



It may surprise you to know that the skills needed to listen, understand, and talk that typically emerge during early childhood continue to refine and develop into adolescence during the secondary school years.

Vocabulary is one key area of development throughout and beyond adolescence. Vocabulary means the store of words that you know, understand and use. It is thought that a child in secondary school learns approximately 7-10 words per day!

**Supporting a young person to build vocabulary helps with:**

- ✓ Understanding speech, concepts and emotions
- ✓ Understanding what is read
- ✓ Joining in conversations
- ✓ Developing thinking and learning

If you are concerned about your child's listening, understanding and talking, whatever their age, seek advice from a qualified speech and language therapist.

Read this leaflet for general ideas of how you can help your child to build their vocabulary skills. Please adapt suggestions to take account of your child's age and stage of development.

## **Learning new words**

Word knowledge increases intensely during adolescence.

During this time the meaning of existing vocabulary is deepened and there is a growing understanding that words can have multiple meanings, for example: text, taste, bright, sweet, cold.

There is also a gradual increase in knowledge of the connections between words, for example: music and musician.

The words that children come across in secondary school as part of instructions and discussions can be more abstract and may be unfamiliar. Technical words related to a particular school subject are usually taught but there are other 'cross-curricular' words that are used by all teachers. Such words are rarely taught but may act as barriers to understanding.

Examples of these general '*cross-curricular*' words include: introduce, estimate, measure, evaluate, modify, discuss, compile, observe, notice, believe, infer, consequently, anticipation, doubt.



## **How words are learnt**

Learning new words is a gradual process. There is a close relationship between reading and vocabulary development. Older children are typically expected to learn more and more words *through* reading and writing. Children who have a large vocabulary understand more of what they hear and read.

Words can be learnt through:

1. Direct instruction  
This is where a word or idea is defined and explained. A dictionary can also help to learn and confirm new meanings.
2. Context  
This is where the meaning of a word is guessed or worked out from clues in the sentence and the words/meaning around it. This skill is called inference and is a key skill in following conversations and understanding what we read.
3. Clues in the word  
This is can be used alongside context. This is where word parts are combined to make new words, for example: birthday, timetable. This includes knowledge of word parts such as '-able' and '-less'. It also includes comparing known words that sound or look alike, for example: careless, helpless, pointless.



## How you can help

- a. Encourage a curiosity about words, noticing and checking new words in the newspaper, in books, when watching a television programme. Talk about what a new word means or look it up together in an online dictionary.
- b. Let your child know that it's ok to ask what a word means or to say, 'I don't understand'. Help your child to narrow it down to the word or part of the sentence that is not clear.
- c. Check your child's understanding of key words by asking them to explain to you what it means. Check your child understands a homework question by asking them to explain it to you.
- d. Show your child how to use clues and word parts that could help work out the meaning of a word when reading.
- e. If you want to target particular words, choose the more abstract 'cross-curricular' words that teachers use (as mentioned above), as this will have the biggest impact on successfully understanding instructions in class. It may help to talk to someone in your child's school about this.
- f. Enrich the connections between a target word and other words by thinking about related words that the child already knows, sound similar, look similar, are in the same category, have a similar meaning, or even have an opposite meaning.
- g. Use visual strategies such as drawing, images and writing to explain target words and link them to other words.
- h. Making your own crossword can be a fun way of matching clues to a word, visit [www.puzzlemaker.com](http://www.puzzlemaker.com)
- i. Give examples of the ways that a target word can be used in a sentence. Practise this together as it helps to deepen understanding of how to use a word meaningfully. Encourage your child to gradually think of new sentences that contain a target word.
- j. Repeat and come back to what target words mean so that they are heard and seen many times, in a range of different examples, both spoken and written. Create a 'dictionary' of difficult words that you can add to and check.