

Young children's words predict reading ability—5 ways parents and caregivers can help grow them

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Becoming a proficient reader holds endless possibilities for a child. These opportunities include long-term [academic achievement and educational opportunities, daily life](#) and eventual workplace success—and the magic of being transported to the world of fantasy and

mystery, limited only by the imagination.

It's a complex process that [unfolds gradually in recognizable stages](#). Young learners must see and interact with combinations of letters and [words](#) thousands of times to support early reading fluency.

A vast and deep vocabulary affords precision and nuance in making meaning of the world. Young children are ready and capable of learning complex vocabulary (words like "construct," for example) required as a [knowledge base](#) for reading proficiency as they mature, especially if [taught strategically and explicitly](#).

Early childhood instruction

Early childhood instruction is critical to teach young children the crucial vocabulary they need from an early stage. This positions and better prepares them for the transition a few years ahead—from learning to read in the youngest grades, to reading to learn.

Yet research suggests the effectiveness of literacy [instruction at the kindergarten level is mixed](#) and uneven.

Policymakers and [school boards](#) need to ensure educators are implementing [best practices](#) in literacy instruction. Families and caregivers also have key roles supporting children in learning words from a young age.

Early stages of reading

The early stages of learning to read, often described as [decoding \(using knowledge of the relationship of letters to sounds\)](#), can [generally be attained by the vast majority of young learners by Grade 3](#).

This is achieved through instruction in [phonemic awareness skills \(noticing and working with specific sounds in spoken words\)](#), [phonics \(sound-letter relationships\)](#) and sight word recognition—perhaps 400 literate words. These [include high-frequency words](#) and some 200 additional content words relevant to children's cognitive and socio-developmental contexts such as "friend" or "neighbor."

Such words serve as the building blocks for automatizing these foundational skills.

Grade 4: Pivotal time

Grade 4 represents an enormous leap in [literacy development](#) because there's a shift from early literacy learning associated with narrative texts to academic literacy learning associated with expository (informational) genres. This shift is [accompanied by a high demand for "academic vocabulary."](#) These words are more abstract, discipline-specific, technical, [idiomatic and](#) often have Latin and Greek roots: the language of school and books.

These words cannot be learned from mere exposure and incidental acquisition. They [must be taught](#).

In Grade 4, academic vocabulary knowledge becomes the key predictor of whether young readers will be able to extract meaning from print on the page. Literacy researchers Jeanne S. Chall and Vicki A. Jacobs coined the [term "the Grade 4 slump" to describe the phenomenon of reading failure](#) among so many young learners at this pivotal point.

Importance of early learning

Various other scholars similarly identify vocabulary knowledge in Grade

1 as the single factor that accounts for the large variance in reading outcomes: Vocabulary in Grade 1 is predictive of more than 30 percent of [reading comprehension in Grade 11](#).

Far too many young children do not make the transition successfully from apparent success with limited vocabulary requirements associated with early literacy benchmarks and later, more complex reading comprehension and capabilities.

Research from the United States [finds some 33 percent of Grade 4 students are unable to read at the basic level](#).

In Canada, Julia O'Sullivan—a professor of health policy, management and evaluation—notes that [depending on the province or territory, at least 20 percent and up to 40 percent of Grade 3 and 4](#) students don't meet reading expectations.

Mobilizing words

Children who have the requisite vocabulary knowledge in their oral repertoire, estimated at some 9,000-word families by Grade 4 (run, runs, running, ran belong to one word family), must now marshal and mobilize these words—[mostly acquired from early experiences before kindergarten](#).

Here are some ways parents and caregivers can help children grow their words.

(1) Have "serve and return conversations" with children. Here, adults [consciously talk with children, not to them with the aim of amplifying](#) and teaching language. This means adults take the time to help children find the words they may be seeking, introduce and talk about new words and echo back and affirm children's expanding

vocabulary. How adults take turns speaking and the quality of vocabulary matters.

(2) Tactile experiences combined with talk. Provide opportunities for children to have tactile experiences, manipulating objects through hands-on play and helping around the house, providing the words for these objects. This matters due to the "[body object interaction](#)" value of these words, meaning that children are sensory and social beings who learn and reconstruct [the external world into internal mental representations](#) mediated through language.

Through playing and working with their hands, supported through talk, children develop neurocircuitry known as embodied cognition. Such adult talk [supports vocabulary learning](#). This could take the form of diverse activities like playing with blocks, learning to use cooking utensils or tools or helping sort items in a shed.

Digitally mediated simulations on a computer screen are no substitute for real world experiences and children's hands-on engagement with [print materials](#)

(3) Provide meaningful contexts and words linked by their meanings. Choose a familiar topic of interest to your child. For example, you might talk about [recycling to help youngsters learn words](#) such as dispose, separate, prevent and produce. A [child](#) could be enlisted to help sort recycling items for the benefit of embodied cognition. Draw attention to new words, teach the meanings and provide playful opportunities to learn and practice using them.

(4) Reading aloud. Reading to young children needs to be sustained into the upper elementary school years, and include expository texts, since children are not [yet able to independently expand](#) their vocabulary development.

(5) Model and foster a love of reading and words. A love of reading, books and curiosity and consciousness about words and their meanings matters. Subscribe to your local newspaper or magazines, take trips to the library and limit screen time.

Early interventions for enhancing [young children's](#) vocabulary knowledge have the best chance of resetting the vocabulary trajectory and closing the [vocabulary](#) gap. These can shift yet be sustained over time to account for [children's](#) developmental learning needs. Waiting until Grade 4 is waiting too long.

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