



## Build your child's vocabulary

*By Lauren Lowry, Hanen Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer*

Did you know that:

- a child's vocabulary growth is directly linked to his or her overall school achievement [1]
- the size of a child's vocabulary in kindergarten predicts his ability to learn to read [2]
- the more words a child knows, the more information the child has access to
- having a large vocabulary helps children think and learn about the world

It is important to encourage children's vocabulary development so that they develop the language and literacy skills necessary to succeed in school. The adults in a child's life play a significant role in helping a child learn new words. Through everyday conversations and interactions, caregivers use unfamiliar words and talk about what words mean, which helps expand a child's vocabulary. In fact, the number of words a child is exposed to by his parents relates directly to the size of the child's vocabulary [3].

### A recent study about vocabulary

However, it's not just about *how much* you say, but also about *what* words you use that makes a difference to a child's vocabulary. In a 2012 study, Meredith Rowe looked at the factors that contribute most to a child's later vocabulary development. She studied the vocabulary of 50 young children when they were 18, 30, 42, and 54 months of age, as well as the amount (quantity) and type (quality) of words the parents used with their children. She found certain factors that contributed to a child's vocabulary one year later, such as the parents' education and the child's previous vocabulary. But some of her most interesting findings were that:

- **children's vocabulary at 30 months was influenced by the quantity (number) of words a parent used one year earlier** – This means that children aged 12-24

months benefit from hearing lots of talk and many examples of words.

- **children’s vocabulary at 42 months was influenced by parents’ use of a variety of sophisticated words one year earlier** – Children aged 24-36 months have learned a lot of common vocabulary, and are ready to learn more difficult words, such as “purchase” instead of “buy”, or “weary” instead of “tired”.
- **children’s vocabulary at 54 months was influenced by parents’ use of narratives (talking about things that happened in the past or in the future) and explanations one year earlier** – Children aged 36-48 months benefit from conversations about things that happened in the past (e.g. an outing they went on, something funny that happened at preschool, etc.) or something that is planned for the near future (e.g. a trip to see Grandma) is helpful. And providing explanations about things (e.g. answering children’s “why” questions) is also helpful at this age.

Rowe concluded that “quantity...is not the whole story” and that these other influences also have an impact on children’s vocabulary [2, p. 1771]. This is important information, as much literature that advises parents about children’s speech and language development encourages parents to talk to young children as much as possible (quantity). But Rowe’s study highlights the importance of **quality**, especially for children aged 24-48 months. Parents should try to keep one step ahead of their child – modelling words and concepts that are slightly beyond their child’s level to help his vocabulary grow.

## How to help your child learn new words

From Rowe’s study, we know that:

- young children (12-24 month olds) benefit from exposure to lots of words (quantity)
- toddlers (24-36 months) benefit from hearing a variety of sophisticated words
- preschool children (36-48 months) benefit from conversations about past and future events as well as explanations

This tells us *what* to say, but what about *how* to say it?

Here are some tips to keep in mind when modeling new vocabulary for your child:

- **Follow your child’s lead** – This means emphasizing words that come up during everyday conversations and interactions with your child. If you talk about what interests your child, it is more likely your child will pay attention and learn a new word. If your child is interested in playing with cars, you can model words like “push”, “beep beep”, or “fast” with a young child or more complicated words like “mechanic”, “speed”, or “traffic” with a toddler. You can provide explanations for

preschoolers like “he needs to get a new tire because his tire is flat”, talk about events in the past such as “remember when we had to take our car in to be repaired?”, or events that will happen in the future such as “Our car is dirty. Maybe we should go to the car wash.”

- **Children need to hear a word several times before they start to use it** – This means that you might use a word with your child many times before your child actually says the word himself. Children’s understanding of words precedes their use of words. So, they will understand far more words than they can actually say. If you repeat words for your child on different occasions, it will give him more opportunities to hear and learn new words.
- **Don’t bombard your child with words** – Just because quantity is important at some stages of development, this doesn’t mean that you should shower your child with constant talk. You should aim for a balanced conversation between you and your child – you say something, then your child says or does something, and so on. It is important to **wait** after you say something so you give your child a chance to respond in his own way.
- **Help your child understand what a new word means** – By giving details about new words or explaining what words means, you build your child’s understanding of new words. For example, if you are playing with cars and introduce the word “passenger”, you might say something like “a passenger is someone who rides in a car or a bus or a train. A passenger goes for the ride but doesn’t drive the car or the bus.” Relating new words to your child’s personal experiences also helps him connect with new words. For example, if you are talking about the word “nervous,” you might say something like “Remember when you started preschool – you felt nervous. But eventually when you were more comfortable there, you didn’t feel nervous anymore.”
- **Actions can speak louder than words** – If you accompany your words with actions, gestures, or facial expressions, it will help your child understand the meaning of the words. For example, when modeling the word “weary”, you could do a sleeping action (hands under your head) or yawn so that your child understands what the word means. Your voice can also add meaning to a word. For example, if you say the word “frightened” or “terrified” with a shaky voice that sounds like you are scared, it will help your child understand what you mean.

The bottom line... it’s not just *how much* you say, but also *what* you say and *how you say it* that makes a difference for your child’s vocabulary growth. Keeping one step ahead of

your child will promote his vocabulary skills, and also set him on the path for success in school. For more information about building your child's vocabulary skills, [click here](#).

## *References*

1. Weitzman, E. & Greenberg, J. (2010). *ABC and Beyond: Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings*. The Hanen Centre: Toronto.
2. Rowe, M. (2012). A Longitudinal Investigation of the Role of Quantity and Quality of Child-Directed Speech in Vocabulary Development. *Child Development: 83*(5), 1762-1774.
3. Hart, B. & Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

### **About The Hanen Centre**

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)