

The Big 5 *The Big Picture*



Oral Language and Vocabulary

1. Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing
2. Background Knowledge
3. Book Knowledge and Print Concepts
4. **Oral Language and Vocabulary**
5. Phonological Awareness

Alix, a home visitor, sees Vivian and Abi developing their oral language and vocabulary skills by interacting with their parents. Nine-month-old Vivian and her father babble back and forth at each other. Vivian beams. She is proud to be “talking” with Papa. Three-year-old Abi uses a whisk to stir in an empty bowl. She says, “I stir with my big spoon.” Her mother says, “That’s a whisk. It’s a lot like a spoon but made from pieces of wire. Can you say ‘whisk’?” Abi feels the wires and says, “Whisk! It’s a whisk made of wire.” Pointing at the spoon, Abi continues, “That’s a spoon.”



What is Oral Language and Vocabulary?

Oral Language and Vocabulary refer to all aspects of spoken language skills. This includes children's growing and diverse vocabulary of new and varied words.

Oral language development is connected to children's cognition (thinking skills) in many important ways. As children's vocabularies increase, for example, children demonstrate specific cognitive skills such as classification (e.g., the ability to recognize the difference between big and little spoons) and the ability to categorize (e.g., ants and beetles are examples of bugs).



The ability to understand, process, and then use, spoken language includes:

- ▶ Interactive language skills, such as gesturing or taking turns while speaking and listening
- ▶ Social language that allows children to interact with others, such as playing with others or following directions
- ▶ Academic language, including a rich vocabulary, that allows older children to fully participate in listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities in school
- ▶ Receptive language skills—hearing and understanding the language or languages of an environment
 - ▶ Children understand more and more of the words (vocabulary) spoken in their environment
 - ▶ Children understand longer stretches of words, including stories, explanations, and descriptions
- ▶ Expressive language skills—making and using the sounds of a child's language or languages for communication—such as:
 - ▶ Babbling by infants (“ba-ba-bee-ba”) to early word attempts (“wa-wa” for “water”) to first words
 - ▶ Putting words into sensible phrases and sentences (syntax)
 - ▶ Talking at an appropriate pace and for increasing lengths of time, including telling stories and providing explanations
 - ▶ Participating in extended conversations on a single topic with many back and forth exchanges over several minutes, with both talking and listening
 - ▶ Using an increasingly large and varied vocabulary, with more and more words, and words that are longer, more complex, and more unusual
 - ▶ Knowing how to match the language to the situation, including code switching between languages for dual language learners (DLLs)



Children in poverty are at risk for having a smaller vocabulary of many fewer words than other children. A large vocabulary is important because it is the foundation for children learning to read and understanding what they read.

Why Oral Language and Vocabulary matter

- ▶ “Oral language’ is a predictor of reading ability and includes a range of skills. It refers to expressive skills, such as the ability to comprehend vocabulary, along with expressive abilities in putting words together to form grammatically appropriate phrases and sentences, and combining words together in meaningful ways” (Wasik & Newman, 2009, p. 307).



- ▶ “Spoken language and reading have much in common” (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 108). Readers recognize the printed words on the page and use their oral language knowledge to understand what the phrases, sentences, and paragraphs say.
- ▶ “Oral vocabulary is very important to reading comprehension; readers need to know the meanings of individual words to understand the text as a whole” (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013, p. 11).



How do Oral Language and Vocabulary develop?



Miguel is developing his oral language and vocabulary by having an interactive conversation with his uncle about something he really cares about—his recent visit to the doctor. Miguel and his uncle each take several turns during this part of their conversation.

Notice that Miguel's uncle asks him open-ended questions, such as "What happened?" He also responds to what Miguel has to say. For example, when Miguel says his shot hurt, his uncle warmly responds, "Oh, I'm sorry it hurt." He also introduces a new word, "painful." Miguel uses it right away. Talking with, listening to, and extending children's talk are all important ways adults can support children's oral language and vocabulary development.



Nusrat cuddles with her baby boy, Amir. She speaks with him in child-directed speech (or “motherese”)—slowly, with short phrases and exaggerated pitch. Amir responds to her words and also to her cuddles, babbling back to her the sounds he hears.

Elsa engages the children in frequent back-and-forth conversations. She also encourages the children to talk and expand on what they say.



Notice that Elsa asks open-ended questions that require a longer response from the children (“What do you notice...?” “How do you know?”). Elsa encourages the children by repeating and extending what they say (“You see a green and puffy caterpillar!”).



Young children develop oral language skills beginning before birth, as they process the language(s) of their environment, distinguishing patterns of sounds and storing individual sounds in memory. As infants, they learn about social language primarily through interacting with others—by hearing adults and older children speak to them and by using language to respond. Adults support children’s language development in daily, ordinary interactions in which adults engage children in longer and more language-rich conversations as children move through early childhood. Adults also purposefully extend children’s talk by asking questions, encouraging, and supplying new words.

Children must also be *intentionally taught* words as well. Many important words are not used frequently when speaking but are very important when reading. Adults may use children’s picture books, children’s experiences in the world, or children’s interests as sources of new words. When adults teach new words to children, they often:

- ▶ Use the new word and say what it means. “Look at the nest! A nest is where birds live. They usually make them out of straw or twigs.”
- ▶ Show a picture of the word or act out the word.
- ▶ Ask the child to say the word.
- ▶ Talk about the word, including words that are similar and different. “Yes, a nest is like a bed for birds.”
- ▶ Use the word often. “Are you taking a nap in a nest? No, your bed—that’s right, you’re not a bird!”



Hearing
new
language



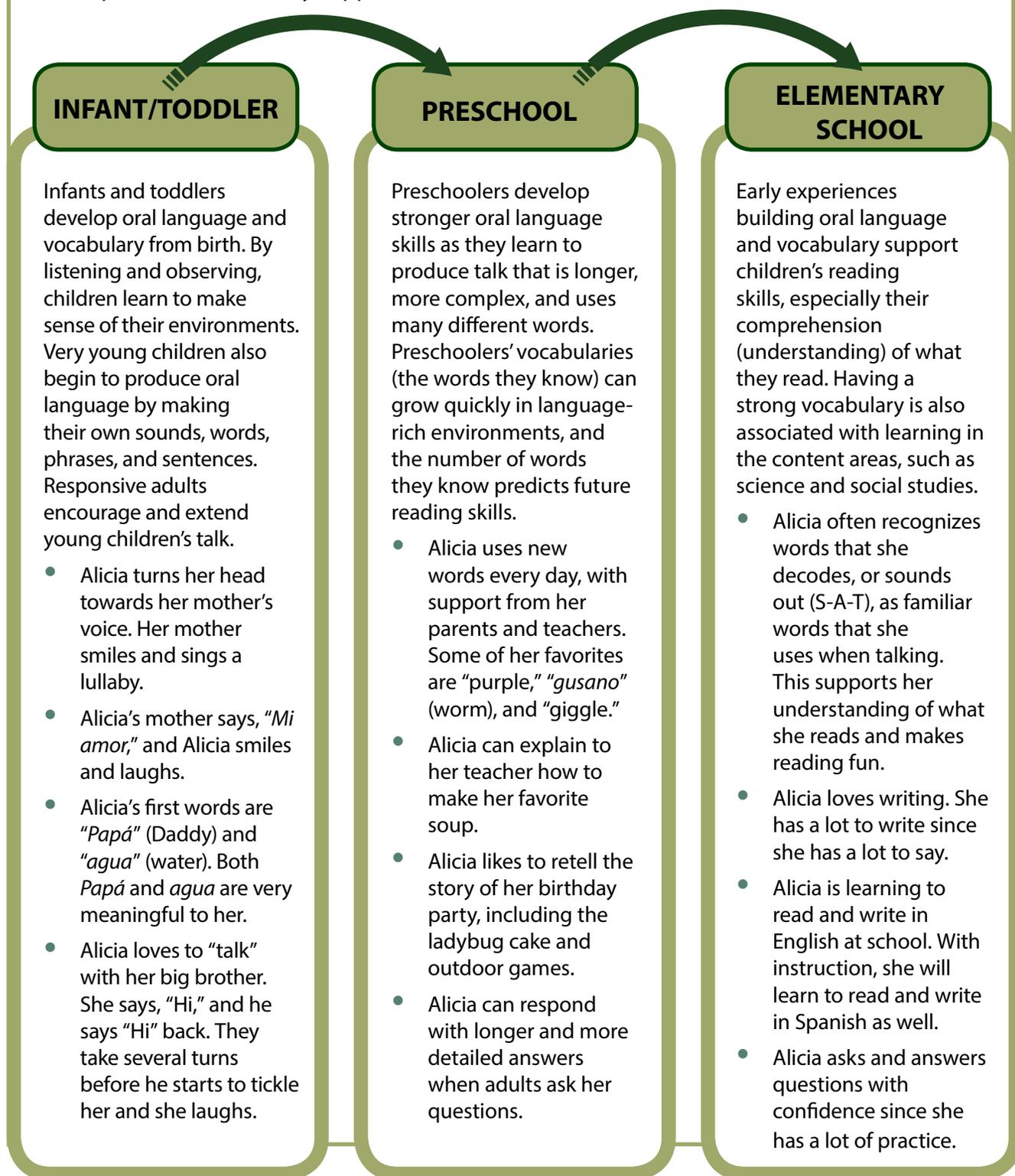
Using
new
language



Expanding
on new
language



Alicia develops oral language and vocabulary throughout her early childhood, and this knowledge directly supports her school readiness. Alicia, a DLL, is learning Spanish and English at home and English at school. She will develop skills in each language based on how each language is used with her and how she uses each language. Here we see how the skills she develops from birth directly support her school readiness.



INFANT/TODDLER

Infants and toddlers develop oral language and vocabulary from birth. By listening and observing, children learn to make sense of their environments. Very young children also begin to produce oral language by making their own sounds, words, phrases, and sentences. Responsive adults encourage and extend young children's talk.

- Alicia turns her head towards her mother's voice. Her mother smiles and sings a lullaby.
- Alicia's mother says, "*Mi amor*," and Alicia smiles and laughs.
- Alicia's first words are "*Papá*" (Daddy) and "*agua*" (water). Both *Papá* and *agua* are very meaningful to her.
- Alicia loves to "talk" with her big brother. She says, "Hi," and he says "Hi" back. They take several turns before he starts to tickle her and she laughs.

PRESCHOOL

Preschoolers develop stronger oral language skills as they learn to produce talk that is longer, more complex, and uses many different words. Preschoolers' vocabularies (the words they know) can grow quickly in language-rich environments, and the number of words they know predicts future reading skills.

- Alicia uses new words every day, with support from her parents and teachers. Some of her favorites are "purple," "*gusano*" (worm), and "giggle."
- Alicia can explain to her teacher how to make her favorite soup.
- Alicia likes to retell the story of her birthday party, including the ladybug cake and outdoor games.
- Alicia can respond with longer and more detailed answers when adults ask her questions.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Early experiences building oral language and vocabulary support children's reading skills, especially their comprehension (understanding) of what they read. Having a strong vocabulary is also associated with learning in the content areas, such as science and social studies.

- Alicia often recognizes words that she decodes, or sounds out (S-A-T), as familiar words that she uses when talking. This supports her understanding of what she reads and makes reading fun.
- Alicia loves writing. She has a lot to write since she has a lot to say.
- Alicia is learning to read and write in English at school. With instruction, she will learn to read and write in Spanish as well.
- Alicia asks and answers questions with confidence since she has a lot of practice.

How do Oral Language and Vocabulary develop in Dual Language Learners?

Dual language learners (DLLs) develop early language and vocabulary skills in two or more languages. When children have strong language models, they can develop strong language skills in more than one language—from birth!

- ▶ Remember that DLLs likely know many more words overall than they know in English. Only a portion of their vocabulary is in English.
- ▶ Understand that most DLLs know some words and ideas in only one of their languages. For example, they may know many words about bath time only in their home language and many words about circle time only in English.
- ▶ Learning a new word (or label) in English for a word they already know in their home language is much easier for most DLLs than learning a brand new word. Their understanding of the concept supports their word learning in English.
- ▶ Use your knowledge of the home language to help DLLs learn new English words. If you are a speaker of the children's home language, help them connect English versions of words to words in their home language.
- ▶ Use visuals and picture charts to help children connect words to images. For example, use pictures to illustrate schedules, lists, recipes, or other writing.
- ▶ Encourage children to use props or act out new words. This is fun for all! For example, Ms. Amy is helping Lin learn the names of animals in English.
 - ▶ First, Ms. Amy holds up a picture of an animal and says its name in English.
 - ▶ Then, Ms. Amy asks Lin to say the animal's name in English and they act it out together.
 - ▶ Next, Lin acts out an animal and then tells Ms. Amy its name.
 - ▶ Finally, Lin acts out an animal, says its name, and talks about the animal—what it looks like and what it likes to do.



Oral Language, dual language learners, and culture

Children learn to talk within their families, cultures, and communities. Based on their experiences, children develop *funds of knowledge* about how to use language. Funds of knowledge is a way of thinking about the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that children have developed based on their experiences with their families (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

- ▶ Different families and cultures value different ways of talking.
 - ▶ Some families may encourage children to talk, ask many questions, and have conversations with adults.
 - ▶ Other families may talk less often or expect children to speak very little. They may value cooperation or working together more than talking.
 - ▶ Some children may talk more or less than is common in their families or cultures.
- ▶ Ways of talking may vary across cultures, such as:
 - ▶ When should children speak (and not speak)—at meals, in the car, whenever they have something to say, or only when asked a question?
 - ▶ With whom should children speak—only with people they know well, anyone, adults, other children, men, women?
 - ▶ For how long should children speak—as little as necessary to communicate a point, as long as possible?
 - ▶ How should children tell a story—short and to the point, long and detailed, another way?



Once trusting relationships are established between teachers, caregivers, and family members, everyone can discuss their goals for children’s oral language skills. These discussions, paired with observations of each child, can help teachers and caregivers plan oral language experiences that build on and extend children’s existing knowledge and skills.

Alicia and Xiao are preschoolers who have both developed oral language within their cultures and families, in a way that is consistent with their temperaments. Xiao's oral language is expressed mostly in Chinese, his home language.

Xiao enjoys listening to his father but is not in the habit of talking a great deal. Xiao's teacher may need to be especially responsive to Xiao to support him in seeing the classroom as a place where talking is encouraged. Alicia, however, talks a lot. She may need some support with conversational skills like waiting one's turn to speak.

Alicia

I like to make up shows for my family. I sing and dance and tell jokes and stories.

Do you want to hear what I did yesterday? I woke up really early and my parents weren't even awake! I jumped on them, but they wanted to sleep. So I went to the living room and . . .



Xiao

I like to talk with my father about his job as a chef. He tells me all about the different foods and sometimes shows me how to make things. Sometimes I ask a question.

Yesterday, I helped my father cook lunch. I helped make the wrappers and we folded the meat inside the dough.



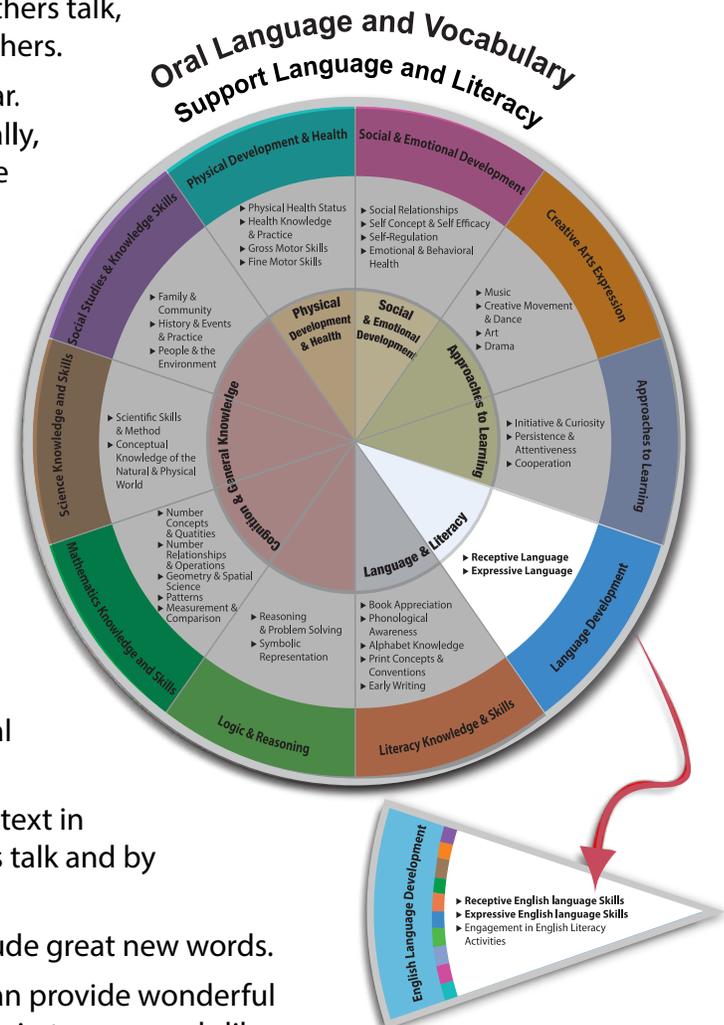
Supporting Oral Language and Vocabulary

Children learn oral language by hearing others talk, by interacting, and then by talking with others.

- ▶ Infants babble the sounds they hear. When adults respond enthusiastically, infants are encouraged to use more sounds.
- ▶ Toddlers begin to use words, phrases, and sentences by drawing from the words they hear others use. Toddlers deepen their language skills when adults encourage them to talk more.
- ▶ Preschoolers talk for longer periods of time about things that are important to them. With support and encouragement, they can use a greater variety of words and talk across more conversational turns.

Children learn new words, and the context in which they are used, by hearing others talk and by speaking with with them.

- ▶ Children’s picture books often include great new words.
- ▶ Science and social studies topics can provide wonderful words. Even young children can begin to use words like “observe” or “community.”
- ▶ Children learn many words simply by hearing them used repeatedly. They learn other words when adults intentionally teach them these words.
- ▶ DLLs should be supported in making connections between new English words and words they already know in their home language.
- ▶ Visuals, gestures, and motions help all children, including DLLs, to learn new words.
- ▶ Children will master new words when adults ask them to repeat them, celebrate when they use them, and repeatedly use these new words during different activities and throughout the year.



Oral Language and Vocabulary in action for infants and toddlers

Jennifer supports her toddlers to develop language by using language with them and responding to their own early vocalizations, (including babbles). She may respond by looking at a child, babbling back to him, talking, singing, picking him up, or bringing him something to play with or look at. She looks to the children's cues, including their language cues (what they say and how they say it), to help guide her interactions.

Jennifer notices that snack and meal time are good times to speak with her toddlers. She uses *self-talk* by describing her actions to the children. For example, she will say, "I am making your bottle now," or "I am going to spread this jam on your bread." She also uses *parallel talk* to describe what the children are doing. For example, she might say, "Tom, you enjoy your bread. You are tearing the crust right off!"

Jennifer also intentionally repeats what children say. When Kaleb says, "I eat!" Jennifer says, "Yes, you are eating, Kaleb. What are you eating?" Kaleb responds by holding up a strawberry. "A big, red strawberry!" says Jennifer. She is following Kaleb's cues.

Jennifer is supporting the children's oral language and vocabulary development. They are hearing talk about what they are seeing and doing—which helps them understand the language they hear. Jennifer provides Tom with the word "crust" when he tears the crust off the bread. She also asks him to help her serve the bread and shows him what a whole "loaf" looks like. Tom won't use these new words yet, but with Jennifer's support he is learning information about his world that interests him greatly. Jennifer also shares books about bread with him, reminding him as she reads that he eats bread. These conversations about bread and eating extend across several days.



Oral Language and Vocabulary in action for preschoolers

Lola loves to cook, and she notices that her preschoolers all mention eating bread at home. She decides to explore bread and bread-making with the children. Lola begins by reading *Bread, Bread, Bread* by Ann Morris. She decides that they will make bread as a classroom project. This project will include several activities, many of which will support oral language and vocabulary development.



- In small groups, Lola and the children have conversations about bread. Lola asks the children questions: What kind of bread do you like to eat? What other foods do you eat bread with? How do you think bread is made?
- Lola creates a basic recipe for making bread, which she posts. The recipe includes pictures. Lola talks through each step with the children, talking about what they will do. She includes a list of ingredients in the children's home languages.
- The children make bread together and she talks about what they are doing at each step.
- During breaks in the cooking process (when the bread rises, bakes, and cools), Lola meets with the children in small groups. She asks the children questions: What have we done so far to make the bread? What did it feel like? What do you think we will do next?
- When the bread is baked, the children brainstorm many different words (in a few different languages) describing the taste of the bread. The words include "delicious," "yummy," "good," "warm," and "buttery."

Lola and the children talk about the experience making the bread over the next few days. Some children re-enact making the bread using playdough—talking through what they are doing. Some children draw pictures and make emergent writing about the experience. Lola tells families about the experience and encourages them to ask the children questions (in their home language). Some families make bread at home as well!

References for Oral Language and Vocabulary

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