

VOCABULARY BUILDING – WHY IS IT A GOOD THING?

There is an article posted on this webpage about the importance of reading to your baby. Sometimes people wonder why this is necessary, since an infant doesn't understand what you are reading.

Think about how children learn language. They learn, because parents and grandparents, siblings, babysitters, friends and strangers all talk to them. The more words they hear, the more words they learn. When we talk with children we have about 5000 words that we commonly use and approximately 5000 more that we use somewhat less often. However, when we read books to our children, they hear some less common words and, when we read the book multiple times, those words and their meanings become part of the child's understanding and vocabulary.

One of the best predictors of school success is the size of a child's vocabulary. A child needs a good vocabulary – the bigger the better – to be able to understand a word she sees in print (if a child's never heard it, it's hard to understand it) and a child can't write a word he's never heard.

Children acquire a large vocabulary from listening and from having conversations, hearing stories, learning poetry, singing songs, and playing the kinds of "car games" that you played as a child. As they learn words they also begin to understand the rhythm and flow of words; they develop the foundations for learning about syllabication; they become attuned to words that rhyme and words that begin the same way; they hear the sounds of the letters that make up the words. All this is important because these things are the foundations of phonemic awareness.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in words. This awareness improves children's ability to read, comprehend, and spell. Formal teaching of phonemic awareness is typically done in kindergarten, but the foundations for understanding begin with reading to your baby and continuing to read aloud as long as your child will listen. In our family, one of our Christmas traditions was to gather together as a family and read Christmas stories aloud, even when our children were teenagers.

A study done by the U.S. Department of Education found that children who were read to at least 3 times a week had significantly greater phonemic awareness upon entering kindergarten than children who were read to less often.

When reading to children, who are 3, 4 and 5 years old, it is important that you ask questions as you read, encourage your child to make predictions, point out parts of the illustrations, and prompt your child to "read". Don't do so much that that you make it seem like a "lesson" and hinder the flow, and thus the enjoyment, of the story. Do just enough to stimulate interest and enjoyment. And, don't forget the poems, songs, games, and conversation! The results will be impressive!