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# What Parents Can Do at Home to Help Students With Vocabulary





Very young children learn thousands of words just by listening to people around them. As children begin to talk, they learn even more words through everyday conversations with parents and other adults. And when they learn to read, they encounter a whole world of words in books and other reading. Increasing the number of words a child recognizes and uses is important at any age. That's because a strong vocabulary helps with reading, writing, speaking and listening. And those skills help your child do well in every school subject—and throughout life.

This booklet provides specific, easy-to-implement ideas you can use at home to build your child's vocabulary. The suggestions can help your child develop a love for words, carry on conversations and understand words in books and other reading materials. The tips come from parents, experienced teachers and specialists who work every day with students who want to expand their vocabularies.

# Help Your Child Use Context to Understand New Words

The very best way to build a strong/large vocabulary is by reading. But sometimes, your child will encounter an unfamiliar word. Help your student learn to use the context around the word to figure out what the word means. Sometimes, writers make it easy—they define a new word almost as soon as they use it. Have your child look at:

- **Punctuation.** This can be a clue. A colon (:) is usually a signal that the author is going to explain a word mentioned earlier in the sentence. Here's an example:  
*In the microscope we saw an amoeba: a tiny one-celled organism that lives in ponds and streams.*
- **Key words.** Phrases such as "that is," "for example" or "for instance" let readers know that more information follows.  
*He was interested in becoming a paleontologist; that is, a scientist who studies fossils.*
- **Surrounding sentences.** A new word isn't always defined clearly, but it's often possible to get a pretty good idea of what the word means. For example, your child may not know the meaning of the word *loquacious*. But by reading what comes next, it may be possible to figure it out.  
*Brian was loquacious. He started talking the minute he woke up in the morning. He talked to his friend Jose as they walked to school. In class, Mrs. Johnson often had to remind him that he had to give others a chance to answer questions and to take part in discussions. And when there wasn't anyone around to talk to, Brian talked to himself!*  
It's clear from this example that *loquacious* means *talkative*.

# Challenge Your Child to Learn and Use Synonyms and Antonyms

Most people use many of the same words every day. One of the best ways to expand vocabulary is to look for *synonyms* (words that have the same or almost the same meaning) and *antonyms* (words that mean the opposite).

For example, instead of saying something is *large*, your child could say it's *colossal* or *gigantic* or even *stupendous*. It's also the antonym of *tiny*, *infinitesimal* or *microscopic*. An online thesaurus is one of the best reference tools for children who want to improve their vocabulary because it contains both synonyms and antonyms.

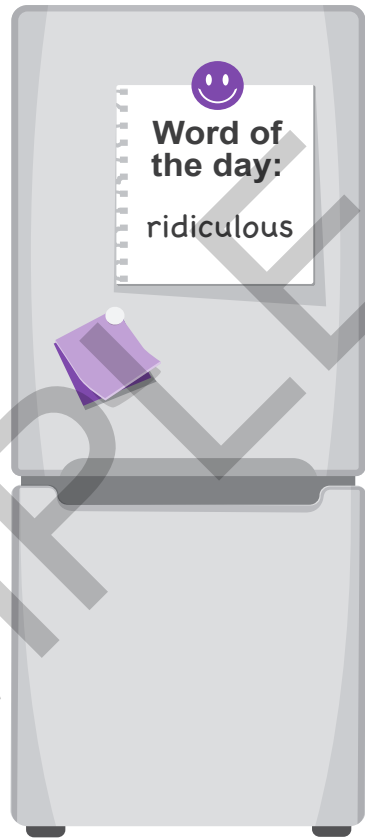
Here's a list of synonyms and antonyms for familiar words. Have your child add other words to this list:

Synonyms	Antonyms
Little—Tiny	Up—Down
Old—Ancient	Happy—Sad
Stop—Halt	Sick—Well
Run—Jog	Bright—Dim
Ask—Request	Shiny—Dull
Talk—Speak	Heavy—Light

One way to encourage the use of synonyms and antonyms is by playing a word game. You give a word and ask your child to give you a synonym (or an antonym). Then switch places.

## Pick a Word of the Day

Have family members take turns bringing a new word to dinner. Each person should be prepared to tell family members what the word means and then use it in a sentence. Post the words on the refrigerator or anywhere else they'll be in plain sight. Challenge family members to use the new words three times in conversations the next day.



## Make a Dictionary

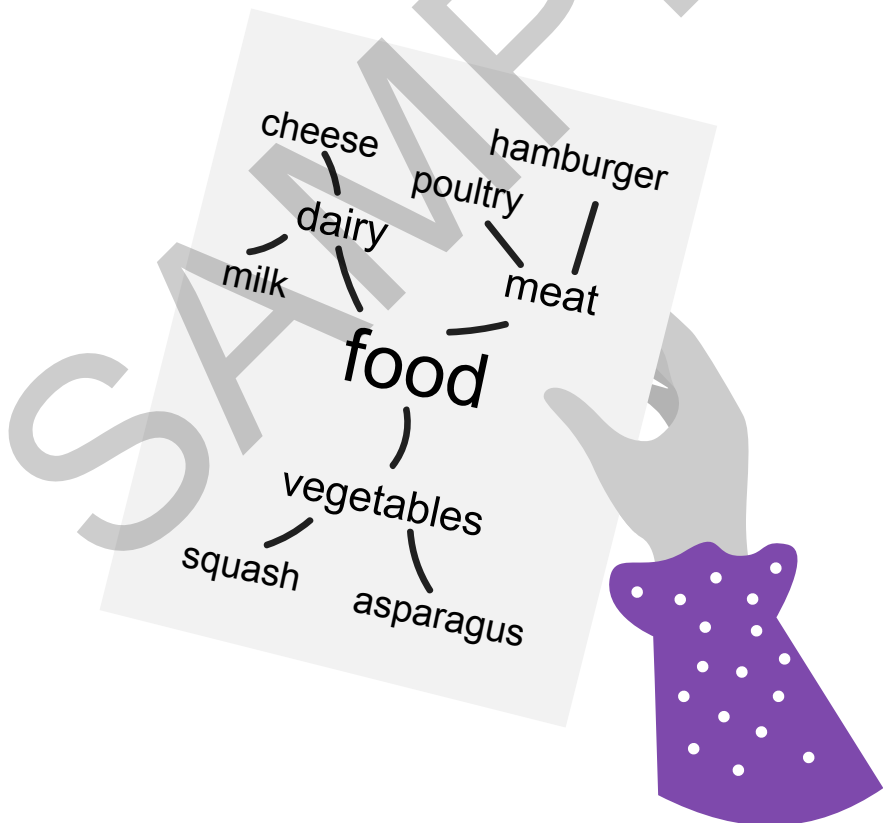
Help your child create a homemade dictionary with one page for each letter of the alphabet. When your child finds a new word—a spelling word, a vocabulary word or a word from a book—suggest adding it and its definition to the dictionary. Put the pages in a three-ring binder so it's easy to keep adding words.

## Make a Word Web

Creating a word web is a great way to boost your child's vocabulary. Choose a word—for example, *food*. Write it in the center of a piece of paper.

Together, think of other words that tell more about the word *food*. Your child might think of food groups—*vegetables*, *dairy*, *meat*. Next, brainstorm lists of words that fit in those groups: *squash* and *asparagus* for vegetables, *poultry* and *hamburger* for meat, etc. List words that describe ways food is prepared (*boiled*, *sliced*, *grilled*) and ways it tastes (*creamy*, *spicy*, *tangy*).

Have your child take all those words and create a word web by writing them on the paper and showing how they connect to the main word.



# Use Index Cards to Learn New Words

**W**hen your child has to learn new words, try using a method teachers recommend. Have your child:

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- 1. Write each new word** on an index card. These cards are small, so they're easy for your child to tuck into a pocket or a school bag. Then it's easy to study one or two words while waiting for the school bus or for a ride to soccer practice.

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- 2. Write the definition** on the back of the card—the one that most closely fits the way the word was used when your child first saw it.

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- 3. Write an example sentence** using the word under the definition.

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- 4. Look at the word** and try to recall the definition. Then do the reverse. Put words your student knows in one stack and unknown words in another. Keep reviewing until all the words are in the "know" stack.

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- 5. Keep the cards handy.** They will make it much easier for your child to review material when test time comes around.

## Hunt for Words in the News

Choose a section of a newspaper (in print or online) and send your child on a scavenger hunt to find and underline five new and interesting words. Now talk about the words. What does your child think the words mean, based on how they are used in the story? Together, check the meanings in a dictionary. Challenge your child to use at least one of these words in conversation. Or suggest making a list of favorite words to use when it's time to write an assignment for school.



## Use Screen Time to Build Vocabulary

While watching shows or videos, have your child write down at least five unfamiliar words that crop up and try to spell them. Work together to look up the words in the dictionary and use them in a sentence.



## Put Words to Work

**M**any jobs use specialized words. Your child can learn the words that relate to a job that sounds interesting. Have your student make a list of 25 *Words I Could Use ...* as an astronaut, an electrical engineer, a clothing designer, a miner, a deejay, a teacher, a race car driver, a nurse ... . Then let your child role-play a situation where the words are needed in the course of doing that job. This is a fun way to practice the correct usage of these new words.

## Make the Most of Everyday Conversations

Each conversation you have with your child is an opportunity to boost vocabulary.

Try to use words you think your child might not know, along with similar, familiar words. “That movie was *stupendous*. The whole experience was *awesome!* Let’s not *procrastinate*—delaying might cause more problems.”

You can use your child’s natural curiosity to spark conversations—about spiders, rocks, unicorns or anything that captures your student’s interest.

## Read, Read, Read!

Reading is one of the most effective ways to develop vocabulary. Expose your child to new words by choosing a wide variety of books from the library. You might check out fiction and nonfiction, fairy tales and folk tales, poems and plays. Books that take place in other countries or that feature characters from diverse backgrounds are excellent sources of new and interesting words.

Then, set aside time each day to read aloud to your child. Talk about unfamiliar words you encounter, and learn their meanings together!

## Look for Clues in Words

**M**any words in the English language come from Greek or Latin words. A child who understands roots, prefixes and suffixes can often figure out the meaning of a new word by relating it to familiar words. For instance, a child who knows that *audio* and *auditory* both come from the same Latin root (*aud—to hear*) might be able to figure out that *audible* means *capable of being heard*.

Here are some Greek and Latin roots, prefixes and suffixes that appear in many English words.

Word Part	Latin or Greek Meaning	Used in These English Words
a	(without)	asymmetrical, anonymous
ante	(before)	antecedent, antedate
cand	(glowing)	candle, candor
cred	(believe or trust)	credible, creed, credit
err	(to wander)	error, erratic
fid	(faith)	confide, fidelity
man	(hand)	manual, manufacture
min	(small)	minute, minimum
pre	(before)	prelude, precede, premonition
sta or sti	(be or stand in a place)	static, obstacle, obstinate
uni	(one)	universal, unicorn, unify
vol	(to wish)	volunteer, volition

Help your child develop a list of word parts from other languages. Knowing these parts and their meanings will be very helpful as your student advances to more challenging reading material.

# Look for Words Borrowed From Other Languages

Besides Latin and Greek, English has been enriched by many words from other languages. For example, the English word *utensil* came from combining the Latin word *utensilia* with the French word *utensile*.

Use a dictionary to find the origins of these words:

- plaza
- tornado
- spaghetti
- totem
- bronco

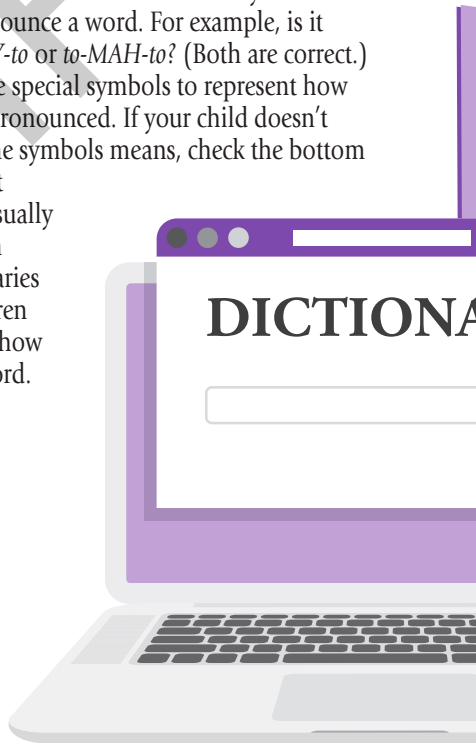
Can you think of any others?



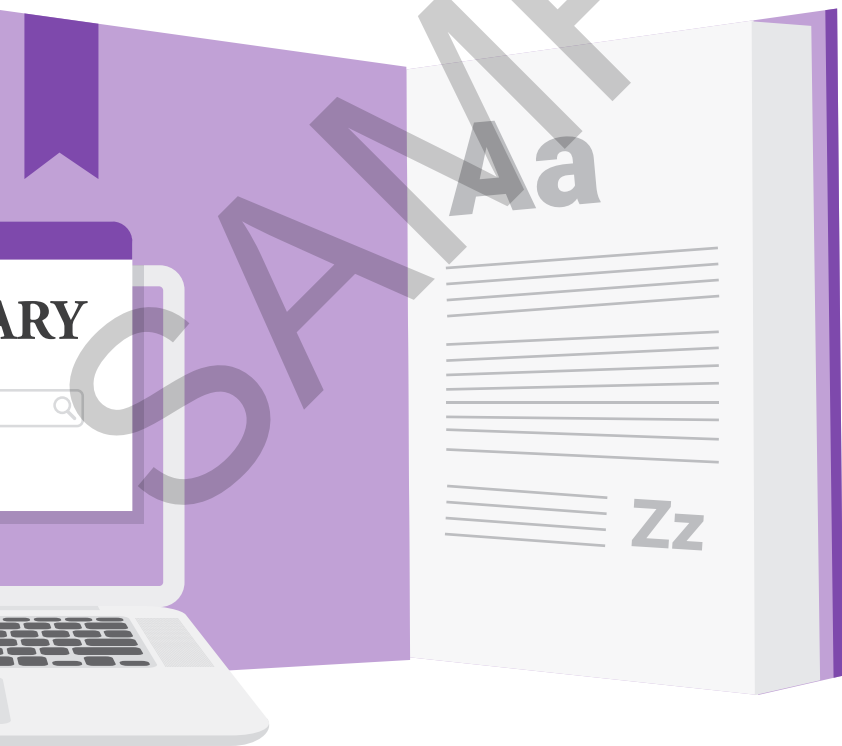
# Make Sure Your Child Knows How to Use a Dictionary

The best tool for learning the meaning of any new word is a dictionary. Make sure your child has access to a dictionary, in print or online. Then browse together and look for these things:

- **Navigation tools.** At the top of each page in a printed dictionary, you'll find the first and last word defined on the page. An online dictionary will have a search box for typing in the desired word.
- **Main entry.** Each word that is defined is listed in alphabetical order. In most dictionaries, the main entry is also in **boldface** type.
- **How to pronounce the word.** A dictionary can tell you how to pronounce a word. For example, is it correct to say *to-MAY-to* or *to-MAH-to*? (Both are correct.) Most dictionaries use special symbols to represent how different letters are pronounced. If your child doesn't know what one of the symbols means, check the bottom of the page of a print dictionary—you'll usually find a pronunciation guide there. Dictionaries for very young children do not always show how to pronounce the word.



- **The part of speech.** The dictionary indicates the part of speech:
  - noun      ○ verb      ○ pronoun      ○ adverb
  - adjective   ○ preposition   ○ conjunction   ○ interjectionMany words can be used as more than one part of speech. If that is the case, the dictionary will include examples of each.
- **Definition.** If there are several meanings for a word, each definition will be numbered.
- **Example sentences.** These show how a word may be used in a sentence.
- **Syllable structure.** The dictionary shows how to divide a word into syllables. In many dictionaries, the main entry will place small dots or spaces between the syllables (*let ter*).



## See How Words Are Related

**M**any words are built on the same base. For example, the word *act* is also part of words like *actor*, *react*, *activity* and *action*. Help your child see how each of these words is related to the meaning of the word *act*.



Often, prefixes and suffixes are used to create related words. For example, the verb *govern* becomes a noun by adding the suffix *-ment* (*government*). Have your child make these verbs into related nouns:

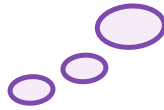
- enjoy (enjoyment)
- elect (election)
- perform (performance)

Sometimes, the word changes its spelling slightly (*decide* becomes *decision*). But it is still easy to tell that the two words are related.



The more words you know, the more clearly and powerfully you will think ... and the more ideas you will invite into your mind.

—Wilfred Funk



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