



Making New Words “Stick”

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Parents of young children who are just starting to talk sometimes ask these types of questions:

- *My child said “cookie” last week, but he hasn’t said it since then. Why?*
- *My child calls her teddy bear “teddy”, but why does she also call all of her stuffed animals “teddy”?*
- *My child can copy me when I say “open”. So why can’t he say it on his own?*

As young children learn about words and build their early vocabulary, it isn’t always a smooth road. This is especially true for children with language delays who have difficulty making new words “stick”. This has to do with how children learn words.

The main way children learn words is by hearing them used in their everyday life. But it is not a straightforward process. Think about this common situation:

While out for a walk, mom points to a four-legged animal and says, “Look at that little dog!” The fact that there is a dog across the street and mom pointed to it gives her child clues about what she’s talking about. But the child also has to learn:

- which one of mom’s words refers to the animal (Is the animal called “little”?).
- that the word “dog” refers to this particular type of four-legged animal (and not other small four-legged animals like cats or racoons).
- that there are many types of animals that are called “dog” (think about the many different breeds of dogs – and they all look very different!).
- that the word “dog” has a slightly different meaning depending on the other words in the sentence (e.g. a “guard dog” brings to mind a different image than a “service dog”).

That's a lot of information to understand, just to learn about a single word! Children develop this understanding gradually over time during the variety of everyday interactions they have with their caregivers. As they hear language used to talk about their daily activities and routines, they gain an increased understanding of what words mean and how to use them. They usually understand a word before they will say it, and they tend to start learning nouns first (names for people, places, and things). Then they add some simple verbs (action words) and adjectives (words that describe) to their vocabulary [1].

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As they are learning about words, children use what information they have gathered so far to express themselves. This means that, early on, they use one word to refer to all things that have similar features (like saying "dog" for all animals with four legs). And even if they hear a word often, they may not yet understand its meaning or be able to recall how the word is said to use it regularly [1].

Children with language delays show the same patterns of word learning as typically developing children. However, it takes them longer to develop an understanding of the word and they need to hear words repeated more often and in more situations before they can use it when communicating with others [2].

There are some things parents and caregivers of young children can do to make word learning a bit easier.

Tips for making words "stick"

All children, whether they have a language delay or not, learn best during enjoyable interactions with their caregivers. You don't need special toys or flashcards – the routines and activities that your child experiences every day are what he needs in order to learn new words. The best way to make words "stick" is to give your child lots of opportunities to hear new words during enjoyable activities that you do together. During these activities, you can:

- **talk about things that interest your child** – when you talk about whatever has caught your child's attention in the moment, he will be more motivated to pay attention to what you are saying. To build his understanding, you both need to be looking at and paying attention to the same thing while you are talking about it.

- **repeat, repeat, and repeat** – children with language delays need to hear words repeated often in a variety of situations to build their understanding. Repeating doesn't mean saying the word a few times in a row. For example, if you want your child to learn about the word "water", it's not helpful to bombard your child by saying, "This is water. Water. Say water." Instead, try to use the word naturally as it comes up in conversation. Also, talk about water during different activities – while washing the dishes, during meals and bath time, and pretending to give a drink to a stuffed animal. Each of these different situations gives your child more information about the word and what it means.
- **make new words stand out with actions and gestures** – if you hold up an object or use a gesture that matches the meaning of a word, your child can match what he sees with the word he hears. This also helps him remember the word [3].
- **avoid pressuring your child to say words or to copy you** – when you pressure your child to repeat your words, it doesn't help him learn what the word means and how to use it. All it really shows us is that he can repeat the word, which is a different skill from knowing how to use a word to express what he wants to say.
- **expand on what your child says** – if your child says a word, turn it into a short, grammatical sentence. This gives your child more information about what the word means and its connection to other words. For example, if your child says "fish" while looking at a fish tank, you could expand by saying "Yes, the fish is swimming". By hearing "fish" used in the same sentence as "swimming", your child will start to learn that there is some connection between these two words. Also, by acknowledging what your child said, it lets him know that he used the word correctly [1].

Children with language delays need to hear a word repeated many times in a variety of situations to learn its meaning and how to use it. You can't assume a child knows a word if he says it once; if he uses a new word a few times in different situations, it shows you that the word is becoming part of his vocabulary. By talking to your child throughout the day and making new words stand out using these tips, you will help those new words "stick" as your child continues to develop his vocabulary.

References

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3. Wakerfield, E. M., Hall, C., James, K. H., & Goldin-Meadow, S. (2018). Gesture for generalization: gesture facilitates learning of words for actions on objects. *Developmental Science*, 21(5), n/a-n/a. <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12656>.