

Developing vocabulary

The way that children make sense of the world is through the language they use. Language develops through interaction with meaningful events and people, so talking to children is key to this.

Research studies have shown that a wide vocabulary is an important factor in achievement at school.

Specifically, the following have been identified:

- Reading stories to children improves vocabulary
- Talking about words helps to extend vocabulary
- Vocabulary is key to reading comprehension
- Using new words repeatedly is important

Playing language games also helps to extend children's vocabulary. Always encourage them to try out new words (even if they get the context wrong to start with).

Talking about the books you read together, discussing TV programmes, listening to stories, singing songs and adding actions, explaining new experiences and being available to answer your child's questions will all help to develop your child's 'word store'.

Word games to play with your children

1. I went shopping and I bought...

This is a good one for those long car journeys. It's great for developing memory (yours as well as your child's!) and listening skills.

How to play

You say, 'I went shopping and I bought an orange.' Your child says, 'I went shopping and I bought an orange and an apple.' The next person adds, 'I went shopping and I bought an orange, an apple and a banana,' and so on.

Variations

- The items that you choose can be completely random
- Pick a theme — only 'buy' items of clothing, modes of transport, animals, etc
- Each item has to be described (eg 'I bought a red teapot', or 'I bought a shiny metal bucket')
- Change the key sentence to, 'I went travelling and I saw...' or 'I went into town and I met...'

2. Auntie's cat

This is a version of a Victorian game. It really helps to extend the vocabulary as each player adds a new descriptive word (adjective) when it is their turn.

How to play

The adjective that is used to describe auntie's cat is changed by each player. Young children can start by using simple adjectives such as colour, size, etc. Older children can be encouraged to supply more unusual adjectives. Each adjective is added in alphabetical order.

- **First person:** 'My auntie's cat is an admirable cat.'
Second person: 'My auntie's cat is a bashful cat.'
Third person: 'My auntie's cat is a careful cat.'

3. I spy

This is still a good activity for long journeys or waiting rooms. It helps young children to develop observational skills and practise initial sounds. For older children, add an element of challenge – objects that are 'spied' have to have at least six letters.

How to play

In the unlikely event you don't know, the first player selects an object that everyone else can see. Everyone is invited to guess the object. The only clue is the letter sound. The person who guesses the object successfully takes over:

'I spy with my little eye... something beginning with a.'

4. Just a minute

This is based on the well-known Radio 4 panel game. It practises extracting the most important points on a subject and helps to develop confidence. A minute is a long time, so start with 15 seconds and build up gradually.

How to play

You could have some topics ready prepared (see suggestions below) or your child could select their own subject.

The aim is to talk for a given amount of time on a subject. The timed element adds the fun – so have a bell or timer ready to ring when the time is up.

The game can be developed (as it is on the radio) by challenging the speaker for repetition, hesitation, etc. Older children might be able to cope with this, but will need lots of practice first.

Subject suggestions:

My favourite TV programme

My least favourite TV programme

My favourite food

My last birthday

My last holiday

What I wish for

Games for older children

1. Fortunately/Unfortunately

This game can be played on a car journey or on a walk. It's more fun with more people, but two players is fine. The more outlandish the suggestions the better – it helps to develop the imagination.

How to play

Share the beginning of a story or piece of news ending with the word 'fortunately' – the next person continues the story but ends with the word 'unfortunately'. The next person ends their input with 'fortunately'. This continues until you run out of ideas or inspiration (or patience).

Example:

First person: Once there was an old lady who lived in a charming cottage. Fortunately...

Second person: She did not live alone as she had her black cat for company. Unfortunately...

Next person: The cat had magical powers and was in fact a wicked wizard in disguise. Fortunately...

Next person: The wizard had lost his magic wand when he was prowling around the cottage at night. Unfortunately...

Next person: The old lady found the wand and hid it in her broom cupboard. Fortunately...

And so on (fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your attitude to word games!).

2. 'If' game

This game helps to develop the imagination.

How to play

You'll need a list of sentence prompts (see below). Take turns to complete a sentence such as, 'If I could fly I would...'

Suggestions for prompts:

If I were Prime Minister I would...

If I could go into space I would...

If I were in charge of my school I would...

If I were an explorer I would...

If I travelled back in time I would...

If I were invisible I would...

3. Tell me what to do!

This game is good for developing the use of precise vocabulary.

How to play

You'll need a set of instruction cards (suggestions below). One person picks up a card without letting anyone else see it. They study it briefly and consider how to describe the action given on it. On the card are written words that they cannot use during their description. The child describes the action. You have to guess what the action is.

Suggestions for the instruction cards:

Describe planting a seed, but do not use the words garden, seed, soil, plant

Describe making a cup of coffee, but do not use the words kettle, coffee, cup, water

Describe riding your bike, but do not use the words bicycle, bike, pedal, saddle, wheel