

VOCABULARY GROWTH

What is this developmental skill?

Vocabulary growth is the gradual expansion of the words children understand and use. Vocabulary provides the building blocks for communication, learning, emotional expression, and thinking. The more words children know, the more accurately they can describe their experiences and understand the world around them.

How does this normally develop?

Children acquire vocabulary through rich, everyday interactions. Caregivers naturally introduce new words while reading, playing, cooking, shopping, and talking about daily life. Children hear thousands of words every day and gradually connect them to objects, actions, feelings, and ideas. Vocabulary continues expanding throughout childhood and adolescence.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect often limits children's exposure to rich language. When adults interact less frequently or use mostly directives ("Stop," "Come here," "Be quiet"), children hear fewer descriptive words and fewer explanations about the world. Limited conversation reduces opportunities to build vocabulary across many areas, including emotions, relationships, and abstract thinking.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Use a limited variety of words.
- Have difficulty understanding new vocabulary.
- Struggle to describe feelings.
- Frequently say "I don't know."
- Use vague language.
- Have trouble following complex classroom instructions.
- Experience reading comprehension difficulties despite basic decoding skills.

Parenting Implications

Vocabulary develops best through enjoyable interactions rather than memorization.

Helpful strategies include:

- Reading together daily.
- Talking throughout everyday activities.
- Naming emotions.
- Introducing new words naturally.
- Explaining unfamiliar words in context.
- Encouraging curiosity and questions.
- Having frequent conversations about the child's interests.

Repeated exposure is far more effective than correction.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking: *"He doesn't know enough words."* Try thinking: *"Every conversation gives him new language to understand himself and the world."*