

# Building Vocabulary

*Here are some things you can do to help young children succeed in school.*

By Malkin Dare

When it comes to academic preparation, one of the biggest – and most crucial – differences among young kids is the size of their vocabulary. To say the same thing another way, the number of words a child knows is closely related to his IQ.

Children who start school with impoverished vocabularies are at a terrible disadvantage. Though they may be perfectly capable of learning new things, their limited vocabularies mean that they fail to learn at the same rate as the other children. They fall even further behind.

Imagine you're in a university class and the professor says: "The pagrates justolize their babies every year." Others nod their heads sagely and write this insight down. You, on the other hand, totally miss the point!

While you, an adult, would undoubtedly have the resources to find out what pagrates are and how they go about justolizing, four-year-olds don't have that option. They would just fail to learn the lesson, perhaps concluding that they are not as smart as the other kids and that school isn't what it's cracked up to be.

The easiest way to save young children from this fate is to give them rich vocabularies. The average child learns about 3,000 new words per year. So what can parents and teachers do to make sure that their students continue to add eight or nine new words to their vocabularies every day?

## Talk to Your Children

Whenever possible, draw children into conversation. Don't use baby talk or talk down, but rather use your full vocabulary. Encourage the children to respond in kind.

It is important to expose children to many different kinds of experiences (going to museums, playing baseball, walking in the park, travelling to other places). During each outing and afterwards, talk together about everything, using precise terms to describe what you saw and did.

## Read to Your Children

Another excellent way to build vocabulary and general knowledge is for children to hear interesting stories that contain words and information they are unlikely to encounter otherwise. Reading to children is important because it exposes them to new words and knowledge – not because it will magically teach them to read.

Stories should be at a challenging level and should continue as long as the children are receptive to being read to. There are several excellent books, such as those by Jim Trelease, that suggest suitable reading material. Alternatively, consult the children's librarian at your local public library.

## Teach Your Child to Read

Avid readers pick up new words through their voluminous reading, through chance encounters in the text. Reluctant readers become even more reluctant, as their meager vocabulary undermines their efforts to understand what they are struggling to read.

The best strategy is to teach children to read before they start school. Sidney Ledson outlines an excellent program in his book: *Teach your Child to Read in Just Ten Minutes a Day*. Whatever method is used, it is important that it have systematic phonics as its basis, as young children who are introduced to reading via systematic phonics are far more likely to become fluent, at-ease-with-print readers and spellers than children who are subjected to whole-word methods.

## Teach Your Child New Words

New vocabulary can be explicitly taught – word of the day, word games, word roots, prefixes and suffixes, etc. There are lots of ideas on the Internet, like <http://pbskids.org/lions/tips/teach-words.html>. An excellent workbook, *Wordly Wise 3000*, can be ordered from Educators Publishing ([www.epsbooks.com](http://www.epsbooks.com)).

*(Mrs. Dare is a reading tutor, and a former teacher and home-schooler.)*

## Greek and Latin Word Origins

- The word *candidate* has its roots in ancient Rome, where a politician running for office wore a white toga as a sign of pure and noble intentions. The Latin word for *white* is *candidus*, and the office-seeker was called *candidatus*. A candidate, then, is someone with pure (purely) political intentions.
- The Latin word for "old man" was *senex*. On the whole, older men filled the Roman *senate*. Although the Canadian Senate has younger men, most of the members are older and, in the Roman sense, are rightly called *senators* (old ones).
- No matter how we use words today, it is difficult to escape the fact that many had their beginnings in ancient Greece or Rome. For example, would you believe there is a connection between dogs and canaries? Roman sailors who stopped at a group of islands off the west coast of Africa found large dogs on the islands. Since the Latin word for *dog* is *canis* as in *canine*, the Romans called the islands the *Canarias*. Later on, birds from the Canary Islands were called *canaries*.
- Greek is the basis for thousands of words we use today, and there is good reason. The Greek language had over 92,000 words, all pure Greek, not borrowings from other languages. Many of the words used in city affairs today are derived from Greek. From Greek *polis*, city, we get the words *politics*, *police*, and *cosmopolitan*. *Metropolis* comes from *mētēr*, mother, + *polis*, and thus "mother city".

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