

CLOSING THE VOCABULARY GAP

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Transcript

My name is Catherine Snow. I'm a Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and I study language development in children from backgrounds of all sorts—English-speaking and other language-speaking children learning English—and the consequences of language knowledge for literacy development.

Children learn the words they hear. Typically, those are words they hear from their parents during conversation, while dressing, while bathing. And in some families there isn't very much talk, so children don't have very much opportunity to learn those words. They end up learning fewer words every day, fewer words every year, and that difference accumulates until there is, for some children, a very, very large gap between what they know, how many words they know, and how many words the kid down the street, whose parents are talking with them all the time (knows).

The vocabulary gap has a huge impact on children's academic success because the size of a child's vocabulary is a very, very strong predictor of how easily they learn to read words in first grade—and even more importantly, how much they comprehend of what they read.

Rich vocabulary has two dimensions. One dimension is breadth; just how many words children know. Because of course all children know the very frequently occurring words. But when you get a larger vocabulary then you get into words that are more interesting, that signal more complex concepts. So one aspect is size of vocabulary and the other aspect is depth of vocabulary—how much you know about those words. Everybody knows that “run” means to move quickly, but how many five-year-olds know that you can also say “run a business” or “run an experiment”? That's another aspect of rich vocabulary knowledge.

Reading books is a fantastic activity for expanding vocabulary, partly because books bring in topics and thus words that wouldn't normally occur in everyday conversation. So they support parents and teachers to use those words, and most importantly, they introduce the words in ways that children can get access to them, and then can use them themselves—if the opportunity is offered to discuss the books with the children. It's the conversation around the books that really makes the difference, not just reading aloud.

Teachers can support rich vocabulary development in the classroom, first of all by modeling it, by using big words, long words, less frequent words as often as they can. Think about everyday opportunities in the classroom. For example, you can call somebody the...you can appoint somebody to a position of being in charge of the plants or you can make someone your “botanical engineer.” Botanical engineer is a much more valuable vocabulary phrase than “plant guy.” Teachers who know that can think about, can plan specifically to introduce rich vocabulary into everyday activities in their classroom.

MARTHA SPEAKS can help teachers, or parents for that matter, teach vocabulary first of all by demonstrating that children can handle lots of rich vocabulary. Children enjoy the show even though or perhaps because it challenges their use of language. It introduces words in a way that's fun, that's playful, that's ludic, and gives children the opportunity to repeat those words and learn what they mean.