

Building Children's Vocabulary at Home & School

The Oxford Language Report
2023-2024

Highlights for families



OXFORD

Foreword

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OUP has long-standing experience of carrying out research into vocabulary development and bringing related issues to the fore. Recently, this research has included a series of Oxford Language Reports focusing on the reported 'word gap' between the vocabulary that children have at their fingertips, and the vocabulary they need to access their education. Whilst our new research establishes that these vocabulary-related issues are ongoing – and were potentially heightened by the pandemic – our resolve to address them is strengthened. In this report, we share perspectives from parents and teachers about how they approach vocabulary building, as well as the associated challenges they face. From these findings, we draw out shared themes and new insights to identify ways in which we can work together towards a common aim: supporting children's vocabulary development to allow them to flourish.

This aim is also a Government focus: vocabulary is a theme that occurs throughout the Department for Education's Reading Framework (July 2023); guidance which sets out to ensure that pupils starting Year 7 have reading and writing skills that allow them to meet the demands of the curriculum. It comes as no surprise to see vocabulary highlighted in this guidance as a central component of the language skillset that unlocks a child's educational success. As we discuss in this new report, it is also a central focus for many schools: broadening pupils' vocabulary is a 'medium' to 'high' strategic priority in 90% of schools, and a 'high' priority in two thirds of Primary schools. And critically, it is vital that the development of this fundamental knowledge base is supported across all aspects of a child's life – from school to home and beyond.



Introduction

This short report focuses on supporting children's vocabulary development across school and home settings. To build a strong vocabulary, children need to encounter a wide variety of words in speech and in text, across a variety of different contexts, and with repeated exposure to these words. Towards this aim, we present findings from new research, bring together insights from parents, carers and teachers, and celebrate a collaborative approach.

In this report, we share:

- perspectives from parents, carers and teachers about how they approach vocabulary building
- ways in which parents and schools can work together to support children's vocabulary
- a useful range of tried and tested vocabulary-building techniques for families to try at home.

Methodology

The ***Oxford Language Report 2023-2024*** is based on surveys with over 800 teachers, parents and carers in the UK. This research, carried out by Oxford University Press, offers a voice to those who provide language input for children in their daily lives. The report builds on research presented in previous Oxford Language Reports exploring children's vocabulary development.

The Teacher Survey was circulated to teachers across the UK, with 94% of participants from England. OUP received responses from 503 participants. 46% of participants work in the Primary sector and 45% in Secondary; 4% in the Early Years sector and 5% in Post-16. The sample includes Heads of Department/Subject (26%), class teachers (26%), Deputy/Assistant Heads (16%) and Subject Coordinators (7%).

The Parent Survey was circulated to UK parents and carers of children aged 5–16 years, using a range of online channels. OUP received responses from 313 participants. 78% of participants are parents of Primary age children (5–11 years) and 22% have Secondary age children (11+ years). 95% of participants have children who speak English fluently. A wide range of other languages are also spoken, including Welsh, Scots, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Greek, Portuguese, Romanian, Polish, Slovakian, Kurdish, Bulgarian, Croat, Russian, Urdu, Hindi, Sindhi, Panjabi, Bengali and Gujarati.



Supporting children's vocabulary matters

A child's vocabulary knowledge can have a big impact on their reading development, later educational success, and the way they experience emotions.^{1,2,3} The importance of vocabulary knowledge continues into adulthood, where a limited vocabulary is associated with an increased risk of mental health problems and unemployment.⁴

Parents recognise the importance of home support in developing a child's vocabulary

All the parents we surveyed consider it 'important' or 'very important' for their child to have a broad English vocabulary, and almost all parents say they spend time talking to their child about words and their meanings. Teachers agree, with 97% considering the parental role in building vocabulary to be 'very important', if not 'essential'.

Teachers report seeing more children falling behind in vocabulary

The teachers surveyed report that, on average, 4 out of 10 pupils have fallen behind in their vocabulary development to the extent that it impacts on their learning.

Over half of teachers report that there has been an increase in the number of children who have fallen behind in their vocabulary knowledge compared to previous years. 95% of teachers believe that school closures and disruptions during the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to a widening vocabulary gap. However, parents' understanding about the importance of vocabulary makes them well placed to work with teachers to address the ongoing consequences.

Almost all teachers agree that pupils with more support for vocabulary development at home tend to perform better academically at school.

Parents and teachers would welcome better links between home and school to develop vocabulary

Although the importance of parental support in a child's vocabulary development is widely recognized by teachers, only 44% of those we surveyed said their school strategy encourages parents to be involved in their child's vocabulary development. Around 85% of teachers agree that schools could do more to encourage parents to be involved in their child's

vocabulary development. Meanwhile, 68% of parents would welcome more guidance when it comes to developing their child's vocabulary – and schools can support them with this.

How do children build their vocabulary?

Children are constantly learning new words through reading, listening and conversation. By the time they leave secondary school, they will understand tens of thousands of words – and some children will build a rich vocabulary in more than one language.⁵

Children need support to build their vocabulary

Even though children are adept at learning new words, they still need help along the way. Parents and families can play a vital part by actively supporting vocabulary development as part of family life.

Two important opportunities to build vocabulary are:

- reading a variety of texts
- taking part in conversations with varied vocabulary.

Parents and families can support children in both these areas.

Vocabulary learning happens all the time

It's important to take opportunities for vocabulary learning at all points in a child's day, not just in the classroom. Ensuring continuity between the approaches used at school and at home will make sure that children benefit from this reciprocal relationship.



How are parents helping children build their vocabulary?

Parents recognise the importance of home support in developing a child's vocabulary

On average, parents report spending just less than an hour per week on vocabulary activities. Parents of children at the start of primary school spend the longest amount of time, which generally decreases as children get older.

69% of parents carry out word-based talk, games or activities at home with their child at least once a week.

Most parents have some confidence in helping their child to build vocabulary

84% of parents feel at least 'quite confident' in helping their child learn new words and meanings, and of these, 43% feel 'very confident'. Most parents focus on talk, games or activities linked to books their child reads (62%), words based on everyday activities (61%), or words based on their child's homework (56%).

Sources of information for building vocabulary

Parents tend to rely on educational websites and their own online searches more than asking their child's teacher for guidance on vocabulary building.

Sources include:

Educational websites (e.g. Oxford Owl) – 59%

Searching online – 53%

Child's teacher – 36%

Teachers are an untapped source of valuable information

As reported above, the proportion of parents who ask their child's teacher for guidance is quite low. However, teachers will have useful insights about what the child has been learning, reading and talking about in class, as well as details about the vocabulary-building approach taken by the school.

When asked what support they would like from school, parents make suggestions such as workshops, exercises which use words in different contexts, direction towards online resources, and more information about what is being taught.

What are the challenges around building children's vocabulary?

Teachers would like children to do more vocabulary-building at home

Teachers would like children to carry out vocabulary-building activities at home at least 'a few times a week'; 46% would like this activity to happen 'most days' if not 'every day'. However, teachers estimate that only 37% of their pupils achieve this target.

Screen time is a barrier to building vocabulary

Parents report the following as barriers that get in the way of their child building and extending their vocabulary at home:

- online computer usage or screen time – the most common barrier cited by 41% of parents
- offline activities, hobbies and pastimes
- children not being interested in reading widely.



Parental support is limited by lack of time and resources

Almost half of parents say that lack of time affects how much support they can give, and almost 4 in 10 cite either a lack of vocabulary-building resources, or being unsure how to help, as barriers.

Time pressure means there is a need for quick and easy tips and activities that can be embedded in everyday life.

Parents' English language skills can be an additional challenge

Teachers also point to additional challenges that affect how much parents can support their child's vocabulary development, including parents' own literacy skills or families where English is not the first language.

What are the best ways for parents and families to support vocabulary development?

Helping children develop their vocabulary shouldn't be a time-consuming, expensive or tedious task. Instead, it can be boosted by maximizing experience with different words through conversation, reading, and word-based games or activities – and these are all things that can enhance family life.

Time-poor parents do not need to carve out a specific portion of the day for 'vocabulary building'

Using snippets of time to talk or play a game with their child – plus prioritizing time for shared reading – will help to support their child's vocabulary development.

Some of the barriers reported by parents can be used as a springboard for vocabulary development:

- For older children, time spent on screens may already involve interaction with friends. For younger children, capitalize on their computer or screen use by encouraging digital games or apps with a focus on vocabulary. However, these sorts of tools can supplement but not replace real-life interaction.
- Offline activities and hobbies give rich opportunities to learn specialist vocabulary, with children's experiences used to start discussions at home or school.
- Where a child's lack of interest in reading is a barrier, the benefits of a reading for pleasure strategy at school, and modelling reading for fun at home, cannot be undervalued.

Allowing children autonomy to choose what, where and when they read is key for developing their reading motivation.^{6,7}

There are opportunities for schools and parents to work more closely together

Schools mainly focus on the strategy of encouraging wider reading to support children's vocabulary development at home. However, parents would appreciate other types of support, including fun activities and games, accessible online materials and age-appropriate guidance. Parents would also welcome better communication from schools about recommended resources and common themes to focus on.

Teachers recommend accessible activities for building vocabulary as part of daily family life

"Reading every day with children and explaining new words."

"Discussing their day with them."

"Reading TO children – not just listening to them read."

"Real life experiences e.g. autumn walks, trips, visiting family."

"Co-listen to audio books."

"Have dedicated time to talk – no devices or background noise."

"Doing practical tasks together (construction, cooking, games or outdoor adventures)."

"Pointing out and discussing effective vocabulary spotted in everyday situations e.g. adverts or newspapers, not just in reading [books]."

"Compare the meaning of words in English with [words in their] own language."



Key approaches for supporting your child's vocabulary development

To build a strong vocabulary, children need to experience a wide variety of words in speech and written text, across a range of different contexts, and with repeated exposure to these words. Parents can help by encouraging conversation, reading, and word-based activities, all of which can be an enjoyable part of daily life.

Conversation

- From the very start of a child's life, parents have the power to support a child's vocabulary development: speech from parents and caregivers is the primary source of language for young children.^{8,9}
- Engaging your child in supportive day-to-day conversations is key: this could be on the way to school, during meals, or at bath time.
- By meeting words multiple times and in different contexts, children can build their confidence in how to use these words themselves.^{10,11}
- Use things around you like adverts, songs, or the news as inspiration for introducing new words to your child.
- Continue to discuss a variety of topics with your child as they get older, engaging in things they are interested in and asking their opinions.^{12,13}
- It is normal for children to make mistakes in their speech – be patient, model the correct language yourself and praise children when they use new words appropriately.



Reading

- Reading fiction, including picture books, introduces children to new words: language in children's books is more diverse than speech and contains more unusual words.^{14,15}
- Shared reading between parent and child can be effective because it involves more complex language and a higher number of words per minute than everyday language.^{16,17,18,19}
- There are other benefits to reading together too: it can prompt wider conversation and boost emotional bonding.^{14,18}
- Encourage your child to choose a book from a library. Ask them questions about what is going to happen next or what a character is feeling.
- Audiobooks are a practical option for a shared language experience – for instance during long car journeys. Audiobooks also offer a useful resource for parents with literacy or English language limitations.
- As your child gets older, reading is still important for vocabulary learning, so continue to encourage your child on their reading journey.²⁰
- Model reading as an enjoyable activity yourself, and allow your child space, time and choice around how they want to read.

This report is further evidence of the need for every primary school to have a library. School libraries are essential in helping to fuel a child's imagination, build a rich vocabulary, and give them the literacy skills they need to succeed in life. When families across the country may be struggling to afford books at home, school libraries can be a child's only access to books and the joy of reading.

Sinéad Naidoo, National Literacy Trust, Senior Programme Manager, Raise a Reader

Activities

- Tell each other a story about something you see on the way to school. Try using the 5 "Ws" as question stems to get started - *who, when, why, what, where* (and how). Take it in turns to say what happens next.
- Play word games that involve synonyms (words that mean the same thing) – for example, how many different words can your child think of for *kind, scary or funny*?
- Link words to real-life actions and experiences: for instance, act out adverbs by asking your child to *creep silently, scamper quickly or skip joyfully*.
- Make the most of any experiences or trips outside the home or daily routines where your child can encounter a broader range of words. Ask your child what they can see or encourage them to describe what is around them; point out new objects or activities they might not have encountered before.¹⁴



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