. R. (2003). The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by age 3. *American Education*, 27(1), 4-9.
3. Dwyer, J. & Harbaugh, A. G. (2020). Where and when is support for vocabulary development occurring in preschool classrooms? *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 20(2), 252-295.