

Closing the word gap at home: a toolkit for parents

What is the word gap?

Children with a 'word gap' – a smaller vocabulary than others – are disadvantaged in ways which can affect their whole lives.

Studies have shown that children with a limited vocabulary make slower progress in reading and writing, and they achieve worse results in their tests in school.

They might also find it difficult making friends and working independently, and have lower self-esteem. They are less likely to stay on at school, and more likely to be unemployed as adults.

Increasing your child's vocabulary is something that every parent can help to do, and the benefits are lifelong. Here are 18 flexible ideas you can try at home to support your child:

Talking together

Having regular conversations with your child is one of the most powerful ways to improve their vocabulary. This doesn't need to feel artificial, just take your lead from what's around you and what interests you and your child.

- 1. Eating together.** Try to eat and talk together with no other distractions and have a 'no screens at the table rule' which includes parents.
- 2. On the go.** Use car journeys as a chance to talk. Choose silly or light-hearted topics to start conversations. For example, 'What superpower would you choose?', 'What does your perfect day look like?', or 'If you were a holiday, what kind would you be?'
- 3. Telly talk.** Watch a TV programme together and use it as a springboard to talk.
- 4. Talk about the news.** Chat about what's happening in the world and ask their opinion about it.
- 5. Did you know...?** Starting conversations with teenagers can sometimes be difficult. You could start by sharing an experience, fact or anecdote that might interest them.
- 6. Sharing advice.** Ask their opinion about something or seek their advice on a situation or problem.

Encourage reading for pleasure

Reading for pleasure gives your children access to a wider range of words and children who read regularly are more likely to develop a varied vocabulary.

- 1. Book talk.** Talk about your own reading. It's very powerful for your child to see and hear adults engaging with books, and genuinely reading for pleasure.
- 2. Borrow books.** Make regular trips to the library and take advantage of everything that's freely on offer, including magazines and newspapers, DVDs and audiobooks. Try to make these visits as fun as possible so that your son or daughter has positive associations with the library.
- 3. Share ideas.** Talk to other parents about their children's reading and share titles and tips to spark their interest.
- 4. Seek out inspiration.** Whether your teenager is an avid or reluctant reader, it can be difficult to find books to suit their ever-changing interests. Stay up-to-date with children's fiction and books for young adults online through reviews and recommendations, use Twitter to follow their favourite authors for book news and ideas, or simply pop into a bookshop for window-shopping inspiration.
- 5. Graphic novels.** If you struggle to find any books of interest for your child, try comics and graphic novels. Remember that all reading is good reading.
- 6. Non-fiction.** Don't neglect non-fiction - some children prefer it - and it's just as important for vocabulary development.
- 7. Reading aloud.** You might have read with your child when they were at primary school, but it's just as important to try and weave this into your family routine if you can when they are at secondary school. Try a variety of different texts, including interesting news stories or magazines.
- 8. Spoken word.** Listen to audiobooks, podcasts or the radio together. It's important for young people to hear new words said out loud, as this can help to make their meaning clearer.

Share a curiosity about words

Young people are more likely to cope with difficult words if they have a curiosity about language. Show your child that you are curious about words too.

- 1. Play games.** Play word games as a family, such as *Scrabble*, *Boggle* and *Pictionary*.
- 2. Tall tales.** On car or train journeys play games such as *Just a Minute* (where you talk for one minute on a subject without hesitating, repeating yourself or deviating from the subject), or adapt the format of popular TV shows like *Would I Lie to You?* (which involves telling a funny or unusual 'story' from your past and family members have to say whether you are telling the truth or not).
- 3. Top words.** Talk about your favourite words or unusual words that you encounter.
- 4. Word workouts.** Show your child that adults often need to check a word's meaning. Support your child in using online and paper dictionaries, and if you like playing word games or solving crosswords, do it together.