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Language Support Model

Document 4



PRINCIPLES OF VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT: for Teachers

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HELPING CHILDREN TO DEVELOP VOCABULARY

By the age of seven, children have about 4000 words they can use, and they understand many, many more. There is no way we could teach all of these! What we are aiming to do is to **give children strategies** they can use when learning new words.

There are four important factors in doing this. We need to help the child to:

1. choose **useful** words to learn.
2. build up the **meaning** of the word by linking with other words (semantic links).
3. reinforce the **sound pattern** of the word (phonological structure).
4. hear and say the word a lot, and practice ways of **bringing the word to mind** (word finding).

Thereafter, it is important to encourage the child to use the skills learnt, in **real-life word-learning** situations, in the classroom.

All this involves teaching the child to **think** about their own word-learning, and to take control of how they learn words..

1 CHOOSING USEFUL WORDS

To teach strategies to help learn words we need to choose some useful words to focus on. Some **school topic words** could be good choices: they are better if they are frequent words, and ones that will be reinforced in class. These can be hard to select, and discussion with the child might help.

Words that label **concepts** and **relationships** and the vocabulary used in **maths** and **reading** can be very hard for children with language problems to learn. They are

important for a lot of school work however, and might be very good targets to focus on.

The manual covers the following:

Example topic vocabulary (such as *nouns* and *verbs*)
Synonyms and antonyms (such as *hot, cold; same, different*)
Concept words (such as *either, or; if, unless*).
Maths vocabulary (such as *even/odd, more/less, total*)
Reading vocabulary (such as *sentence, paragraph, start/end, blend*)
Prepositions (such as *first, beside, next to*)
Questions (such as *what, when, who*).

2 BUILDING UP MEANING BY LINKING WITH OTHER WORDS (SEMANTIC LINKS).

Semantic links are concerned with word meanings and also link with our knowledge of the world. To learn a new word a child may be helped by thinking about its **semantic links**, or meaning links with other words. Several aspects (what something *looks like*, where we *find it*, what we *use it for* and so on) can be useful in ‘anchoring’ the word in memory. For example, for the word ‘planet’, we can use:

- 1) description: *round, big*.
- 2) location/ where it is found: *in space*.
- 3) function/ use: not applicable for ‘planet’!
- 4) category/ group name: *things in space*
- 5) related words: *star, moon*

The features identified for *planet* can be discussed as appropriate. The child may need explicit information from the adult about the word’s features, as opposed to being asked questions. This is especially necessary for words new to the child. Most of these semantic links will work with topic words, which can often be linked to more frequent, simpler words that the child already knows. For words that describe concepts and relationships we can only use description, location or categorisation a little, and rely mainly on discussing related words and their meanings.

Examples of ways to discuss semantic features and make links with world knowledge for topic words could include:

1) **Giving the Child a Description**

Explaining as appropriate:

- a) what the thing referred to by the new word looks like,
- b) the sound it makes,
- c) what it feels like,
- d) what it smells like,
- e) what it tastes like,
- f) what it is made of,
- g) when it is used.

2) **Giving the Child Information on Location**

Explaining as appropriate:

- a) where you find the thing referred to by the new word,
- b) where it lives,
- c) where you see it.

3) **Giving the Child Information on Function or use**

Explaining as appropriate:

- a) what the thing referred for by the new word is used for,
- b) when you might use it,
- c) what it does.

4) **Giving the Child Information on Category or group**

You may need to check the child understands what 'group' means. Then you can discuss as appropriate:

- a) what group the thing referred for by the new word belongs to.
It will probably be necessary to lead the child in by an example such as '*Coat, sock, and jumper are types of clothes. But orange is a type of---?*' expecting the child to complete with '*Fruit*' or '*Food*'. For a word like *planet*, where there is no category name as such, a more general one such as *things in space* will suffice.
- b) any other words in the group that the child already knows.

5) **Giving the Child Information on Related words**

Explaining as appropriate:

- a) the new word might make us think of some other words.
Suggest the child makes a picture in their head of the new word. Ask: '*What else can you see?*' For example, with '*planet*' the child may '*see*' *sun, moon, rocket*.
- b) There may be something that often goes with the word.
Some words have strong associations, like *fish and chips*; *knife and fork*. Other words have weaker associations that still help to link the word and build up semantic links.

6) **Giving the Child Information on Synonyms or similar meanings**

You may need to check the child understands that words can have similar meanings, for example that *cold* is similar to *chilly*, *sofa* is similar to *settee*, *computer* to *PC* and so on. Then you can discuss as appropriate:

- a) other words that mean nearly the same as the new word.

7) **Giving the Child Information on Antonyms or opposite meanings**

Antonyms will only apply if the new word has an obvious opposite, for example words like *smooth* and *lumpy/bumpy/rough*. These words are likely to be adjectives, or to label directions like *up, down*. You may need to check the child understands the idea of opposite meanings. Then you can discuss as appropriate:

- a) words that mean nearly the opposite of the new word.

8) **Giving the Child Information on Relevant Information**

It is important to identify the *most* relevant semantic links for the new word. This will help the child to describe the word to the listener more efficiently so that it can be identified. For example, a child describes a word as follows: '*It's food, it's red, it tastes sweet, it's in the kitchen cupboard.*' The word has been described by category, description and location, but the listener may not be able to identify it as *jam*, unless the child gives a more crucially relevant description such as a function: '*You spread it on bread*'.

This skill of being able to give relevant descriptions of semantic features will be highly useful when the child is struggling to find words in any situation, as it

should enable the adult/listener to come to a quicker understanding of what the child is trying to say. However, the most relevant semantic features of a word will vary with context. Discussion with the child of what information results in the listener's 'best guesses' will be helpful here.

3 REINFORCING THE SOUND PATTERN (PHONOLOGICAL FORM) OF THE WORD.

Many classroom activities concerned with learning **phonics** get children to concentrate on a word's phonological form. Teachers are very aware of these, and such activities are very useful in trying to 'fix' a word in a child's memory.

The manual has activities for **syllable** awareness; **onset** and **rime** awareness; **rhymes**; the **length** of a word and picking out any **words-within-words**, ideas that are familiar to teachers.

It is very helpful to teach the semantic links and phonological form of a word **together**. This should help the child to learn and remember the word.

4 WAYS OF BRINGING THE WORD TO MIND (WORD-FINDING).

Semantic and phonological information may not be available in a complete form when the child needs to say a word, and the word may not be 'found' at the right moment - called **word-finding difficulties**. This is when the child appears to know the word they want to use but they are unable to say when they need it. Sometimes they have a 'tip of the tongue' experience: at other times they just cannot think of the word at all. Often, the child is able to use the same word with no problem on some occasions, but struggles at other times. For children with language problems, word finding difficulties tend to occur on words that are not known very well by the child.

A rather better strategy is to reflect with the child about what needs to be done to find a word. Asking the child to '*Think what you know about the word*', and getting them to **cue themselves**, is a very good idea.

Retrieval Strategies for Children to Use Themselves

The best strategy is to reflect with the child about what needs to be done to find a word. Asking the child to '*Think what you know about the word*', and getting them to **cue themselves**, is a very good idea.

It is also helpful to give the child time to **rehearse** the word when it has been found, saying the word in a sentence that links it with a 'picture' in the child's mind and with other associated words. For example, for *orchard* a child could say '*Apples grow in an orchard. An orchard has lots of trees.*'

For some children **acting**, **miming** and **drawing** are helpful in 'fixing' the word in memory.

Teaching the child to **say when they are searching** for a word (saying for example '*I'm just thinking about it.*' or '*I'll get it in a minute.*') helps children buy time, which is in itself a useful word-finding strategy.

Retrieval Strategies for Adults to Help Children

There are strategies that are suitable for teachers and other adults (such as parents, SLTs, assistants etc.) to use to '**cue**' the child. (They are listed in the Support Model document 'The Communication Friendly Classroom', page 10,

and are repeated here.) Some only work if you already know which word the child is searching for!

If you do know the word the child wants to say, you can provide alternatives to help them find it – e.g. ask '*Is it a ladybird or a greenfly?*' Do not always give the correct word last, or the child may just learn to repeat the last word you say.

You can also give the beginning sounds of the word - e.g. say '*I think it's a lll* ' (for ladybird).

If you do not know the word the child wants to say, you can ask questions about the word. For example, ask about the **semantic links** listed above:

- descriptions - ask '*What does it look like?*' (Spots, wings).
- locations - '*Where do you find it?*' (Garden, leaf).
- functions - '*What does it do?*' (Flies).
- categories - ask '*What big group does it belong to?*' (Insects, mini-beasts).
- related words – ask '*What other words go with it?*' (Lady, bird, bug).

Or you can ask the child for **phonological** information:

- ask for the number of syllables (claps/beats) in the word
- ask for the initial sound
- ask for any words that rhyme with the word
- ask for any words that sound like the word.

A combination of retrieval strategies can help the child to remember. Building up semantic and phonological links around the word can also help the child to fix it more firmly in their memories, and so help retrieval.