

# Word Up

Boosting your child's vocabulary now will help her read better later. Strike up a conversation—today!

BY PORTER SHIMER



Remember the days when you hung on your child's every adorable new word, even when she was calling an apple an "abbo" and a vacuum a "baccu?" As her language skills started to emerge, you probably were full of encouragement and praise. "But around age 4, when children can speak well enough to communicate what they need and want, many parents tend to shift their emphasis away from language to other skills like writing and counting," says Bob McMurray, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City.

Preschoolers need to learn those things, of course, but there's no good reason to stop paying attention to your child's verbal skills now. New research suggests that the size of a child's vocabulary at 4 and 5 is one of the factors that helps determine how good his reading-comprehension skills will be later in elementary school. To keep the verbal gusto going, try these great—or maybe we should say stupendous—ideas from our language experts.

## BE A DRAMA QUEEN

Acting out words in a storybook or in real-life conversations can help a child remember what they mean, according to a recent Harvard University review of educational research. "You might say, 'I'm so exhausted,' with a huge yawn or demonstrate what shrugged means by shrugging your shoulders," suggests review author Wendy Mages. In fact, pretend play is a fabulous way to expose kids to all sorts of new vocabulary.

"Whether you're playing doctor, restaurant, or fairy princess with your child, take the opportunity to incorporate unfamiliar words that are associated with those roles—like stethoscope, reservation, or royalty—into the dialogue," says Mages.

## DROP A COUPLE OF HINTS

When your preschooler asks you what a word means, resist the temptation to automatically tell him. "He's more likely to remember the definition if you help him figure it out for himself," says Dr. McMurray. For instance, if gargantuan is the word in question, tell him that an elephant or a dinosaur is gargantuan and see if he comes up with the meaning on his own. Another good tactic: "To help kids understand what something is, it's often helpful to tell them what it isn't," says Philip Dale, Ph.D., editor of the *Journal of Child Language*. "So you could say, 'Look at the gargantuan elephant, not the tiny mouse.'"

★ *The typical 4- or 5-year-old learns ten to 15 words daily, so he's up to 10,000 by the time he's in first grade.*