

UNDERSTANDING WORDS

What is this developmental skill?

Understanding words is the ability to connect spoken language with objects, actions, people, feelings, and ideas. Children must learn that words carry meaning and that the same word can sometimes have different meanings depending on the situation. A growing receptive vocabulary allows children to understand what others are communicating and to participate more successfully in daily routines, learning, and relationships.

How does this normally develop?

Children begin learning word meanings through repeated experiences with responsive caregivers. When an adult names an object, describes an action, labels an emotion, or talks about what is happening, the child gradually connects the spoken word with its meaning. Vocabulary expands as children hear words used in different situations, listen to stories, ask questions, and engage in conversations. Over time, children move from understanding familiar and concrete words to understanding more abstract language, such as time, feelings, relationships, and intentions.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Children who experience neglect may hear fewer words, receive fewer explanations, and have fewer opportunities for shared conversation. Adults may meet basic needs without describing what is happening or responding to the child's attempts to communicate. As a result, the child may have limited exposure to the vocabulary needed to understand daily life. Chronic stress can also make it difficult to retain and organize new language, particularly when words involve emotions, relationships, or future events.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Understand familiar routines but become confused by unfamiliar words.
- Use context or copy others rather than fully understanding what was said.
- Have difficulty identifying objects, actions, or emotions when named.
- Misinterpret words that have more than one meaning.
- Struggle with academic vocabulary.
- Appear to understand because they nod or agree, even when they are confused.
- Become frustrated when others assume they know words they have not learned.

These difficulties may be mistaken for defiance, carelessness, or limited intelligence when the child may simply lack the necessary language experience.

Parenting Implications

Caregivers can support word understanding by using clear language, naming objects and actions during daily activities, and explaining unfamiliar words in simple terms. New vocabulary is easier to learn when it is connected to something the child can see, do, or experience. Repetition is important, especially when the child has had limited early language exposure. Caregivers should also check understanding rather than asking only, "Do you understand?"

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, "*They should know what that word means,*" consider, "*They may not have had enough opportunities to learn this language.*" Attuned caregivers slow down, explain without embarrassment, and treat misunderstanding as a developmental need rather than a failure.