

# Vocabulary Development Activities

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Use the following activities to introduce new words or give more support to children with weak vocabulary skills. Choose words children don't already know well. These should be interesting, useful words children are likely to hear in a variety of contexts and, eventually, able to read for themselves. The words should help children discuss texts, their own experiences, and the world around them in more precise or complex ways. Young children are able to understand challenging words if they are given good explanations and practice using them. (If the words needed to explain a vocabulary word are too difficult for children to understand, the vocabulary word itself is probably too challenging.) After introducing a word, give children ample opportunities to hear and use the word in a variety of contexts so they understand it more deeply and to embed it in their long-term memory. All children can benefit from activities and games that reinforce vocabulary.

## I. Introducing Rich Vocabulary

**Purpose:** *Introduce and provide child-friendly explanations of new words*

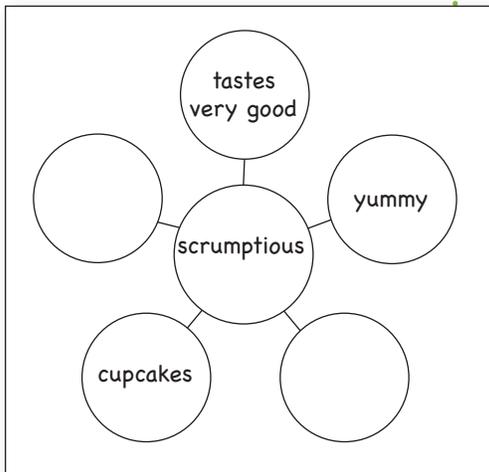
Introducing a word is the first step in developing children's understanding of it. Say the word and give a child-friendly explanation of it. The explanation should use everyday language children can understand and tell when or why the word is used. For example, for *amazing*, explain that it describes something that is really great in a way that surprises you and makes you say, "Wow!" Give examples that children can relate to, pointing out, for instance, that it would be amazing to see a shooting star, meet a famous TV actor, or find hidden treasure. Also use the word in strong context sentences, such as "The amazing ice skater jumped up and turned around in the air four times really fast." Act out the word if possible, for example, showing how you might react if you saw something amazing. Have children repeat the word and any gestures and give their own examples.

Here are some suggestions for when to introduce new words:

- Introduce vocabulary before children read. New words are often important to children's comprehension of the text. If children have difficulty retaining word meanings, focus on fewer words. Some words or idioms in a text can be explained better when children encounter them while reading. Ask children questions about vocabulary during reading. Keep word discussions short so children don't lose track of the plot or information flow. After reading,

elaborate on the words already discussed or introduce another word or two that connect to the text. For example, if children say that a character's actions show he is a good friend, introduce the word *loyal* and connect this word to children's descriptions of the character.

- Introduce words as part of classroom discussions. For example, on a cloudy day, point out that it is *gloomy* outside and discuss what a gloomy day is like and what it means if a person feels gloomy. Draw attention to words children use, explaining unfamiliar words others might not know or substituting a richer word for the word a child uses. For example, say, "Chris said elephants are *big*. Another word for *big* is *enormous*. *Enormous* means very, very big. An elephant is an *enormous* animal. What other animals are *enormous*?"
- Set up a new word space in the classroom and display a new, challenging word every few days. Show the new word plus pictures, objects, and other, simpler words that help explain it. For example, for *exquisite*, you could show an illustration of Cinderella in her ball gown with the caption *an exquisite dress*, a piece of fine lace or other lovely objects and the words *very pretty*. Refer to the word and display over the next few days and have children add objects, pictures, words, or context sentences to it. If possible, take a picture of the display and store it in a picture album of "Words We Know." Periodically review words in the album.
- For older children, in the new word space show a word web. Put a new word in the middle of the web and explain it. In the outer circles, list simpler words or examples that help define the new word. Add or have children add to the web as you reinforce the word over the next few days.



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## 2. Reinforcing Vocabulary

**Purpose:** Use new words in varied contexts

**Materials:** Drawing materials

These activities reinforce words you've recently introduced. Before an activity, remind children of the new words they're learning. Restate the child-friendly explanations for them. After the activity, have children tell which new words were discussed.

- **Associate a new word with a familiar word or phrase.** Which word goes with *donate*: *give*, *take*, *play*? (*give*) Why? (*When you donate something, you give something to someone.*)
- **Associate a new word with a context or activity from children's experiences.** Describe a time when you or someone you know acted *goofy*. Is it always a good idea to act *goofy*? Why or why not? Have you ever been to an *amusement park*? What did you see or do there? What did you smell? Hear? Taste?
- **Have children make a choice about a situation involving a new word and explain their choice.** If you were *fatigued*, would you go swimming or go to sleep? (*sleep*) Why? (*If you're fatigued, you feel tired. You'd probably want to go to sleep, not do a sport.*)
- **Give the beginning of a good context sentence that uses a new word. Have children complete it.** The *timid* mouse hid in the corner because \_\_\_\_\_.
- **Have children act out the meaning of a new word.** Show me how you'd look if you felt *grouchy*. What might a *grouchy* person say?
- **Give examples and non-examples related to a new word. Have children respond to each example you say.** Give yourself a hug and say *loveable* if I name something that is *loveable*: a teddy bear, your mom, a kick in the leg, a baby bunny, a mean monster.
- **Have children give examples of the new word.** A cup has a *handle*. Name other things that have a handle.
- **Ask true-or-false questions about a new word.** A *pest* is a great friend to have. True or false? (*false*) Why? (*A pest is someone who bothers others. It wouldn't be fun to be friends with a pest.*)
- **Have children give an opinion about the new word.** Would you like to be called *courageous*? Put your thumb up for *yes* or down for *no*. Shrug your shoulders if you're not sure. [Then call on individuals to give reasons for their responses.]

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- **Use new words to describe children or characters.** We said Icky was *kind* because he helped Golly feel better during the storm. It was *kind* of Becca to share her crayons with Jason. Have we read about someone else who was *kind*? What did that character do that was *kind*?
  - **Encourage children to use the new words in their everyday talk.** Brian said he was tired after recess. What word do we know that means feeling really tired? Brian, do you feel *exhausted* after the running you did? If anyone else feels exhausted, give a big yawn and say, “I’m exhausted.”
  - **Help children make connections between related new words.** A dishwasher is a helpful *machine* that an *inventor* created. Can you name some other machines that inventors have created?
  - **Help children make connections between a new word and other forms of the word.** When you *collect* something, you find it and put it in a group of things that are alike. What does a stamp *collector* collect? Would you want a *collection* of baseball cards? Why or why not? Do you think *collecting* seashells would be fun? Why or why not?
  - **Encourage other adults who interact with the children in your class to use the new words in their everyday speech.**
  - **Have children draw and write about a new word.** [Explain that their picture should show the meaning of the word and their writing could give a short explanation, context sentences, examples, or synonyms.]

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### 3. Understanding Descriptive Language

**Purpose:** Describe objects and pictures and identify objects and pictures from descriptions

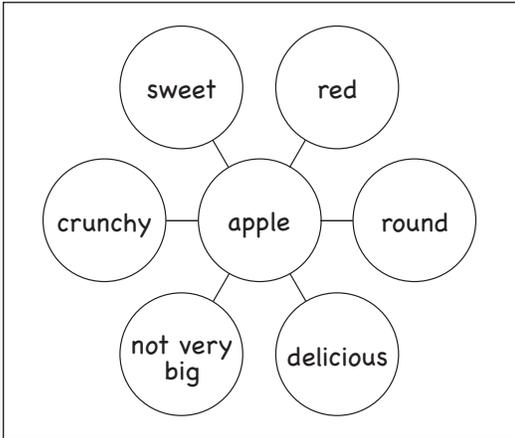
**Materials:** Food, toys, common household or classroom objects, pictures

Remind children that when you describe something you tell more about it. Explain that writers carefully choose words to describe things so readers can understand and picture what the things are like. Point out that describing words might tell what size something is, its color, its shape, how it feels when you touch or hold it, how it smells, what sounds it makes, and what it tastes like. They can tell how someone feels (*happy, sad, excited*), what kind of person someone is (*nice, mean, kind*), or how something is done (*quickly, slowly*).

Pass around a familiar object, such as an apple. Have children name and describe it. Ask questions to prompt responses. For example, ask, “What size is it? Is it big, medium, or small? What color is it? What shape does it have? Is it round like a ball or square like a box? Does it feel smooth like the top of your desk or bumpy like tree bark? Does it feel heavy or light? What does an apple taste like?” (You can wash the apple and let children eat a piece of it.) Remind children of richer descriptive words they’ve discussed or substitute new words for words children have said. For example, say, “Julia said an apple tastes good. If something tastes really good, we say it is *delicious*. Do you think apples taste delicious?” Conclude by reviewing some of the descriptive words discussed and help children use them in sentences about the object. Give sentences starters, such as “An apple looks/feels/tastes \_\_\_\_\_.”

Help children describe other items, as well as pictures of interesting people, animals, places, and machines. For this activity, don’t worry about distinguishing parts of speech. The point is to get children to be specific and vivid in their descriptions.

After developing some descriptive language, play I Spy. Give clues about objects or pictures you’ve displayed. Use some of the descriptive language children discussed. For example, for a watermelon, you could say, “I spy a picture of something that is round and heavy. It’s green on the outside and red on the inside. It has black seeds. It tastes delicious. When you bite a slice of it, sticky juice runs down your chin. What is it?” Have children raise their hands when they think they know the answer, then have everyone say it on your signal. Children can take turns being the one to give descriptive clues.



**Variation 1** Make a word web of the descriptive words discussed. Write the name of a person, place, or thing in the center. List descriptive words or phrases in the outer circles. Be sure to read words as you write them, especially words that aren't yet decodable.

**Variation 2** Read a sentence from a text children have heard or read that contains good descriptive language. Have children tell what is being described and discuss what the describing words tell about that person, place, or thing.

## 4. Understanding Onomatopoeia

**Purpose:** Recognize words that suggest or imitate sounds and enjoy saying these words

Say the word *hiss*, drawing out the final /s/ sound. Have children repeat it. Ask what might make that sound. Point out that a snake might hiss or air might make a hissing sound as it leaks out of a balloon or a tire. Repeat for *buzz*, *purr*, *cluck cluck*. Give clues to help children name things that make a sound similar to the word. Explain that writers use words like these to help readers imagine what things sound like. These sound words (onomatopoeia) make their stories come alive.

Have children identify possible sources of sounds for other onomatopoeic words, such as the following:

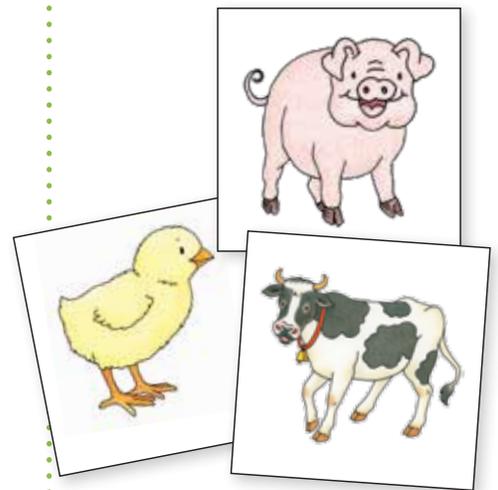
achoo	fizz	quack	tick tock
arf arf	groan	roar	toot
bang	growl	screech	tweet
beep-beep	gulp	shush	vroom
boing	hiccup	sizzle	whack
chirp	meow	snap	wham
clang	moo	snip	whir
click	neigh	squeak	whizz
crash	oink	squish	whoosh
crackle	peep	swoosh	yelp
crunch	plop	thud	zap
croak	pop	thump	zoom

English-language learners might be able to share onomatopoeic words in their first language for the sources of sounds discussed, especially for animals.

**Variation 1** Display pictures of things that make sounds that can be described with onomatopoeia. Say an onomatopoeic word for one of the pictured items, such as *oink* for a pig, and have children point to the thing that makes a sound similar to the word you said. Or point to a picture and have children use onomatopoeia to imitate the sound(s) the pictured item makes. They can use words they've learned or make up their own.

**Variation 2** Give children commands that use onomatopoeia, such as "Toot like a horn. Snap your fingers."

**Variation 3** Some picture books include onomatopoeic words. Read one of these stories or sentences from several stories. Have children identify word(s) that help them imagine what something sounds like.



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## 5. Vocabulary Development Games

**Purpose:** *Have fun with interesting words*

**Materials:** *Classroom objects, paper lunch bags, index cards, envelopes*

Once children know how to play a game, encourage them to suggest words that can be used for it. This can help them develop a sense of ownership for the words.

**Tongue Twisters** Have children repeat tongue twisters you give them, such as “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. She sells seashells on the seashore. Quick ducks quack.” Point out that twisters include several words with the same or similar letter-sounds. Discuss what each twister means.

**Who Is It?** Give descriptive clues about a character from a story children have recently heard or read (or a child in the class if the child would enjoy it). Include words that describe character traits, such as *friendly, nice, brave*. Have children guess whom you’re describing.

**What Is It?** Place small objects, such as a stapler, a box of crayons, or a stuffed animal, in individual bags or put cards with decodable words, such as *hospital, vet, pencil*, in separate envelopes. Pass out the bags or envelopes. Tell children to look at their object or word but not to show it to others. Have them take turns using descriptive language to tell about their object or word. Tell them they can’t say the name of the object or the word on their card. Have others guess what the object or word is. You might want to set a time limit for guessing.

**I’m Thinking of a Word** Write a recently discussed vocabulary word on a card. Hold it to your forehead, hiding the word so children can’t see it. Give clues about the word’s meaning. Have children raise their hands when they think they know the word. Call on someone to say the answer. Then show and read the word.

**Let’s Go to a . . .** Tell children to pretend they are going to a museum, farm, supermarket, hospital, fair, or other destination. Ask questions related to the senses: What will you see (smell, hear, taste, touch) there? Or play Where Am I?: Name things you see, hear, taste, touch, and smell and have children guess what kind of place you’re describing.

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**Move It! Move It!** Have children act out interesting action verbs they've discussed recently, such as *wiggle, squirm, creep, scramble, twirl, pounce, scurry*.

**Make a Face** Have children make faces for either verbs related to facial gestures, such as *scowl, frown, squint, pout, gasp*, or words for feelings, such as *glum, gloomy, thrilled, joyful, fearful, surprised, excited*. Use words discussed recently.

**Sound It Out!** Have children act out recently discussed words related to the sounds people or animals make, such as *sigh, sob, roar, howl, chuckle, mumble, hiss, croak, hum, whisper*.

**Charades** List on the board or name recently discussed vocabulary words. Then assign a child or a group a word to act out. Have others guess the word. Remind them of the possible answers as they make their guesses.

**Riddles, Jokes, and Puns** Find age-appropriate riddles, jokes, or puns at the library or online. Have a word fun time where you share a funny riddle, joke, or pun with children. For example, ask, "What's black, white, and red all over?" (*an embarrassed zebra*) Discuss what makes the riddle, joke, or pun funny. Have children share riddles or jokes with you and, if appropriate, with the class.