

Article 1.2. Why (and How) to Gift Your Child a World of Words

Kathleen Hipfner-Boucher, Research Scientist, Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Xi Chen, Professor, Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Do you know the meaning of the word ‘pernicious’? Can you define it? Name a word that means the same thing as pernicious? A word that is its opposite? Use it in a sentence? Cite examples and counterexamples of “pernicious-ness”? Word knowledge is not all-or-none, it is a matter of degree. Some of you have no doubt never seen or heard the word ‘pernicious’ before. Others will be vaguely familiar with it. You may have heard it used to describe the influence of school closures due to COVID-19 on children’s mental health, for example, but be unable to nail down its precise meaning. Still others will possess a full understanding of the word and be able to use it with confidence. Vocabulary depth and breadth—the number of words we know and how well we know them—matter. They are key language skills underlying our ability to understand what we read. Reading for understanding, in turn, opens the door to success in school and to overall well-being from childhood into adulthood. Research tells us that in comparison to their peers, children with strong vocabulary skills in the preschool and early primary years are better able to understand the texts they read in later grades (e.g., Cunningham & Stanovich 1997). That is why a world of words is among the most important things that we as parents can gift our young children. It is all the more important that we do so in the face of COVID-related disruptions to in-person kindergarten.

The average child will have learned the meaning of about 6000 root words by the end of second grade (Biemiller & Slonim 2001). Much of their word learning up to that point will have happened in the home through conversations and play with parents, caregivers, and older siblings and through shared storybook reading (Cunningham 2005; Weitzman & Snow 2001). However, differences in the quantity and quality of language and literacy experiences offered in the home lead to large gaps in vocabulary between children in the early school years (Biemiller & Slonim 2001). Between grades 3 and 6, most children will add word meanings at about the same rate, but those who enter grade 3 with fewer known words may never succeed in closing the (pernicious) vocabulary gap (Biemiller 2006). And one gap leads to another: children who know fewer words will have a harder time understanding what they read. Hence the importance of exposing children to words, especially within the context of COVID-19. With interruptions to in-person schooling, parents may want to ensure that their children are doing as much word learning as possible in the home to make up for lost learning time in the kindergarten classroom.

Vocabulary is much more than a “mental dictionary”; instead, it is a marker of the varied experiences and understandings children acquire from the earliest age and bring with them to the task of learning to read (Shanahan 2005). For example, a child who has cultivated a passion for dinosaurs through books, visits to a local museum, or a family trip to the Drumheller badlands, may very well recognize and name a brontosaurus, stegosaurus, and tyrannosaurus. But it is equally likely the child will have acquired broader knowledge associated with dinosaurs, perhaps developing awareness of things like extinction, fossilisation, or archeology. Knowing a word implies some

understanding of the many concepts related to it. In fact, it is said that word knowledge reflects world knowledge. World knowledge, also called background knowledge, will become critical when children are expected to read for understanding in school.

What is the relationship between vocabulary and reading? Vocabulary influences the process of learning to read in many ways. In the preschool years, it helps children become aware of the sounds of language, an awareness they must develop in order to learn how to map sounds onto letters. The more words children know, the better their chances of developing sound awareness and of becoming successful early readers (Metsala 1999). Word knowledge also helps children learn to sound out words (Ehri 2002). Sounding out the word *flower*, for example, is made easier if one knows what a flower is and can link the printed word to the concept.

In the middle elementary grades, much of children’s word learning is book-based learning of the complex vocabulary associated with the subjects taught in school, like the words *triangular* and *glaciation*. In order to learn the meaning of these challenging words, children need...words. We know that a successful reader must know about 95% of the words in a text (Hirsch 2003). Knowing most of the words helps the reader to get the gist of what they are reading, making it possible to correctly infer—and learn—the meaning of the unknown words. Word learning through print is bolstered by an understanding of the rules of word formation and knowledge of strategies that allow the reader to figure out word meanings by breaking big words into their smaller chunks (roots, affixes) (Desrochers et al. 2018). The success children experience as readers motivates them to read more, multiplying opportunities to learn new words (Wigfield & Guthrie 1997). However, to ensure that all children acquire the depth and breadth of vocabulary needed to become proficient readers, direct instruction in both vocabulary and word learning strategies should be prioritized in school from an early age (NICHD 2000). Vocabulary instruction is particularly important for children from less language rich homes and children who have limited home exposure to the language of the classroom. Vocabulary instruction in school, in combination with parental practices targeting language and literacy development in the home, prepares children to become engaged, life-long readers.

How can you support your children’s word learning at home during COVID-19 restrictions? Here are just a few suggestions. Teach your younger children songs and nursery rhymes to develop sound awareness and vocabulary. Take, for example, the following nursery rhyme: *Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jump over the candlestick!* As you teach it to your child, talk about the similarity in sound between the rhyming words *quick* and *stick*. Think of other words that end with the -ic sound. Make up silly rhyming sentences using the words. Talk about the similarity in initial sound between *Jack* and *jump* and look for other words that begin with the same sound. Think about the meaning of unfamiliar words, like *nimble*. Ask your child to show you how you jump if you are nimble.

Read aloud to your child. Vocabulary can be developed through book reading because children’s books contain “big” words that are rarely heard in conversation. Reading to children is important even as they begin to learn to read because with a parent’s guidance, children can navigate books that contain more challenging language than the books they can read on their own. And books have the advantage of being available at no cost through public library systems throughout Canada. Consult your local librarian or the internet for recommendations.

For word learning to happen through shared storybook reading, it is important that children experience book reading as a pleasurable activity. The more enjoyment they derive from shared stories, the more likely they are to want to be read to and eventually, to read on their own. Motivation to read supports children through the effortful process of learning to read, so hold your child close and make story time a feel-good experience. Take advantage of the read aloud to encourage story-relevant talk but be sensitive to those moments when your child wants simply to listen to a favourite story, uninterrupted, from beginning to end.

Make storybook reading a daily activity. Establish a reading routine, choosing a fixed story time that works for your family. You may want to read a book cover to cover with minimal comment on the first reading to make sure your child has understood the storyline. Over subsequent readings try to encourage greater child participation in the storytelling, varying what you do from reading to reading with a goal to maintain your child's interest. Ask open-ended questions (who, what, when, where, why, how) about what they see or hear. Expand on your child's response and ask follow-up questions that relate story content to personal experience (*The boy is crying because he lost his ball. How would you feel if you lost your ball? What would you do?*). Provide simple, child-friendly definitions for unknown words, with examples the child knows well (*Chilly means cold. Snowy days are chilly.*) Ask your child for an example of something that is *chilly* and something that is "not chilly, something that is warm". It is important that your child say the word to commit it to memory. You may define a complex word, such as *unafraid*, by defining its root (*Afraid means scared. If I'm afraid how might I look?*) and its affix (*Un- means 'not' so unafraid means 'not scared'. If I'm unafraid how might I look?*) After reading, ask your child to retell the story, encouraging the use of new words. Reuse words that you have introduced in novel contexts outside of the read aloud session.

A favourite story in my house, and one that lends itself well to word learning, is Audrey Wood's *The Napping House*. It tells the story of a "snoring granny", a "dreaming boy", and a menagerie of animals who settle in, one by one, for an afternoon nap on granny's "cozy bed". Throughout the book, children are introduced to sleep-related vocabulary (dozing, slumbering, snoozing) through cumulative text that builds with the pile of sleeping bodies (until a "wakeful flea" brings the nap to a chaotic end). The text invites children's participation in the storytelling, giving them ample opportunity to try out novel words. With every turn of the page, Don Wood's illustrations tell a parallel story of a sleepy grey day that gradually gives way to sunshine and frolic.

For many of us, one of the silver linings in the COVID-19 cloud is an abundance of time at home with our children. With interruptions to in-classroom learning, the role of parents as sources of language is amplified. Spend this time giving your children the words they need to succeed. Turn off your devices and connect, instead, with your children. Spend time talking. Make family mealtimes a moment to share; as a prompt, you might ask your children to tell you one thing they did or saw, one thing they learned, and one thing they felt during the day. Offer them an attentive ear as they tell their stories. Spending time talking, singing, reciting nursery rhymes, playing, and reading together will also help to mitigate the social isolation that COVID-19 and online learning have imposed.

As parents, we are having to think creatively about ways to expand our children's COVID-19 restricted world. Fortunately, public health recommendations place few restrictions on access to the outdoors. So, head outside and take advantage of the word/world learning opportunities that await beyond your front door. Then talk, draw, or write about it when you get home. In doing so,

you will lay the knowledge base on which your children's learning—including literacy learning—will build. For those parents who are speakers of a minority language, spend time teaching your children words, lyrics, poems, and ideas in the language of your home country. Read to them in your home language. In time, your children will learn the English or French labels for the concepts you have taught them.

Take advantage of these extraordinary circumstances to prepare your children to become committed, life-long readers. And when all this is over? Keep it up. A child can never know too many words.

Oh, and by the way, pernicious is defined by the Oxford dictionary as "having a harmful effect, especially in a gradual or subtle way".