

Helping Your Child at Home with Vocabulary Building

Parents are the first “language models” for children. The language children use is modeled, or based, on what they hear from their parents. Parents need to create an environment that enriches what a child hears. The words he hears, he will use with encouragement.

To start, take a look for a moment at the words you use-and how you use them, Children who repeatedly hear, “I seen it” will imitate that language. And the probability is great that if they speak that way, they will write that way.

Encourage family discussions. Turn off the TV and talk. One of the best places is the dinner table. That’s one of the few times an entire family is together. In a sense, it’s a “captive” audience. Set up some ground rules, such as “No eat and run,” and “Everyone will have something to talk about” during and after supper. It’s a kind of “hear and tell” time. What to talk about? Things going on in the neighborhood, what happened at school, events that are coming up, family plans, family decisions, et cetera. But remember the conversation should be pleasant and relaxing. This is NOT the time to bring up sins of omission or commission.

If your child has started formal spelling at school, post the list on the refrigerator door. Use those words with your child as discussions arise. Encourage him to use them in his responses.

If you have a cassette recorder, make a tape of words. Say the word, define it, and then use it in a sentence. (Select words that he will find interesting.) Better yet, have the child do the taping. Encourage regular use of the tape. (If he’s studying for a spelling test, he can also spell it on the tape.)

“Word of the Week” is a family game-like activity. Each person selects a word taking turns each week. For example, the first week it might be Mother who writes a word on a card and puts it on the refrigerator door. Everyone must use that word as much as possible that week. The next week it’s Dad’s turn, and then the children’s turn, and so on until it is Mother’s turn again. As the words are used, they are posted on a cabinet door to stimulate continued Usage.

“Ten Questions” is a game that promotes several teaming skills, chief of which is reasoning with words. One family member thinks of something, which the other players must guess with no more than ten questions. The first question always is “Is it animal, vegetable, or mineral?” This covers virtually every possible thing the child could think of. Then, question by question, the field is narrowed to likely possibilities. After the first questions, the following questions must be asked so that they can be answered by “yes” or “no.”

For some youngsters, “Ten Questions” might be too demanding, so make it “Twenty Questions.” One of the values of the extension is that additional reasoning and logic can be expressed. Stretch the game as much as possible. You can show, for example, the process of moving from broad-based questions to more discrete ones. In this way, your child will learn to ask questions such as, “Is it located in the Northern Hemisphere?” “Is it in the Western Hemisphere?” “Is it in the United States?” “Is it land based?” and so on. This becomes an exercise not only in vocabulary development but also in geography.

Encourage the use of a “log” or “diary.” And Pen Pal Clubs are easy to find and join.

Enter a subscription to a child’s magazine. There are many of these, and they cover practically every interest area of children: cars, sports, computers, the outdoors, et cetera. (Information from the articles makes an ideal subject for family discussions.)

If distant family members have cassette players, send “letters” on tape. Each family member has his or her “say,” and then the tape is mailed to the distant relative to listen to on his tape recorder. That person then adds some comments and either returns it or passes it on to another family member.

Play games with homonyms – words that sound alike but are spelled differently and mean something different, as in “sun” and “son.” For example, on the versatile refrigerator door, post train rain- or “reign-rain” or “pray-prey” or “flower -flour.” Ask family members to add to the list. You’ll be surprised at how many homonyms they will uncover

Another way of encouraging vocabulary development is the penny game,” which can be played even if your child is having difficulty with reading. You might use a comic book, the comic strips or sports pages in your local newspaper, or a magazine article- To play the game, the child must know that some words start with a consonant followed by a vowel-for example, “say, look, go, pay,” et etc. that other words begin with two consonants (called a blend) such as “grow, plate, tray, brush,” etc. (Note: Some words do start with two or three consonants but are not true blends because one letter is silent, as in “white”. gnat, pneumonia,” etc.) Tell the child you’ll give him a penny for every word he underlines that starts with a blend.

A follow-up to the “penny game” is to list words in “teams,” such as fog/frog, bake/brake, pay/play, say/stay,” et cetera.

A guessing game can be fun. “I’m thinking of a word that starts with “br” that is something you use to paint a house.” (Brush) “I’m thinking of a word that starts with “tr” that is something we do to the bushes when they get too large.” (Trim)

A traditional game that most children enjoy is “My father owns ” Example: “My father owns a grocery store, and in it he sells something that begins with the letter B.” If the child does not know

the alphabet, letter sounds can be used.

Revolving blend- is another family game in which someone gives a common blend-for example, “tr”-and, in sequence around the table or room, everyone must think of a word that begins with that blend-”train, truck, truffle, try, tray, trumpet, truce.” et cetera. When the list is exhausted, the last person begins another blend, such as “st”-”stay, start, stick, stuck, star,” etc.

Word origins or facts about words can be fascinating family fare. For example, the word “salary” had its origin in “salarium,” which is Latin for salt. Roman soldiers received their pay in salt. Ask your librarian to help you find books that will provide other interesting examples of the origin of common words.

Suffixes are clues to word meanings. For example, “er” or “or” at the end of a word suggests “one who.” Example: conductor-one who conducts; trainer-one who trains, etc. Each week a new suffix can be selected to create words.

The “Take a Walk” game is an activity that brings family members together in an enjoyable, relaxing way. It takes at least two people. A walk is taken around the neighborhood or perhaps around a local shopping area. On one trip the thrust may be, “Let’s name everything we see that begins with the letter B.” On another walk, it might be naming everything that begins with the letter G. Or everything that is the color purple. You might add an element of fun by saying, “We’ll get one point for every word we name. Let’s see how many points we can get.” (Involves arithmetic as well as vocabulary.)

A rhyming game is always fun, particularly for young children because they can say any “word,” nonsense or sense. Start with things the child knows, such as parts of his body, and say, “I’m thinking of something on your face that rhymes with (sounds like) rose.” From this point, once your child gets the idea, you can play it just by saying words, such as “what’s a word that rhymes with car?” (jar, bar, star, far, et cetera) “How about a word that rhymes with junk?” (bunk, skunk, trunk-but even runk lunk zunk as nonsense words). Nor only does this quick little game build vocabulary, but it also teaches the child some fine-tuning for the sounds of words.

Children listen, then use words, then read them, and, finally, write them. What they learn at home about words supports success in school. A great deal of the learning that takes place at home is effective because it isn’t a repeat of school. Once it becomes too formal and too “school-like,” it will lose its appeal.

Parents who talk to their children, and who encourage interaction win lay a healthy platform for academic success. And children will quickly realize that words need not be drudgery but can be exciting and interesting.