

Using Vocabulary Cards

How a child learns to speak and understand the spoken word is a mysterious process. As long as a child is exposed to some language in his/her early life, s/he will almost always learn to speak. We don't entirely understand why, but we know this to be true absent certain complications. She will learn the vocabulary that she is offered. We can do much to enrich these offerings, to give the child a greater wealth of words at her command, but we can not make her learn to speak. That occurs in a way that, at present, remains a mystery. But the same can not be said for writing or reading. Writing and reading require instruction of some sort and require some degree of effort by the child. She must exert herself on the components of our language to build it for herself. She must mount each of these steps: (1) Develop Spoken Language: create an internal dictionary and practice using the words in it; (2) Develop Phonetic Awareness: learn the sounds within words and the sounds/symbols of our alphabet; (3) Practice Creating Words (Writing): learn to put those sounds/symbols together to make words; and, (4) Practice Reading: Learn to decode those sounds/symbols to decipher words. Working with vocabulary cards is a wonderful way to help the child develop an internal dictionary of words at her command.

I. Naturally Expose the Children to the New Vocabulary

Building verbal language skills is the first step in the child's road towards mastering language. The first words a child needs to know are those most relevant to her. For example, her name, the names of her classmates, the parts of her body, the names of the items in the home, etc. Before using vocabulary cards themselves, naturally expose the children to new vocabulary by regularly using it in conversations, by noticing the objects when you encounter them in daily life, and by reading books that feature the objects. This is your opportunity to bring the words to life for the child.

II. Practice the Vocabulary with the 3-Period Lesson

Children can most easily internalize vocabulary when it is used in connection with the object/item itself. For this reason, it is best to use real things when teaching vocabulary. When they are not available, use photos that isolate the object being presented.



Period 1: Place 3 or 4 photo cards on a clean workspace that is free from distractions. Touch and name the first card. Say, "This is a dog." Repeat for all. **Period 2:** Move your hands away and say, "Show me the dog." If s/he cannot or points to the wrong card, simply move back to period 1. **Period 3:** Point to a card and say, "What is this?" If the child does not say the name, simply move back to period 2. Depending on the child, you may get through all 3 periods in one lesson or you may need to repeat the first two periods over the course of several days before the child is ready to demonstrate mastery in period three. Keep in mind that it is during the second period that most learning takes place. Place your emphasis there.

III. Play I Spy

This simple game gives the child the opportunity to listen for and identify the sounds within words. As he learns to hear the components of a word, of our language, he develops phonetic awareness. He begins to understand that all of those words are made up of smaller components-of sounds. Once this happens, he can begin to link those individual sounds with their symbols-the letters of our alphabet. **Lesson I:** Gather a child or small group of children around you. Say, "I spy with my little eye, something in Kyra's hand that starts with the sound 'puh.' Of course, Kyra is holding nothing but a pencil so her chance of succeeding, of figuring this out, is high. Continue to sound out the word, 'PUH en ssss ull.' Do this as much as you need to until one of the children hears it and says, "pencil." Continue for as long as the children are interested. The intent of this first lesson is to help children understand the mechanics of this game in a way that nearly guarantees their success...even though they may not yet be skilled at noticing the sounds within words. **Lesson II:** Walk about the room together and select 6 or 8 objects/photos to work with. This is one of your earliest opportunities to help the child see that she can find what she needs to work with in the room, that she is free to take what she needs to do her work. The first time you play, you want to choose objects/photos that have different initial sounds. Give her a few options if she needs them. (Once she gets the hang of it, it will not be a problem if she chooses objects with duplicate sounds.) Place each vocabulary card or object on the work space and encourage the child to say its name as you do so. (The child must know the name of each item before playing I Spy.) Say, "I spy with my little eye something on the rug that starts with 'mmmm.'" Repeat the sound and then, unless the child points to it, point to the monkey and say "MMMM uuuhh nnnn kuh eeeee, MMMM uuuhh nnnn kuh eeeee." **Lesson III:** The same as Lesson II but spy the ending sound in the word. When you pronounce the word, carefully articulate all parts of the word as in Lesson II but emphasize the ending sound as in "mmmm uuuhh nnnn kuh EEEEE." **Lesson IV:** The same as Lesson II but spy the middle sound in the word. When you pronounce the word, carefully articulate all parts of the word as in Lesson II but emphasize the middle sound as in "mmmm UUUHH nnnn kuh eeeee."