

For better readers, work to build vocabulary, background knowledge

Do you remember a subject in school that was hard for you? Did you voluntarily spend your free time after school or during summer practicing that subject? Probably not, and unless you struggled with reading, it is unlikely that the lack of practice hurt your ability to pursue education or a desired career. Lack of practice reading, however, has meaningful lifelong consequences.

Kids who can't read, don't, and their vocabulary and background knowledge suffer. Knowledge gaps deepen with time and cause kids to struggle to understand what they read in every subject. Reading comprehension requires that we automatically *read* unfamiliar words and *understand* the words we read in the context and order in which they appear.

The ability to *read* unfamiliar words requires mastery of letter-sound relationships. The ability to *understand* words requires vocabulary and background knowledge, and an understanding of how words work together to make meaning. We use vocabulary and background knowledge as context for understanding what we read. Knowledge builds on existing knowledge. For example, you are unlikely to learn anything from a newspaper article about a London cricket match unless you understand why the author uses words and phrases like “googly,” “nurdle,” and “bowling a maiden over.”

Research shows that the number of books in a child's home correlates with the child's reading ability. It is essential to understand the difference between correlation and causation. The *existence* of books in a home is not what *causes* increased reading ability. Homes that naturally contain a large number of books also tend to contain parents who *can* and *do* read to their children. Equally important is that children in these homes tend to hear a higher number and diversity of words,

which helps develop oral language skills, vocabulary, and background knowledge. It's easy to say that parents *should* read to their children, but what if they can't?

There are specific practices that build vocabulary and background knowledge for all kids. These are especially important for struggling readers and children who come to school with knowledge gaps. Here are two examples of such practices:

Access to audiobooks is critical for struggling and disadvantaged readers. Being able to listen to textbooks and novels allows kids to access information at their comprehension level while building their decoding skills.

Robust, engaging, vocabulary instruction can fill vocabulary gaps. Research has shown that direct, explicit vocabulary instruction can level the vocabulary “playing field” before the middle of elementary school.

Asking children to memorize dictionary definitions of words is a terrible way to teach vocabulary. Most dictionary definitions define words using other words that kids do not know and are intentionally dense to reduce space. Kids need student-friendly definitions of words, and they need to hear words used in contexts that are familiar to them. They need on-going opportunities to use new words in their work. We highly recommend *Bringing Words to Life, 2nd Edition* by Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan for any teacher or parent interested in learning more about effective vocabulary instruction.

Here is an example of robust, engaging vocabulary instruction.

Introduce the word

“Class, our vocabulary word is hustle. What’s the word?”

“Here is how you write hustle. h-u-s-t-l-e.”

“Read the word.”

“Let’s examine our word for the number of syllables, syllable types, part(s) of speech, and spelling patterns.”

Provide a student-friendly definition using words they know

“To hustle means to do something quickly. For example, last weekend I took my son to the movies, and he was very slow putting his shoes on so I said: “We are late for the movie – you better hustle or we will not have time to buy popcorn before the movie starts!”

Say more about the word and use it in additional examples

“Sometimes we hustle because we are late, but sometimes we hustle to get out of the way of something or because we need to move quickly.

“Jennifer is not the best player on the basketball team, but she always hustles, so the coach respects her.”

Ask questions about word meanings

“If you had eight brothers and sisters and you wanted to make sure you got a piece of pie, would you hustle into the kitchen when you heard your dad take the pie out of the oven?”

Elicit word use by students

“Tell me about a time when you had to hustle. Use the word hustle in your story.”

Ask students to answer questions

“If I were late to a doctor’s appointment, would I hustle to get there on time?”

Ask students to finish what you say

“My son stopped at a friend’s house on the way home from school and was late for dinner, so he decided he should _____ home.”

Ask students to use the word with a partner

“Turn to your partner and tell them a short story using the word hustle. Each person will have 30 seconds. Wait for me to say go and listen for me to say stop.”

Offer incentives for students to use or point out the word while doing other work

Practice robust, engaging vocabulary instruction with your family this summer! Encourage your kids to read or listen to audiobooks. These practices make a difference.

May 28, 2020 | Reprinted with permission, Wyoming Tribune Eagle

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