



***WORDS
TO
LIVE BY***

As we have seen, language is a very essential tool in the formation human development. It provides us the ability to interact with others in both simple and complex social interactions. From the start of learning letters and numbers, children progress in their language skills to begin to form words. Parents can assist in guiding their children by introducing them to words that represent common objects or tasks. Through repetitive use, a foundation will be built that will serve to promote the learning of related words and concepts.

The Hanen Centre¹, a Canadian organization whose mission is to provide the knowledge and training to help young children develop the best possible language, social, and literacy skills compiled an excellent summary of recent research into vocabulary education.² Their analysis of the research revealed that:

- There is a direct link between a child's vocabulary growth and their overall school achievement³.
- The magnitude of a child's vocabulary in kindergarten predicts their ability to learn to read⁴.
- The more words a child knows, the more information the child has access to.
- Having a large vocabulary helps the child to think and learn about the world.

To develop the language and literacy skills necessary to succeed in school, it is important to encourage your child's vocabulary development. As the adult, you play a vital role in your child's life with respect to learning new words. In everyday conversations and interactions, you may use unfamiliar words and, when you discuss what words mean, this aids your child in expanding their vocabulary. Research shows that the number of words a child is exposed to by their parents relates directly to the size of the child's vocabulary.⁵

However, it's not just about how much you say, but the selection of words also makes a difference to your child's vocabulary. In a 2012 study, Meredith Rowe looked at the factors that contribute most to a child's later vocabulary development. She studied the vocabulary of 50 young children when they were 18, 30, 42, and 54 months of age, as well as the quantity and quality of words the parents used with their children. She was able to deduce specific factors that contributed to a child's vocabulary one year later, such as the parents' education and the child's previous vocabulary. However, some of her most interesting findings were that:

- A child's vocabulary at 30 months was influenced by the number of words a parent used one year earlier. This means that children aged 12-24 months benefit from hearing lots of speech and numerous examples of words.
- A child's vocabulary at 42 months was influenced by parents' use of a variety of sophisticated words just one year earlier. We note that children aged 24-36 months have

learned a lot of common vocabulary, and are ready to learn more difficult words, such as “purchase” instead of “buy”, or “weary” instead of “tired”.

- A child’s vocabulary at 54 months was influenced by parents’ use of narratives (story-telling) and explanations one year earlier. Children aged 36-48 months benefit from conversations about things that happened in the past (e.g. an outing they went on, something funny that happened at preschool, etc.) or something that is planned for the near future (e.g. a trip to see Grandma) is helpful. Providing explanations about things (e.g. answering children’s “why” questions) is also helpful at this age.

Rowe concluded that “quantity...is not the whole story” and that these other influences also have an impact on children’s vocabulary. This is important information, since a number of literary sources that advise parents on children’s speech and language development encourage parents to talk to young children as much as possible (quantity). But Rowe’s study highlights the importance of quality, especially for children aged 24-48 months. Parents should try to keep one step ahead of their child. Parents should model words and concepts that are slightly beyond their child’s level to help their vocabulary grow.

From Rowe’s study, we know that:

- Young children (12-24 month olds) benefit from exposure to lots of words (quantity).
- Toddlers (24-36 months) benefit from hearing a variety of sophisticated words.
- Preschool children (36-48 months) benefit from conversations about past and future events as well as explanations.

The Hanen Centre offers the following tips to keep in mind when modeling new vocabulary for your child.

- Follow your child’s lead. This means reinforcing words that come up during everyday interactions 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 preschoolers like “he needs to get a new tire because his tire is flat”, talk about events in the past such as “remember when we had to take our car in to be repaired?”, or events that will happen in the future 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. Children’s understanding of words precedes their use of words. If you repeat words for your child on different occasions, it will give them more opportunities to hear and learn new words.
- Don’t bombard your child with words. While the quantity of words is important, don’t overload your child with constant conversation. You should aim for a balanced dialogue

with your child – 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 a chance to respond in his own way.

- Help your child understand what new words mean. By discussing new words or explaining what words means, you are building your child’s understanding of those 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 but does not drive the vehicle.” Relating new words to your child’s personal experiences also helps him reinforce the new words. For example, if you are talking about the word “nervous,” you might say something like “Remember when you started preschool – you felt nervous. But eventually when you were more comfortable there, you didn’t feel nervous anymore.”
- Actions can speak louder than words. If you match your use of words with actions, gestures, or facial expressions, it will help your child understand the meaning of the words. For example, when modeling the word “weary”, you could do a sleeping action (hands under your head) or yawn so that your child understands what the word means. Your voice can also add meaning to a word. For example, if you say the word “frightened” or “terrified” with a shaky voice that sounds like you are scared; it will help your child understand what you mean.

Remember, it’s not just how much you say, but also what you say and how you say it that will make a difference in the growth of your child’s vocabulary. Staying one step ahead of your child will promote their vocabulary skills and also set them on the path for success in school.

Endnotes

¹ The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

² <http://www.hanen.org/helpful-info/articles/build-your-childs-vocabulary.aspx>

³ Weitzman, E. & Greenberg, J. (2010). ABC and Beyond: Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings. The Hanen Centre: Toronto.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. (1995). Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.