

Words and Your Child's Brain
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A word is far from something simple. In reality, a word is a concept; a word is a symbol. It has a speech form "CAT" that represents a group of characteristics which you have learned to recognize as a very young child: *four legs, whiskers, furry and says, "meow."* Each of these features or characteristics is stored in your child's brain for reference purposes to compare with other things that he or she learns: *four legs, furry and says 'woof.'* So why are words so important to a child's development?

Each word is encoded along with its descriptive information in a giant network system within the brain. The more features and characteristics added to the network, the more complex your child's language is likely to become. Consider that each new word gets stored in a card catalogue that allows its features to be cross-referenced with information on other cards in the brain's library. The storage system represents both short and long-term memory, which can be retrieved to label objects, actions and people he/she sees.

There is a period of time during which a child's vocabulary develops rapidly. Between 24 and 36 months, hundreds of words are learned and stored for future reference. By 5 or 6 years of age, children's total vocabulary has increased to around 15,000 words. It is interesting to note that most of the words that children acquire during this period of time are names for people and things. Verbs tend to develop later because they describe relationships between people and objects. In middle childhood, children continue to add words to their working vocabulary at the rate of 5,000 to 10,000 words a year.

Children act as little scientists during this period of rapid word development. They learn words within natural contexts. They experience what words mean and how words are used by others. Research has shown that children who have parents who talk to, read to and play with them frequently have a much larger working vocabulary, develop more complex sentences and learn to read more easily. So language development is all about exposure and experience and home is an important language learning laboratory!

Words actually change a child's brain in terms of its operation. Words change the neurological functioning of the brain making your child's thinking and reasoning more complex and abstract. Information in the brain then creates a highway of aisles between the stacks of information. The greater amount of information embedded or stored, the more complex the brain's highway system will become.

So remember, a word is not just a word. It is descriptive information that is stored in different parts of the brain. Every time your child learns a new word through talking or reading he or she gets smarter. Words are used to express ideas and feelings. As your child's language becomes more complex, the better his problem solving and reasoning skills. Children think in words by means of words. If you want to help your child become smarter talk about words. Talk about talking. Talk about reading and talk about thinking. Becoming smart is all about learning new words...lots of them. School success is based on language, so is IQ.

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