



# What Works? Research into Practice

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## Supporting Students' Vocabulary Development Through Play

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### Tips to Support Students' Vocabulary Development

- Teachers can support vocabulary development by participating in children's play using new vocabulary appropriate to the play context.
- During play, teachers can make connections to children's prior knowledge and add content to children's play scenarios in ways that expand children's understandings.
- As teachers observe, listen, and respond to what children are doing and saying, they extend and build on children's language and learning.

By Grade 4, children whose vocabulary knowledge is below grade level are likely to have difficulties in reading comprehension. How can teachers in primary classrooms support students' vocabulary development?

Play provides an ideal context for children's vocabulary development. As children engage with objects, they talk to themselves and to others, developing and refining their understanding of what the objects are, how they can be used, and how they relate to other familiar concepts.<sup>1</sup> In this way, they construct meanings of words in their talk during play activities. Children can try out the words and, by observing how others respond, either confirm or revise their understandings of the words' meanings.<sup>2</sup> They also encounter new vocabulary and ways of using it when engaged in play activities with others. In the process, children create more nuanced understandings of the vocabulary and become more confident in using those words in multiple contexts.<sup>3</sup>

Vocabulary development is foundational to literacy and contributes to children's overall achievement across the school curriculum.<sup>4</sup> The more words that children know and can use at a young age, the more words they are able to learn and the more readily they will be able to read those words.<sup>5</sup> Children draw on their vocabulary knowledge when making predictions and inferences in their reading and when composing texts for others to read. Indeed, research shows that, by Grade 4, children whose vocabulary knowledge is below grade level are likely to have difficulties in reading comprehension, even if their word identification skills are strong.<sup>6</sup> The relationships that researchers have found between children's

vocabulary and their literacy and overall school success<sup>7</sup> indicate the importance of vocabulary instruction starting in kindergarten and continuing throughout the school years.

## The Teacher's Role in Supporting Vocabulary Development Through Play

Teachers' contributions to children's learning and vocabulary development in play are often more complex than in teacher-directed lessons, as teachers must observe, listen, and respond to what children are doing and saying. Their responses extend and build on children's language and learning.<sup>8</sup> Teachers can support young children's vocabulary development by participating in children's play using new vocabulary appropriate to the play context. Additionally, during play they can make connections to children's prior knowledge and add content to children's play scenario in ways that expand children's understandings and provide multiple experiences with the concepts. The teacher's contributions, thus, offer further opportunities for children to use the new vocabulary.

For example, a kindergarten teacher joined children's play with blocks after observing two boys who collided with each other, suffering minor injuries. As the two boys argued about who was at fault, the teacher grabbed some blocks, quickly made a pretend vehicle, and took up a role: "Ambulance coming through!" she cried, "I'm the ambulance driver. I heard there was an accident and some boys were injured. What happened and where are you injured?" The children answered the teacher/ambulance driver's questions while she administered the needed attention to the injured boys. She then directed, "I'll need

some help lifting the boys onto the stretcher." While the lifting was going on, she made connections to children's prior knowledge by asking if they knew someone who had to be driven to the nursing station when they were sick or injured. When another child came limping to the play scene saying, "I need an ambulance!" she extended the concept of "ambulance" by saying: "Wait, I hear the sirens of another ambulance. It must be on its way to take you to the hospital. It's like a big nursing station with doctors and nurses." After the teacher withdrew from the play, she observed the children bringing their injured peers

to a pretend nursing station and using words she had introduced, such as *ambulance* and *injured*. In this intentional interaction,<sup>9</sup> the teacher responded to a problem arising from the children's play. She extended their vocabulary by providing new information to the play context and concrete examples of the concepts.<sup>10</sup> She also challenged the children's thinking about possible ways to interact when unexpected problems arose in their play.

After hearing new words used in context, the children continued to experiment with them in new play situations that stemmed from the ambulance/paramedic scenario.

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## Suggestions for Supporting Oral Language Through Play

- Introduce words through reading and rereading a story or poem,<sup>11</sup> inviting children to explore meanings of words they encounter. Create further play settings in which children can apply the new vocabulary in their interactions with peers and objects. When reading Jan Thornhill's *Over in the Meadow* (Maple Tree Press, 2004), for example, teachers might say, "I wonder what the muskrat was doing when she burrowed in the reeds. Pretend you're the mother muskrat. What do you use

to burrow? Why do you want to burrow in the reeds? What else might you burrow into?" After discussing other animals that burrow (perhaps while showing pictures of frogs, chipmunks, clams, moles, cicadas, snakes, burrowing owls, and other burrowing creatures), along with reasons for burrowing, children might create and play with playdough figures of burrowers.

- Introduce children to a problem situation or ask children to come up with hypotheses about science phenomena, such as magnetism, seed growth, and properties of solids and liquids. Encourage children to talk with peers using their imagination and pooled background knowledge and experience to solve the problem and generate hypotheses. For example, students who have gathered seeds on their way to school from various plants may be given the challenge of figuring out how the seeds are dispersed so that new plants grow in locations far from the original plant. They may experiment with various ways of moving the seeds, drawing on background knowledge – such as remembering burrs stuck to their socks or seeds blowing in the wind – to hypothesize. Teachers might ask questions such as, "What did you notice about the seeds when you blew on them?" or "How did you figure that out?"
- Model new ways of thinking about situations and using language within particular contexts (e.g., at the grocery store centre, the teacher might join children by playing a grocery shopper who says, "I'm looking for mozzarella cheese to make a pizza. I wonder what I should do to try to find it in the store." The teacher might respond to children's suggestions by posing questions such as "I wonder how I might . . . ?" or "I wonder what would happen if I . . . ?" or by making additional suggestions.
- Prior to joining the play setting, observe how children use language, take up roles, and establish rules within their play in order to avoid diverting the play from the children's intended direction. Listening is as important as contributing to the play, because teachers want to

provide as much space as possible for children to make their own connections to new information that has been introduced.<sup>12</sup>

- Encourage parents and caregivers to use drama in everyday situations to broaden vocabulary. For example, if a boy asks, "Grandma, are you tired?" his grandmother could answer, closing her eyes, "Yes, I'm exhausted!" She could then flop on a chair, repeat "I'm exhausted!" and invite her grandson to show her how exhausted he is.
- Adapt the rich instruction model,<sup>6</sup> shown to be effective in developing children's vocabulary, to play contexts. Following this direct instruction model, teachers explain word meanings in language children can readily understand, provide multiple examples of words used in a range of contexts, and ask students to identify appropriate and inappropriate uses of each word. In place of direct instruction, teachers could join the children's play, providing many examples of the correct use of specific vocabulary. For example, at the water centre, teachers might wonder aloud if objects that they or the children place in the water will *float* or *sink*, using these terms, and perhaps even the word *buoyant*, in appropriate ways. Teachers might invite children to create stories about the objects as they float or sink and encourage children to talk about what they're observing as they place or drop objects into the water.

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## In Sum

Given the well-established relationship between vocabulary and literacy, it follows that introducing children to new vocabulary should be a priority. Creating opportunities for children to construct understandings of the meanings of words across a range of contexts can be part of both everyday classroom activity and family members' interactions with children. In primary classrooms, there are no better contexts for supporting children's vocabulary development than play settings. In their play,

children introduce each other to new vocabulary and to ways of using words to achieve their intentions. Children see how classmates and family members respond to the words they use in play interactions and get a sense of the appropriateness of the words for the context. By observing and listening to children's play interactions and then participating in the play, teacher and adult family members can achieve their goal of extending and deepening children's vocabulary and conceptual understandings.

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