How Children Learn New Vocabulary

0-12 months

Children of this age communicate needs and feelings by crying, babbling, gurgling, and squealing. By practicing and developing speech sounds through babbling (e.g., baba,mama) babies go on to understand and say their first words at about 1 year.

1-2 Years

Children of this age continue to enjoy babbling and are developing their vocabulary. By 2 years of age children generally have a spoken vocabulary of more than 50 words. Most of these words will be nouns with a small vocabulary of verbs e.g. sleeping, walking. The pronunciation of these words may not yet be clear. Children of this age will be able to understand a wider range of nouns and verbs than they can say. Children will also be starting to use personal pronouns e.g. I, my and mine.

2-3 Years

Between 2-3 years, a child’s spoken vocabulary grows considerably and can be up to 1000 words.

Children will understand and use more verbs, and will start understanding prepositions, e.g., in/on and pronouns, e.g., he/she, you/your and we.

3-4 Years

Children of this age start using joining words such as ‘and’ and ‘because’. Children will also be asking lots of questions e.g. Why? What? Where? They will start to use adjectives of colour and size, further prepositions e.g. ‘under’ and ‘next to’ and more pronouns e.g., his/hers, they/theirs, him/her, ours.

4-5 Years

At this point a child will:

* Understand that words can be put into groups and can give common examples e.g. animals: dog, cat, horse…
* Understands a range of related words to describe concepts e.g. soon, early and late, soft, hard and smooth
* Can clap the correct number of syllables in words.
* Can find words beginning with the same sound in listening activities, e.g. ‘can you find me something that starts with a ‘t’?’
* Children of this age can use a range of vocabulary including adjectives and adverbs.

5-7 Years

At this point a child will be able to:

* Compare words, the way they look, sound or mean e.g. there are two words ‘sea’ at the beach, and you ‘see’ with your eyes.
* Talk about objects, describing their size, shape, category, function, etc.
* Use newly learnt words in a specific and appropriate way e.g. “Dad, you know when you have lots of lions together it is called a pride of lions.”

7-9 Years

At this point a child will:

* Use a range of words related to time and measurement e.g. century, calendar, breadth.
* Use a wide range of verbs to express their thoughts, or about cause and effect e.g. “I wonder what she’s thinking”, or “If we run we should get there on time but we might arrive late.”
* Join in discussions about an activity using topic vocabulary e.g. “I saw some chicken eggs hatching in the incubator on the farm last Friday.”
* Begin to extend understanding and use of vocabulary linked to expressing emotion.

9-11 years

At this stage a child can:

* Make choices from a wide and varied vocabulary e.g. ‘leap’ instead of ‘jump’, ‘terrified’ instead of ‘frightened’
* Use sophisticated words but the meaning might not always be accurate e.g. “My bedroom was meticulous.”
* Know that words can have two meanings and can use them appropriately. Can’t always explain how they are linked e.g. ‘hard’ (rigid object and tough person)
* Developing a wider range of vocabulary linked to emotion and accurately describing the emotions of themselves and others

11-14 Years

At this level a child will:

* Still be challenged by some instruction words, e.g. modify, generate, consider.
* Use patterns in words (e.g. affixes), e.g. –able, -esque, un-, dis- to aid understanding.
* Use ‘academic words’ when prompted in all formal tasks, e.g. agitated, arrogant, excruciating. They may find higher level verbs hard to understand, e.g. estimate, research.
* Be able to confidently explain the meaning of subject words and words with multiple meanings.
* Understand some words have multiple meanings, e.g. hot, bright.
* Can explain the meaning of new vocabulary using a dictionary style definition, e.g. describing ‘brave’ as ‘someone who shows courage, even in a dangerous situation’ rather than saying ‘they’re not scared’
* Use more interesting vocabulary when prompted, e.g. ‘worried’ becomes ‘anxious’.

14+ Years

At this level, young people will:

* Know what more complex instruction words are asking them to do: evaluate, find themes, compile.
* Will continue to learn vocabulary for specific topics or specialisms.
* Use a range of descriptive words and expressions; e.g. swaggered, noxious, meandered
* They may still be challenged by some instruction words, e.g. modify, generate, consider.
* Uses the patterns in words (e.g. affixes), e.g. –able, -esque, un-, dis- to aid understanding.
* Uses ‘academic words’ when prompted in all formal tasks, e.g. ‘condensation’ instead of ‘dripping’.
* Can confidently explain the meaning of subject words and words with multiple meanings