

Early Years Library

READ THE
INTRODUCTION
TO THIS SERIES

Part of the **Language and Early Literacy** Series

LANGUAGE AND LISTENING

What do we
mean by
language and
listening?

Developing the ability to listen, understand and respond appropriately and learning and using new and interesting words in context are important foundational skills for the development of language and literacy. Children learn to listen carefully to, understand and remember verbal information and stories. Children demonstrate their listening skills by responding to spoken instructions, answering questions about what has happened in a familiar story or talking about what might happen next. Children hear a wide variety of words in context and are given the opportunities to expand and use new vocabulary in play and conversation.

Why is it
important

When children are exposed to, and practise new words in context they develop the confidence and skill to communicate in a variety of ways, and understand the many ways that others communicate, including through reading and writing. Listening and understanding skills also help to develop children's reading fluency, increasing their enjoyment and understanding of books and stories and demonstrating that words can communicate meaning. Being able to understand the parts of a story can give children a foundation on which to develop their own story-telling skills as they grow.

Learning new words

Children learn new words when they are exposed to them in context and can link the word's meaning to their existing knowledge. Starting with simpler descriptive words and expanding to longer, more complex vocabulary, children begin to understand, remember and practise new and interesting words.

Most commonly used strategies in evidence-based manuals:

- Use new words in context, emphasising and repeating them in other contexts to help to build children's understanding
- Talk to children about new and interesting words that you encounter or overhear, explaining their meaning. Encourage children to use the words in activities and their own conversations
- Use visual tools such as picture cards or props that help children to understand the meaning of new words

Inspiring Ideas

- Where does this belong? Using a variety of small world toys, discuss and introduce new words after using familiar words to describe the place each animal lives. Ask children to sort the toys by their habitat. *"Where does the polar bear belong? Oh, it lives in the cold and ice! Polar bears live in a place called the Arctic, that's a snowy habitat! What is a camel's habitat?"*
- Teddy wants to go for a walk round the garden! Support children to plan the walk for Teddy. *"Does Teddy want to walk under the magnolia tree? Jump on the stepping stones? Hide behind the large slide?"*
- Discuss with children the parts of plants found in the garden or grown from seeds using new and interesting words, pointing out the roots and stem, and asking children what plants need to grow. *"Yes! Water and sunshine help plants to grow. Plants need lots of good nutrients from the soil, too."* To help children to develop an understanding of the meaning of new words, use them again in a different context. *"We need to eat food with lots of nutrients to help us to grow!"*

Tip

Use lots of new and interesting descriptive words in conversations with children. When children hear words used in different contexts, it can help them to build a meaning for each new word.

Tip

To help children generate or recall words, teachers can offer prompts for either the sound of the word (phonological support; e.g. "nu..." to prompt nutrient) or the meaning of the word (semantic support). Allow children the time to remember, rather than just telling them.

Using new words in context

Children learn to use their new vocabulary in the right context with increasing confidence. In structured and unstructured activities, children recall and use new and interesting words to communicate with others independently.

Most commonly used strategies in evidence-based manuals:

- Support children to use new vocabulary by using new words yourself, for example during a role play activity, and extend children's own contributions
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage children to use the new words they have heard
- Use visual tools such as props, dressing-up resources and arts and crafts materials to encourage the use of new words
- Use role play scenarios and games to encourage children to talk to each other using new vocabulary

Inspiring Ideas

- Teddy's visit! Ask children to show Teddy around, describing the important things they can see. When the tour has finished, have the children phone Teddy's daddy and tell him all about Teddy's day! Support children to use and repeat the new words they have heard. *"Teddy got stuck in the oozy mud in the garden and had to be rescued!"*
- After reading a familiar book, support children to role play the story, prompting them to use interesting new words and repeated refrains. *"Do you remember what the troll says? 'WHO'S THAT TRIP-TRAPPING OVER MY BRIDGE?!' That's right!"*
- Shopping mystery! Ask children to describe what they want to buy to the shopkeeper without saying its name! Support children by asking: *"Is it round or square? Does it feel soft or rough?"* Prompt each child to use these new words to help the shopkeeper to figure out what their customer wants to buy.

Tip

Extend children's vocabulary by repeating back what they have said, adding one new descriptive word. *"You're digging a hole? Yes, you're digging a deep hole!"*

Listening and responding

Children practise their listening skills by responding to information that they hear, for instance by listening to spoken instructions or different words or sounds. They respond in different ways, for example, through verbal or physical responses.

Most commonly used strategies in evidence-based manuals:

- Remind children of strategies to help them listen carefully
- Give children developmentally appropriate instructions and ask questions for children to listen and respond to
- Use visual tools such as natural resources and arts and crafts materials during listening and responding activities
- During listening and responding activities, use visual tools and everyday objects such as puppets, toy animals, garden materials (e.g. sticks, leaves, or sand), and flashcards to engage children

Inspiring Ideas

- When playing outside, or on a walk, ask children about the noises they can hear in the environment. *“I think I’ve just heard a loud, rumbling noise! Can anyone else hear that? What could that noise be? You can hear a whistling sound? Me too! Where is it coming from?”*
- Hop little bunnies! When singing ‘hop little bunnies’ remind children to listen carefully and wait until they hear you sing the word ‘hop’ before they jump up and start to dance!
- Tic in the dark! Outside on a wintry evening or in a room where furniture can be pushed to one side, turn off the lights or ask one child to close their eyes. Have the other children make funny noises or repeat their own names and have the child who is ‘it’ find them by sound alone!

Remembering stories

Children remember important parts of stories and put key events from stories in order.

Most commonly used strategies in evidence-based manuals:

- When reading books with children, show how you recall key events from the story
- Discuss and ask children questions about what has happened within a story
- Using role play and small world play, support children to act out familiar stories in order

Inspiring Ideas

- Let's Talk! Before the story begins, remind children to listen very carefully because at the end you will need help to remember what happened. *"What did the caterpillar eat? Can you remember what animal it turned into at the end?"*
- Pick a familiar fairy tale to read to children. When the story is finished, support children to organise a role play game that re-enacts the story, gently encouraging children to remember key events and repeated refrains. *"So where would you stand? What does the wolf say now? 'LITTLE PIG, LITTLE PIG LET ME COME IN' And what do the pigs reply? 'NOT BY THE HAIRS ON MY CHINNY-CHIN-CHIN!'"*
- After reading a book, spread picture cards which show key events from the story on a table or whiteboard. Ask children to put the cards in order: *"Can you find the first part of the story? And then what happened? You can put that card right at the end if that's how the story finishes."*

Tip

When reading familiar stories, ask children if they can remember what happens in the story just from the cover page.

Answering questions about a story

Children answer questions about a story, for example, making predictions about what might happen next or responding to questions about characters.

Most commonly used strategies in evidence-based manuals:

- Ask children questions and have discussions while reading
- Read stories to children and give your own opinions about the book

Inspiring Ideas

- Let's Talk! *"What was your favourite part of the story? I really liked it when... Has that ever happened to you? How would you feel if you had to do that?"*
- Predict the Plot! In the middle of an exciting, unfamiliar story, ask children what they think might happen next. Encourage children to talk to each other about their predictions. *"Does everyone agree?"*
- When reading a non-fiction book, support children to talk to about something they found interesting. *"Bears eat moths? I didn't know that!"*