

Talking with Your Preschooler—Vocabulary Development

What the Research Says

- The quality of a child's language experiences in the home at age 3 is strongly related to (predicts) eventual reading achievement in 10th grade.
- A child's vocabulary at age 4 is a strong indicator of the child's reading comprehension in 3rd grade.
- On average, children ages 3 and 4 learn 4-6 words each day (5-year-olds can learn 6-9 new words) *if* children hear many words used at home and in their surrounding community.
- At the time when children enter kindergarten, most children have a vocabulary of about 13,000 words.
- Children need to hear words multiple times across different settings and activities before they can fully understand a word's meaning and begin to use it during conversations.
- When parents talk daily with their children, parents and children develop a stronger emotional attachment and bond that in turn, gives their children a greater sense of security, contributing greatly to children's overall sense of well-being.
- When parents talk to their young children and listen to children's thoughts, feelings, and understandings, parents communicate to children that they value their thoughts and feelings.
- When young children grow up feeling that their thoughts and feelings matter to adults, they develop a greater sense of confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth that leads to later academic achievement, success, and overall happiness.

Talking with Your Preschooler—Vocabulary Development Activities for Families

- Songs, rhymes, and finger plays introduce children to new words in ways that are interesting, fun, and enjoyable like “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep” or songs that include movement such as “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” (labeling body parts).
- Be creative – make up your own songs and rhymes or change the words to familiar songs (such singing, “Now It’s Time to Go to Bed” to the melody, “London Bridges Falling Down”).
- Sing along to children’s music CDs or cassette tapes in the car and at home.
- Use photos to tell favorite childhood stories about when you were a baby or young child.
- Encourage your child to use dramatic items like puppets, stuffed animals, dolls, cars, trains, planes, and props (like dress up clothes) to tell you stories or describe events that your child wants to act out (such as taking a stuffed dog to see a veterinarian).
- Encourage your child to point to, describe (color, shape, size, and so on) and label the different items (people, places, and things) in a children’s book.
- Before turning the page as you read a children’s book to your child, ask your child what she thinks will happen next.
- Ask your child to retell or act out a story that you have read to your child (for example, “The Three Little Pigs”) and provide props (like cardboard boxes for bricks) to enhance the retelling.
- Play “I Spy” with your child. Identify an item in the child’s immediate surrounding and provide clues that describe the item (such as “I spy something yellow”). Your child looks around and guesses which item you are describing.
- Place a familiar object in a bag or box (such as a sandal). Ask your child to reach in, feel, and describe the item and guess what it is.

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Advice for Families

- Parents can talk to children throughout the day in a variety of settings, whether at home, in the car, or out in the community during all kinds of activities such as cooking, shopping, playing, or taking neighborhood walks.
- During neighborhood walks or driving in the car, acknowledge the people, places, and things your child points to and labels by adding detail and information. If your child points to a dog and says, “Doggie,” you can respond by saying, “Yes, I see the big black dog. His name is Ralph. He is a Labrador. He likes to play catch.”
- Do not correct your child’s language. If your child pets a cat and says, “nice doggie,” simply respond, “Felix is a very friendly kitty.”
- Focus your conversations on what interests your child. Figure out what most interests your child by watching her play and paying attention to the questions she asks and listening carefully to the things she talks about.
- During family routines and activities like cooking, describe and think out loud what you are doing (e.g., “the pancake batter is too thick – I need to add more water”).
- During family routines and activities, ask your child open-ended questions (how, what, where, and when) to encourage active thinking and to give more descriptive responses (such as, “What will happen if we add blue berries to our pancakes?”).
- Use real items to support and enhance your discussions and explanations with your child (for example, allow your child to hold and smell a dandelion as you describe its color, texture, and so on).
- Make time to talk to your child and answer your child’s questions. Avoid the “just a minute” trap as much as possible. Stop what you are doing and talk to your child – this tells your child how much you care about her!
- Do not hesitate to reread your child’s favorite stories. Reading the same book again and again helps your child to learn the vocabulary in the book.

- When asking questions or making requests, try to be as specific as possible. For example, rather than telling your child to “put away your toys,” say “we need to organize your toys by putting them back on the shelf so that no one can step on them.”