



# Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders

## OAFCCD

### HELPING KIDS LEARN WORDS

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We learn and refine the meanings of words throughout our lives. Children need to understand the sound structure of words and to know the meaning of many different words, as well as how to figure out word meaning from the context in which a word is used. Word skills are important as the foundation for learning to read.

Words have multiple meanings. There are central meaning (most common) and peripheral meanings (less common). There are also figurative meanings ('hit the sack'). Take the word "ear" for example. The most central meaning is the listening device on the side of your head. A less common meaning would be as in an "ear of corn". Figurative meanings of ear may include, "I have an ear for music." or "I'm all ears!" Figures of speech are important because they are very common in everyday speech and yet quite confusing to those who are trying to learn a language.

#### 1. Children need to develop some understanding of the sound system of words.

- Parents may play rhyming games. For example: "Listen, I can change the word "saw", a thing I use to cut wood to "paw", a dog's foot." Reading books with word play, like Dr. Seuss, provide valuable experience.
- Parents can point out similarities in the sounds of words. For example: the word "McDonalds has Don's name in it. Listen, Mc-Don-alds".
- Parents can play blending games and analyze games. For blending games, children can be asked to combine 2 words, such as "cow & boy" into one word or if analyzing, tell which 2 words make up the word "cowboy." For older children, this can be done with sounds. For example: "d-i-n-n-e-r" - ask the child to say what the word is.
- For older children, parents can show how words change with small additions. For example: "I really like your shoes---NOT" or "He is cheerless" or "She is unconscious."
- Parents may emphasize word meaning and sound structure with older children by

engaging in casual word play. You may play a running game of “fictionary” where each person tries to bring home a “stump” the family word or you may make up words for events that have no words (Example: The cart at the grocery with a wobbly wheel may be called “cartiswabis”). Parents may reward children for recognizing unfamiliar words and asking what they mean (Example: “You are so **recalcitrant**”) or may reward them for recognizing words used in the wrong context that sound almost like the intended word (Example: “Here, let me give you some **destruction** on how to do that.”)

2. Children need to develop an understanding of the concept of “word” and meanings in different situations.
  - Parents can talk about words and what they mean in any everyday situation. Once you have a child attending to a word, use it in various sentences and fit it into the present context, if possible. Extend to other meanings or words with similar meanings.

Example: Suppose the word is "shimmering" and you are watching the moonlight shimmering on the lake. Show and talk about your earring shimmering in the moonlight or a wet rock. You may extend on to talk about the rock “glistening” or “shining” in the moonlight.

Example: Suppose you are talking about a child who is described as being “bad.” You could refine your child’s understanding of bad and extend to other words by saying, “Well, she is not **malicious**. Malicious is when you mean “to hurt others.” I do not believe she wants to hurt others. It is difficult for her to stop herself when she wants to do something. That is called being **petulant**.

    - Parents can show how words, that look and sound the same, can have different meanings. For example: The word “pedal” can be on a flower or a bike).
    - Parents can show children how words help you guess what is going to happen. For example: If you are reading a story and the first line of a paragraph is “Two mischievous boys came into the room.”, the parent can talk about what this word means and what it tells you is going to happen.
3. Children need to be taught to use context to discover the meaning of words or multiple meanings or differences in shades of meaning. Parents can help by highlighting these features to children.
  - Parents can replace the occasional word in a familiar story with a more complex word and see if the child can figure out what it means.
  - Parents can help children to use context to figure out word meanings in everyday situations. For example: the parent can say “She must be in a hurry. She is walking briskly. Can you figure out what briskly means?”

- Parents can teach alternate meanings of words through word games in which you try to come up with as many meanings as possible for words. For example: the word "rock" can mean to "rock in a chair", "rock music", "rock that you throw", or "rock hard."
  - Parents may capitalize on children's humor for teaching multiple meanings. Joke and riddle books may be used. Some books are humorous because meaning rules are violated and include books with pictures of absurd meanings (Example: "After dinner, Sara toasted Dad" shows Dad in a giant toaster) or Amelia Badelia, the maid who interprets her instructions wrong (Example: Amelia is told to draw the drapes and she draws a picture of them).
  - For older children, parents can also talk about shades of difference in meaning for groups of words that share meaning to be considered synonyms but have small differences. For example: discuss the small but important differences in meaning for the following words; ARBITRATOR, MIDDLEMAN, and LIAISON.
4. Children need to develop an understanding of how words fit together into larger networks based on meaning.
- Parents can play word games listing super ordinate and subordinate categories. For example: You could try to name all of the toys you can in one minute. You could also say words and have the child try to name an opposite (antonyms) or a word that means the same thing (synonym). Parents could also use a picture sorting game. Pictures of animals can be categorized into jungle, farm, forest, domestic, etc. A new category of "bird" may also be made by re-sorting the parrot from the jungle, the owl from the forest, the love bird from the domestic category, the chicken from the farm, etc. into a new category.
  - Older children could be shown how words can have different specialized meanings in particular subject areas. For example: the word "legend" means something different in accounting than it does in a story book. A game of "Does this make sense?" may also be used. Example: "The chair ate her lunch." does not make sense unless you said "The meeting was over so the chair ate her lunch." Along these same lines, parents may also talk about the politically correct movement and the power words have to show or induce bias.

**Source:** Professor Genese Warr-Leeper, PhD (University of Western Ontario) 2001