

Developing Early Literacy Skills Outdoors

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Building a vocabulary



A good vocabulary has implications for progression in all areas of learning. Children who have the words to explain their needs and wants will be happier and less frustrated than those who cannot verbalise how they are feeling. They will progress further in maths, science and humanities because they will have the language they need to label, process information, explain, describe and reason. What's more, a good vocabulary is of course invaluable for the creative arts and English because it allows children to transcribe the contents of their imaginations into spoken and written language.

Building a vocabulary involves the following skills and concepts:

- Understanding that language conveys meaning
- Understanding and being able to use a variety of nouns and verbs to name and describe
- Understanding and being able to use a variety of adjectives and adverbs to describe
- Being able to describe position and sequence
- Being able to classify and categorise.

The outdoor environment is a rich source of stimuli that begs to be experienced and described. Everywhere you turn there are natural and man-made phenomena that appeal to every sense. Take the children outside and do the following activities to help them start building a good vocabulary bank for the future.

Activity 1: Scent pots

Type of activity: Adult-led, whole group.

Resources: Plastic cups, access to a range of natural resources, fresh air (our scents were overpowered by muck spreading in nearby fields!).

What to do: Give the children a plastic cup each. Take them outside and explain that you would like them to search for natural objects that have a smell. The children should collect these items in their cups to create scent pots.

As the children go about picking things to put in their cups, talk to them and help them to describe what the contents smell like. Encourage them to compare the difference between dry, wet and damp items. Show them how to crush flower heads and grass to release juices and stronger scents. Allow them to use sticks to mix the contents of their pots and see what happens.

Key vocabulary: Flower, petal, blossom, grass, soil, earth, mud, damp, wet, dry, crush, squeeze, juice, smell, scent, strong, faint, musky, musty, fresh, sweet, earthy, grassy, damp, different, stinky, horrible, nice, fragrant, perfume.

Extension ideas: Take the scent pots back to the setting and ask the children to give you some words to describe the smells. Write the words on small stickers and stick them to the sides of the pots.



Collect some natural outdoor scents.

Activity 3: Listen and move

Type of activity: Adult-led, small groups (to avoid collisions).

Resources: Large open space.

What to do: Take the children out to a large space and explain that they should listen to and follow your instructions to practise moving around in different ways.

Begin by instructing the children to walk around slowly. Follow this up with instructions to stop, start, move faster, slower and change direction. Once the children have got the gist of the game, invite volunteers to come out to the front and call out the instructions.

Key vocabulary: Move, fast, slow, speed up, slow down, turn, stop, start, change direction.

Extension ideas: Introduce different movements such as spinning, twirling, jumping, hopping and skipping. Give the children ribbons, hoops and balls and encourage them to describe their movements.

Activity 2: Sharing a Shell

Type of activity: Adult-initiated, during independent play.

Resources: Rocks, pebbles, shells, plastic fish tank plants, toy fish, starfish and seagull or bird, plastic tub and cup, toy crab, sea anemone (find these in pet shops for fish tanks) and bristle worm (find rubber worms with bristles in toy shops), large shells.

What to do: Turn the water tray into a rock pool. Sprinkle sand across the bottom and set out the above toys and resources. Bring some children together to read *Sharing a Shell* by Julia Donaldson and Lydia Monks. Show them the water tray and introduce the characters. Act out the story together using the props and emphasise Donaldson's use of prepositions and verbs in the retelling.

Key vocabulary: Inside, outside, under, in, on, too small, bigger, heavy, climb, move, running, rocketing, roaming, scuttling, romping, wiggling.

Extension ideas: Can the children think of any other words to describe how crabs, fish and birds move?

Try...

...making a texture trail. Send the children to find soft, hard, rough, smooth, brittle, bumpy and slimy natural objects and materials. Lay the objects on the floor and invite the children to walk over them in bare feet and describe how they feel.

Enhancing continuous provision

Sue Palmer and Ros Bayley (2013) offer some good advice about helping children to extend their language and learn new vocabulary during independent play. They advise against rushing into and interrupting play situations with loads of questions, but instead suggest standing back and observing before subtly joining in. Among other suggestions, Palmer and Bayley advocate the use of ‘pole-bridging talk’, whereby

practitioners quietly talk to themselves and describe what they are doing just like the children do when they are playing. This self-talk will gradually pique the children’s interest, drawing them to the adult and opening up the opportunity for conversation and language extension.

The ideas in the table below aim to demonstrate how everyday enhancements provide opportunities for building and developing an ever-widening vocabulary.

Area of provision	Enhancements that help children to build a vocabulary
Water	Add different substances to the water tray to give it a variety of appearances and textures. Make slime with soapflakes, add washing up liquid to create bubbles, make some jelly, freeze blocks of ice, add food colouring and essence. Provide whisks, sieves, jugs, beakers and waterwheels for the children to play and explore. Key vocabulary: feel, thick, run, trickle, gloopy, slimy, sloppy, pour, froth, bubble, mix, whisk, smell, scent, hard, cold, smooth, chip, empty, full.
Sand	Add special objects/materials/substances to the sand. Mix in glitter, rice or coloured pasta. Bury jewels, precious stones or coins. Add slime, soapy water or cornflour and water mix. Key vocabulary: texture, feeling, gritty, damp, wet, slimy, frothy, sparkly, glittery, shiny, coarse, rough, dry.
Construction	Provide large hollow blocks, wooden bricks, crates and planks. Key vocabulary: build, position, next to, on top, straight, curved, tall, low, high, stack, balance.
Role Play	Mud café: Set up a table with containers, sticks, tubs, pots, soil, mud and real cooking utensils such as pots, pans, spatulas and wooden spoons. Key vocabulary: mud, mix, add, wet, sloppy, pie, mould, form, dry, soft, hard, dirty.
Investigation	Provide bug catchers, magnifiers, digital cameras and minibeast identification charts for the children to capture and observe small creatures. Key vocabulary: minibeast, insect, creature, crawl, scuttle, fly, creep, small, large, colour, pattern, legs, head, antennae, wings, slither, shell, slime, flutter.
Physical	Print, laminate and display the words to the song Here we go round the mulberry bush. Gather some children, form a circle and introduce the song. Encourage the children to think of different actions they perform in the morning. Leave the children to sing together. Key vocabulary: wake, bed, brush, hair, teeth, eat, breakfast, walk, scoot, play, school, nursery, pre-school.
Garden	Set out some sorting baskets and collections of pebbles, flowers, conkers, seeds, twigs and leaves for the children to sort and classify according to their own criteria. Key vocabulary: colour, shape, round, long, short, thin, wide, big, small.

Curriculum links

Building a vocabulary covers the following areas of learning and development:

EYFS	Develops an understanding of simple concepts; learns new words very rapidly and is able to use them in communicating; builds up a vocabulary that reflects the breadth of their experiences; extends vocabulary, especially by grouping and naming, exploring the meaning and sounds of new words (CL). Uses vocabulary and forms of speech that are increasingly influenced by experiences of books (L).
NIC	Names and describes; takes part/contributes to group oral language activities; expresses themselves with increasing clarity and confidence, using a growing vocabulary and more complex sentence structure (LL).
SCE	Extends and enriches vocabulary through listening, talking, watching and reading; listens and takes part in conversations and discussions, and discovers new words and phrases to help express ideas, thoughts and feelings; explores words, discovering how they work together (LE).
WFPF	Uses appropriate language in spontaneous and structured play activities and when conveying meaning; chooses words deliberately; extends vocabulary through activities that encourage interest in words (LLC).

Becoming aware of print



An important first step towards being able to read and write is becoming aware of print. Initially this means introducing children to the letters of the alphabet and giving them opportunities to hear letter names and play with letter shapes. They should also be made aware of print in the environment, and helped to understand that it carries meaning.

Becoming aware of print involves the following skills and concepts:

- Understanding that print carries meaning
- Being able to distinguish between print and pictures
- Being able to recognise own name
- Understanding that there is a difference and being able to distinguish between letters and numerals

- Understanding that in English, print is composed of 26 letters of the alphabet
- Being able to recite the alphabet.

Some children spend the majority of their day outside so it is essential to display print and the letters of the alphabet around the outdoor area. Mount a weatherproof display of the alphabet with both upper and lowercase letters and pictures, paint the letters of the alphabet in sequence along fencing or walls and draw alphabet snakes on the floor. In addition, display plenty of weatherproof labels, signs and posters. Draw the children's attention to print all over the outdoor environment and plan games and activities that involve physically interacting with and exploring the letters of the alphabet.