

Shoot for the SSTaRS: A Strategy for Teaching Vocabulary to Promote Emergent Literacy

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Children learn new words every day. How many words they learn and how well they understand and use these words will have a significant impact on the kind of readers they eventually become. Reading involves understanding printed words, and having a large vocabulary makes it easier to gain meaning from what is being read. Vocabulary is also a tool for thinking and learning about the world. The more words children know, the more information they have. The more information they have, the better their understanding of the world and the easier it is for them to learn new words.

Children with rich vocabularies have an enormous educational advantage. Many studies show that vocabulary is the best predictor of reading comprehension at the end of grades 2 and 3, and that vocabulary growth is directly linked to overall school achievement. Not all children have the same opportunities to learn new words. As a result, children's vocabularies can differ enormously in size by the end of their preschool years. Building children's vocabulary in early childhood settings must therefore be a priority if children are to have the foundation they need to succeed at school.

When children first use new words, they usually have a limited idea of what they really mean. Helping children develop a deeper understanding of words is an important part of building their vocabulary. The adults in a child's life play a significant role in helping children build a deeper understanding of words. They do this by giving children many opportunities to hear words in meaningful everyday conversations. In addition, they give children feedback on their use of words, leading to wonderful discussions about what the words mean.

A new guidebook from The Hanen Centre, *ABC and Beyond™: Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings*, outlines a powerful strategy for teaching vocabulary - **Shoot for the SSTaRS**. This flexible, practical strategy can be naturally infused into shared book reading and other daily activities and routines in early childhood environments.

Shoot for the SSTaRS is an acronym that represents:

- S** **t**ress the new word to focus the children's attention
- S** **h**ow the children what the word means
- T** **e**ll the children what the word means
- a** **n**d
- R** **e**late the word to children's personal experiences and knowledge, as well as to other words and situations
- S** **a**y it again — and read the book again

The strategy is applicable to children who speak in sentences and already have a basic vocabulary. Early childhood teachers can choose which words they want to help children learn, based on the following continuum:

Step 1 words — familiar everyday words like *cat*, *table*, *funny*, *baby*, *dirty*, *eat* and *play*. Children who are native language speakers rarely need explanations for these words since they are heard and used so often.

Step 2 words — more sophisticated words that are typically found in books and heard less frequently in conversations, especially in disadvantaged homes.

By sophisticated words we mean **more precise words** than the everyday words referred to in Step 1.

The goal is to:

A) replace familiar words (Step 1) with less commonly used words (Step 2) – for example, *dash* for *run* or *exhausted* for *tired*;

or

B) introduce words that represent new concepts and build world knowledge, such as *carnivore*, *technology* and *medication*.

Once a new word is selected, then do the following:

Stress the new word:

Highlight the new word while introducing it. For example, “Look, that poor dog is **exhausted**. Do you know what **exhausted** means?”

Show the children what the word means:

- Use facial **expressions** (e.g., to dramatize being exhausted)
- Use dramatic **gestures, pantomime** or **play-acting** when possible (e.g., pretend you are exhausted and slump into a chair, assuming an exhausted posture)
- Change the way you say the word - e.g., use a tired voice for “exhausted”

Tell the children what the word means:

- Describe the word’s **meaning** - e.g., “He’s **exhausted**. That means that he is very, very tired. He’s so tired, he can hardly move. That’s what exhausted means.”
- Give **specific details** about the word – e.g., “Look. The dog’s tongue is hanging out of his mouth and he’s panting because he’s been running so much. That has made him exhausted. If someone has been running for a long time that can make him feel exhausted. Staying up all night and not sleeping can also make you feel exhausted the next day.”
- Describe what the word is and what it is not – e.g., “Exhausted doesn’t mean you are just a little tired. It means that you are very, very tired - so tired that your whole body feels like it can’t move and you just want to lie down and rest.”

and

Relate the word to the children’s experience, background knowledge and other situations.

New information makes more sense to children when they can relate it to something they already know. Help children develop a deeper understanding of new words by “hooking” new words onto their existing knowledge and experiences as well as onto words they already know.

For example, “Remember when your grandma came to visit? When she flew from England on a plane, she didn’t sleep the whole night. She was exhausted when she arrived, so she went to sleep early that night and slept until lunch time the next day. Then, when she woke up, she wasn’t exhausted anymore because she had a very good sleep.”

Relate the new word to other known words

Help the children recognize how the new word relates to other words. In relation to the word *exhausted*, introduce the children to familiar related words like *sleepy* and *tired*, as well as to new words like *weary*. It is also helpful to discuss words with the opposite meaning, like *refreshed* and *energized*. These kinds of discussions help children develop a clearer understanding of what *exhausted* means, as well as helping them understand other related words.

Relate the new words to other contexts/situations

You can build even greater depth of understanding of a word by relating it to other situations in which it can be used. For example, when discussing the word *exhausted*, you can talk about what else might make someone exhausted or about whether the same thing would exhaust different people. For example, a person who runs every day won’t be exhausted by running a mile, whereas a person not used to exercise might be exhausted after running much less than a mile.

Say it again

The more times children hear a word and the more contexts in which they hear it, the better they will understand it, and the more likely they are to use it.

It takes years before children truly understand the full meaning of a word. It is only through repeated exposure to the word and through participation in many conversations in which the word is used in varied contexts that they will fully understand it, even after they begin to use it themselves.

Note: There is no need to insist that children say the word. The goal is for children to understand it. Once they do, they will start to use it as part of their expressive vocabulary. In addition, while the examples provided appear to demonstrate the adult taking very long turns, a typical interaction would involve the children actively. It is important for adults to *wait* after telling children something about the word so they can then respond to the children's comments and questions.

Let's take the word, *passenger*.

Here's an example of how to *Show*, *Tell* and *Relate* for the word, *passenger*.

Show	Point to an illustration, point to a person getting a ride in a car, bus etc.	
Tell	Name the category to which the word belongs	"A passenger is a person who gets a ride from someone else – it could be in a car, a train, a bus or a plane."
	Use other words that help explain the meaning	"That man is a passenger on the bus. He gets a ride to work on the bus and he sits with all the other people, who are also getting a ride somewhere. That makes them all passengers."
	Provide details about the word's meaning	"Passengers are people who need someone to take them where they need to go. Often, passengers pay for the ride, like we do when we go on a subway or a bus. Sometimes, you can be a passenger in your own car, when someone else is driving. When mommy drives you to school, you are her passenger. When my husband drives me to the store, I am his passenger."
Relate	Draw on their personal experiences or background knowledge	Teacher: Can you think of a time when you were a passenger in a car? When did someone drive you somewhere? Child: We went to the grocery store. Teacher: Yes, mommy drove you to grocery store, so you were a passenger in her car. And I was a passenger on a plane last month when I went to see my friend in Vancouver.
	Compare and contrast word meanings – synonyms? Antonyms? How are these words the same? Different?	"Drivers are never passengers. They are the ones giving the person the ride, so they can't be passengers. What about a pilot in a plane? Is he a passenger? Do you think a passenger can become the driver? Can the driver become a passenger?"

Note: *ABC and Beyond™: Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings* (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2010), outlines practical strategies for infusing literacy into early childhood classrooms in ways that are playful, motivating and developmentally appropriate. This practical guidebook describes how early childhood teachers can make literacy instruction explicit and purposeful, yet still informal and enjoyable, as they interact with children during shared book reading and other daily routines and activities. In so doing, educators can help children develop the early literacy skills they need to learn to read and write successfully when they get to school.