

ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY



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INTRODUCTION TO ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

Oral language and vocabulary includes children’s spoken language knowledge and skill—both speaking (or “expressive” language skills)—and listening (or “receptive” language skills). Children recognize the sounds of the languages they hear and use as a growing vocabulary of new and varied words. Children gain strong language skills by interacting with adults and older peers who use language with them and support children’s own language use. Since children learn and develop the languages they hear and use, they can develop early language and vocabulary skills in more than one language. This document shares the role that languages and culture play in children’s oral language and vocabulary development.

Young children show they are developing oral language when they

- communicate their needs through crying or smiling;
- babble and coo;
- say their first words;
- learn and use new vocabulary; and
- use phrases, sentences, and stories that become more complex over time.

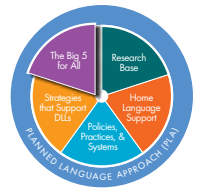
Oral language development is connected to children’s cognition (thinking skills) in many important ways. For example, as children’s vocabularies increase, they demonstrate specific cognitive skills such as classification (e.g., the ability to recognize the difference between big and little spoons) and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

Oral language and vocabulary abilities involve understanding, processing, and using spoken language, including the following:

- Interactive language skills, such as gesturing or taking turns while speaking and listening
- Social language that allows children to interact with others, such as when they play with peers and siblings or follow 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, for example:
 - 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



Code switching (also called language mixing) is the “use of elements from two languages in the same utterance or in the same stretch of conversation.”^(8, p. 88)



- Using an increasingly large and varied vocabulary, with words that are longer and more unusual
- Knowing how to match the language to the situation, including code switching between languages for children who are dual language learners (DLLs)

Just like the other Big 5 topics, oral language and vocabulary should be part of the curriculum— supported every day, throughout the day. These key literacy skills are addressed in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, which is fully described in the next section. Education staff can plan experiences or capitalize on teachable moments to help children develop their oral language and vocabulary skills. Staff also work with families so they can teach these skills at home, no matter what language they speak. Professional development opportunities should help staff build children’s knowledge and engage families. In other words, supporting oral language and vocabulary is part of a coordinated approach across the whole program to encourage each child’s receptive, expressive, and vocabulary skills. A coordinated approach also ensures the full and effective participation of children who are dual language learners (DLLs) and their families.

“Dual language learner means a child who is acquiring two or more languages at the same time, or a child who is learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language.” Head Start Program Performance Standards, Part 1305 -& 1305.2 Terms

CONNECTING EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS AND THE HEAD START EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK: AGES BIRTH TO FIVE

Head Start and Early Head Start programs are required to implement program and teaching practices that are aligned with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (HSELOF) and the state’s early learning and development standards (ELDS). Since they are key literacy skills, oral language and vocabulary are incorporated into state ELDS and the HSELOF. This resource will show where the HSELOF addresses oral language and vocabulary.

For infants and toddlers, the goals associated with oral language and vocabulary appear in the Language and Communication domain and three sub-domains: 1) Attending and Understanding; 2) Communicating and Speaking; and 3) Vocabulary. Find the primary goals that address these skills below.

Attending and Understanding

- IT-LC 1. Child attends to, understands, and responds to communication and language from others.
- IT-LC 2. Child learns from communication and language experiences with others.



Infant/Toddler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

Attending and Understanding

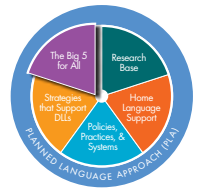
Communicating and Speaking

Vocabulary

Emergent Literacy

Goals for Sub-Domain: Attending and Understanding

- Goal IT-LC 1. Child attends to, understands, and responds to communication and language from others.
- Goal IT-LC 2. Child learns from communication and language experiences with others.



Communicating and Speaking

- IT-LC 3. Child communicates needs and wants non-verbally and by using language.
- IT-LC 4. Child uses non-verbal communication and language to engage others in interaction.
- IT-LC 5. Child uses increasingly complex language in conversation with others.
- IT-LC 6. Child initiates non-verbal communication and language to learn and gain information.



Infant/Toddler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

Attending and Understanding **Communicating and Speaking** Vocabulary Emergent Literacy

Goals for Sub-Domain: Communicating and Speaking

- Goal IT-LC 3. Child communicates needs and wants non-verbally and by using language.
- Goal IT-LC 4. Child uses non-verbal communication and language to engage others in interaction.
- Goal IT-LC 5. Child uses increasingly complex language in conversation with others.
- Goal IT-LC 6. Child initiates non-verbal communication and language to learn and gain information.

Vocabulary

- IT-LC 7. Child understands an increasing number of words used in communication with others.
- IT-LC 8. Child uses an increasing number of words in communication and conversation with others.



Infant/Toddler Language and Communication Sub-Domains

Attending and Understanding Communicating and Speaking **Vocabulary** Emergent Literacy

Goals for Sub-Domain: Vocabulary

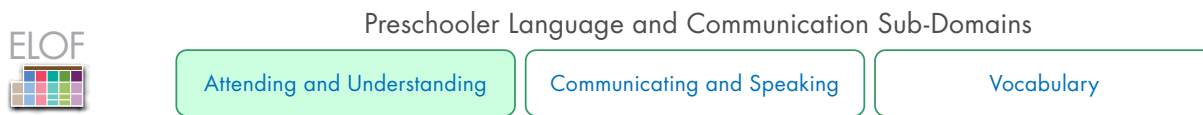
- Goal IT-LC 7. Child understands an increasing number of words used in communication with others.
- Goal IT-LC 8. Child uses an increasing number of words in communication and conversation with others.



For preschoolers, all goals associated with oral language and vocabulary appear in the Language and Communication domain and three sub-domains: 1) Attending and Understanding; 2) Communicating and Speaking; and 3) Vocabulary. The primary goals that address these skills are listed below.

Attending and Understanding

- P-LC 1. Child attends to communication and language from others.
- P-LC 2. Child understands and responds to increasingly complex communication and language from others.

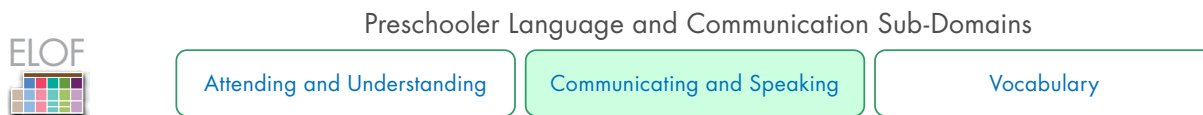


Goals for Sub-Domain: Attending and Understanding

- Goal P-LC 1. Child attends to communication and language from others.
- Goal P-LC 2. Child understands and responds to increasingly complex communication and language from others.

Communicating and Speaking

- P-LC 3. Child varies the amount of information provided to meet the demands of the situation.
- P-LC 4. Child understands, follows, and uses appropriate social and conversational rules.
- P-LC 5. Child expresses self in increasingly long, detailed, and sophisticated ways.

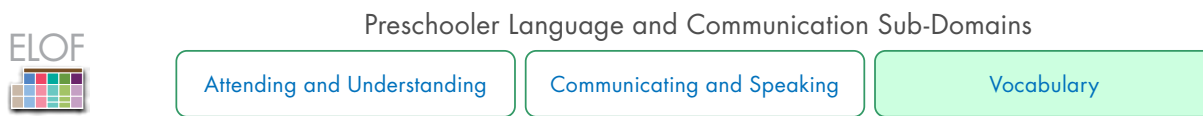


Goals for Sub-Domain: Communicating and Speaking

- Goal P-LC 3. Child varies the amount of information provided to meet the demands of the situation.
- Goal P-LC 4. Child understands, follows, and uses appropriate social and conversational rules.
- Goal P-LC 5. Child expresses self in increasingly long, detailed, and sophisticated ways.

Vocabulary

- P-LC 6. Child understands and uses a wide variety of words for a variety of purposes.
- P-LC 7. Child shows understanding of word categories and relationships among words.



Goals for Sub-Domain: Vocabulary

- Goal P-LC 6. Child understands and uses a wide variety of words for a variety of purposes.
- Goal P-LC 7. Child shows understanding of word categories and relationships among words.



WHY ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY MATTER: UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH

Language is the foundation for communication, learning, and social interactions.² For example, consider how these six research-based principles guide language learning at home and in a group care setting.^{2,3}

1. “Children learn the words that they hear most.”

Children learn language through listening and speaking to adults and peers. Children will learn the languages that they hear the most. Using many words and many types of words in each of a child’s languages builds their vocabulary and supports their overall language development.

2. “Social interaction matters.”

Children learn not only by hearing language, but by engaging in conversations with responsive adults. Adults who engage children in conversation (whether cooing back and forth with a baby or extending talk about the afternoon’s activities with a preschooler) support their language development. Hearing words, even if presented in an interesting format like television, does not guarantee language learning will take place.

3. “Children learn words for things and events that interest them.”

Children are more likely to learn language when you talk about things they’re looking at or focused on. They also learn when you respond to their attempts to communicate, including gestures and facial expressions. Providing children with stimulating experiences, and then talking about those experiences, supports children in learning language.

4. “Children learn words best in meaningful contexts.”

Learning a new word while acting it out in an activity, or hearing the word used along with other used as part of a thematic exploration, provides children with lots of information about the new word that can help them to learn and remember it.

“Oral vocabulary is very important to reading comprehension; readers need to know the meanings of individual words to understand the text as a whole.”^(9, p. 11)

5. “Vocabulary learning and grammatical development are reciprocal processes.”

There is a relationship between vocabulary learning and grammar learning—they reinforce each other. As children use language and new words, they learn how words fit together in language [grammar]. This holds true for children learning two languages as well. Both vocabulary and grammar are crucial to literacy learning.

6. “Keep it positive.”

Expand children’s vocabulary and grammar skills by having conversations with them and asking them open-ended questions. Be careful not to close off conversations by telling children to be quiet, ignoring their attempts to communicate, or correcting their “mistakes.” Rephrasing is much more effective at supporting children’s language development than “correcting” them. For example, if a child says, “I done-d that,” an adult might reply, “Oh, you did that?”

Together, these principles can help produce the best language outcomes for all children, including children learning more than one language, especially in the early years.^{2,3}

The first three years are critical in building young children’s vocabularies.^{1,2} However, children in poverty may be especially vulnerable and at risk for having a smaller vocabulary than other children in higher income families.¹ So, attention to best practices that support language and vocabulary development are critical for these children. A large vocabulary (across all a child’s languages) is important because it is children’s foundation for learning to read and understanding what they read.

“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.”^(11, p. 307)



It is well documented that when adults give young children rich language experiences in any language, children are more likely to read and comprehend grade-level texts in the early and later grades.^{4,7} Readers recognize the printed words on the page and use their oral language knowledge to understand what the phrases, sentences, and paragraphs say.¹⁰

ORAL LANGUAGE, VOCABULARY, AND CULTURE

Children learn to talk within their families, cultures, and communities. Based on their experiences, children develop funds of knowledge about how and when 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.⁵ Children develop ideas about how and when to use language beginning at birth. Learn about a family's ideas for when and how their child should talk to better understand a child's patterns of talking, and better communicate their own expectations with families.



Families and cultures may have varied expectations about how much children should talk. Here are some examples.

- Some families may encourage children to talk, ask 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.

Families and cultures may also differ in their expectations for when and how children should talk.

- At what age should a child begin to speak? How much should toddlers or preschoolers be talking?
- 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, or as long as possible?
- How should children tell a story—short and to the point, long and detailed, another way?

Once education staff and family members establish trusting relationships, everyone can discuss their goals for children's oral language skills. These discussions, paired with observations of the children, can help education staff plan oral language experiences.

The Importance of Home Language Series is available in English and six additional languages. The documents emphasize the benefits of being bilingual, the importance of maintaining home language, and the value of becoming fully bilingual.



THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION FROM BIRTH TO AGE 5

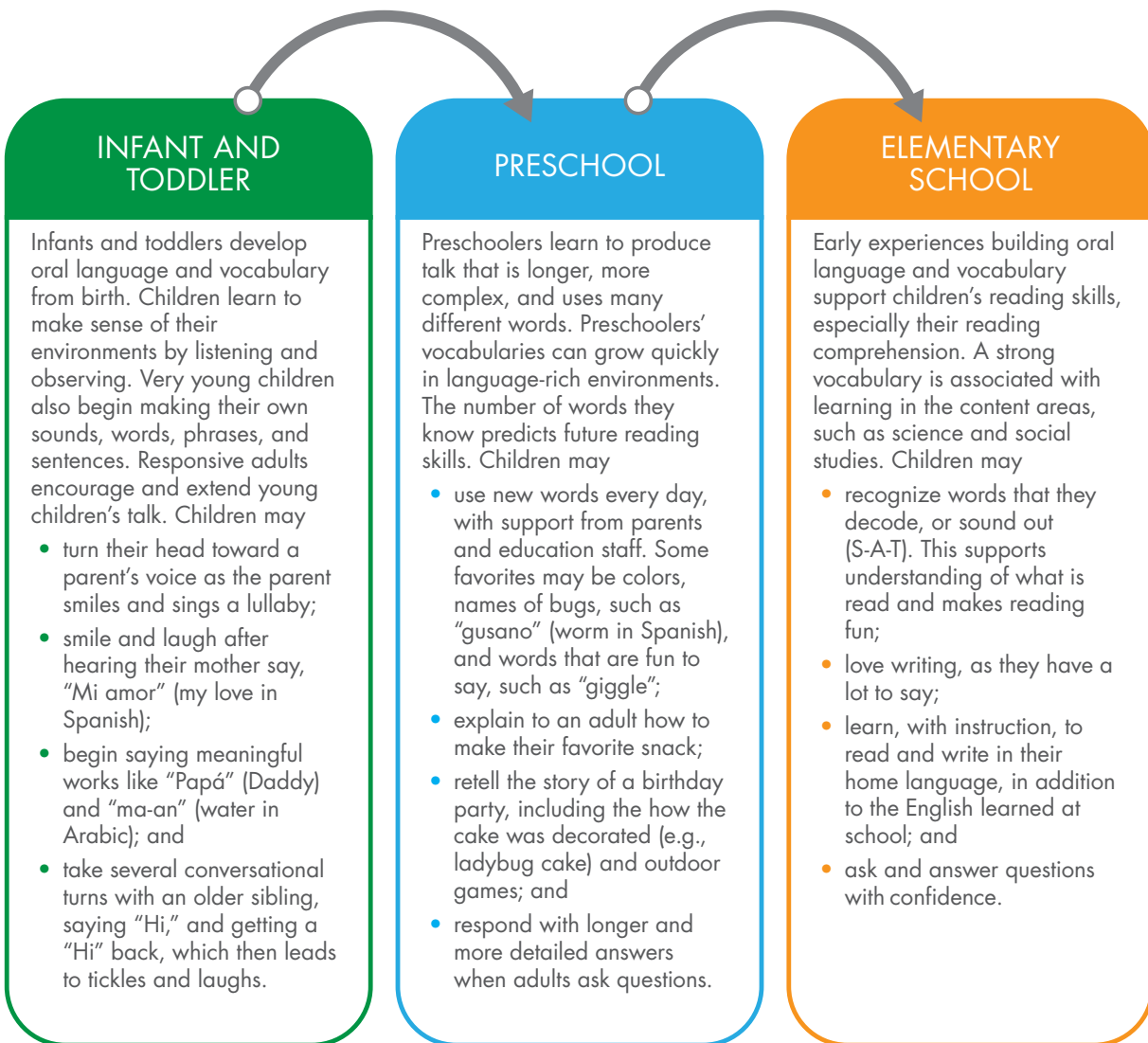
Young children begin developing oral language skills before birth, as they process the languages in their environment, distinguishing patterns of sounds and storing individual sounds in memory. As infants, they learn about social language primarily by interacting with others—hearing adults and older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

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

- Infants babble the sounds they hear. When adults respond enthusiastically, infants are encouraged to use more sounds.
- Toddlers draw from the words they hear others use. They 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 use a greater variety of words and talk across more conversational turns.



HOW DO ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY DEVELOP?



ORAL LANGUAGE, VOCABULARY, AND CHILDREN WHO ARE DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS (DLLS)

Children who are 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 children who are DLLs likely know many more words overall than they know either in English or in their home language.⁶ For example, they may know many words about bath time in their home language and many words about circle time only in English. So, their overall vocabulary includes words they know only in their home language, words they know only in English—and words they know in both languages. Learning a new word (or label) in English for a word they already know in their home language is much easier for most children who are DLLs than learning a brand new word. Their understanding of the concept supports their word learning in English.

"Children given the opportunity to develop competence in two or more languages early in life benefit from their capacity to communicate in more than one language and may show enhancement of certain cognitive skills, as well as improved academic outcomes in school."^(6, p.147)

It is also very common for young children to code switch (use two different languages in a phrase or sentence) when learning more than one language. Children are not confused, though. Instead they are using what they know to get their message across in advanced ways that make sense grammatically.⁶ The most common way young children mix two languages is by beginning a sentence in one language, then switching to another (Genesee et. al. 2004). For example, a child who speaks Spanish may say, “*Quiero jugar outside*” [“I want to play outside.”] or “*This is not what I want to comer* [This is not what I want to eat.]. (For more information about code switching, see [Code Switching: Why It Matters and How to Respond – A Workbook for Early Head Start/Head Start Programs](#). This resource is available in English and Spanish.)

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

Children learn new words, and their contexts, by hearing others talk and by using them. Adults must be intentional about providing children with the language experiences they need to be fully prepared for later reading, writing, and speaking. 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 and varied words. Science, math, and social studies topics can provide wonderful words. Even young children can begin to use words like “observe,” “cylinder,” or “community.” Varied words also include adjectives (e.g., fantastic, incredible), adverbs (e.g., quietly, loudly), and verbs (e.g., leap, deliver) that children may not hear every day (e.g., The noisy car rumbled down the road). Children will master these new words when adults ask them to repeat them, celebrate when they use them, and repeatedly use these new words during different learning experiences and throughout the year.

“Dual language learners’ language development can benefit from shared book reading and storytelling that are characterized by diverse and rich language that promotes interaction and engagement between another person and the child. Infants and toddlers have not been shown to learn language from television or computer applications that do not involve interactions with other people.” (6, p. 148)

When adults teach new words to children, here are some things they often do.

- Use the new word and say what it means. “Look at the nest! A nest is where birds live. They usually make nests out of straw or twigs.”
- Show a picture of the word or act out the word.
- Invite the child to say or sign 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!”

Support children who are DLLs as they make connections between new English words and words they already know in their home language. Visuals, gestures, and motions help all children learn new words. If education staff speak children’s home languages, they can 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. Staff may also encourage children to use props or act out new words. This is fun for all children!



Ms. Amy is helping Lin learn animal names 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 the animal, says its name, and talks about the animal—what it looks like and what it likes to do.

HOW TO SUPPORT BABIES AS THEY DEVELOP ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

Adults support babies' oral language development by talking to them—even before they are born! When adults give even the youngest babies opportunities to participate in “conversations,” they help children become eager and able talkers—first as they babble and coo and later as they speak their first words.

Babies build oral language and vocabulary when adults

- respond to babies' needs for feeding, changing, comforting, and cuddling;
- use child-directed speech or “parentese,” which means speaking in a higher pitch, at a slower rate, with clearer enunciation, and in simpler and shorter phrases, combined with gestures and facial expressions;
- talk, read, and sing to babies in one or more languages using the language you are most comfortable with;
- engage babies in back-and-forth exchanges or “conversations” by responding with different facial expressions, gestures, and words each time a baby babbles and coos;
- talk to babies about what they see, hear, touch, smell, and taste;
- explain routines to babies as they are doing them, such as getting dressed, meal time, bathing, or swaddling;
- use gestures, such as pointing, to direct children's attention to objects or people of interest (e.g., “Look! See the squirrel.”);
- teach older babies (9 months and up) simple signs or gestures to help them communicate basic messages, such as “eat,” “drink,” “up,” “all done” (this is separate from using sign language with children who are hearing impaired); and
- share books with brightly colored illustrations or photos and describe the pictures.

Some children may communicate primarily or only by using sign language rather than speaking. Sign language is not likely to be used as a reliable means of communication from 0-9 months in a child who is hearing impaired (HSELOF 2015, 38).

Home visitors can support parents as they identify, adapt, and try the practices above during home visits and group socializations.

See [Hearing Language is Learning](#) for more on the science behind how babies learn language and tips on how to support it.



Ten-month-old Juanita tries to get her father's attention as he makes himself a snack. Juanita's father engages her in conversation and builds on what Juanita says.

Juanita: Da Da!

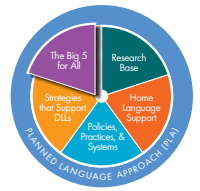
Juanita's father: Hi, Juanita! Dada is making a snack. Do you want a bottle?

Juanita: Ba! [Juanita puts her hand up to get a bottle.]

Juanita's father: A bottle? Sure, Juanita!

Juanita: [Laughs and reaches for the bottle.]

Juanita is learning how she can use sounds to interact with her father and take turns during a conversation. She is also learning new vocabulary. Juanita's father supports her oral language and vocabulary development when he includes her in ordinary conversation. When she goes to her Head Start infant and toddler center, Juanita will make sounds to express herself and expect her teachers to engage in conversations with her, just as her father does.



GOAL IT-IC 3. CHILD COMMUNICATES NEEDS AND WANTS NON-VERBALLY AND BY USING LANGUAGE .

ELOF

| DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION | | | INDICATORS |
|--|---|---|--|
| Birth to 9 Months | 8 to 18 Months | 16 to 36 Months | By 36 Months |
| Learns how to use different means of communication to signal distress or discomfort, solicit help, and to communicate interests and needs to others. | Uses a variety of ways to communicate interests, needs and wants, such as saying or making a sign for “More” when eating. | Combines words or signs from one or more languages into phrases and sentences to communicate needs, wants, or ideas, such as “More milk,” “I want juice,” “Mas leche,” or “Quiero juice.” Children who are dual language learners may combine their two languages or switch between them. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses combinations of words and simple sentences or signs in a variety of situations. Uses simple sentences, such as three- and four-word sentences, to communicate needs and wants. |

HOW TO SUPPORT TODDLERS AS THEY DEVELOP ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

The number of words children know and understand expands rapidly from 18 months to 3 years. Toddlers also develop expressive language and vocabulary when they begin to combine words and sign or speak in simple sentences, and such as “go bye-bye,” “all done,” and “mommy home.”

Not all toddlers develop oral language and vocabulary the same way. Some show slow, steady growth, while others progress in spurts. Toddlers learn words in the languages that they hear. So, it is important that they hear lots of language (whether English or another home language or both) during this exciting period of development.

Toddlers develop oral language and vocabulary when adults

- talk or sign to toddlers frequently using different and interesting words;
- have one-on-one conversations every day and aim for two or more conversational turns for each speaker;
- intentionally teach words and word meanings (e.g., “The sign says ‘Caution.’ So we need to be careful.”). Repeat these new words over time to increase toddlers’ understanding (e.g., “That yellow light means caution—just like the sign we saw. Cars need to be careful!”);
- answer children’s questions, particularly those about why and how the world works (e.g., “The sun is setting—going down. That’s why it is getting dark outside.”);

Troy, 34 months old, uses speech to engage his mother in a conversation with new and interesting words.

Troy: I want my bike!

Troy’s mother: Oh, you want your bike. Where do you want to ride?

Troy: Miguel’s.

Troy’s mother: You want to ride to Miguel’s? That is a long ride. He lives far away across town. What if you ride to the park instead?

Troy: I ride to the park.

Troy’s mother: Yes, you can! You can ride and I will walk. What do you want to do at the park?

Troy: I want to ride and swing.

Troy’s mother: You love to swing, Troy. You like to swing high up! You soar!

Troy: I like to swing high up! I like to swing to the sky! I soar! Wheel! Wheel!

Troy’s mother extends his conversation by adding additional words and thoughts. Troy is learning these new words as he hears them and practices using them himself.

Troy is also learning how to have a conversation. He and his mother are taking turns talking—Troy had five turns during this conversation. His mother knows that the longer the exchange between them goes on the more Troy will learn. So she extends his speech by

- asking him questions—“What do you want to do at the park?”
- extending her speech—“You like to swing up high!”
- adding new and interesting words to what she says—“You soar!”

Troy’s mother helps him learn how to use the words he knows and to use many words when talking.



- build on what children sign or say (e.g., when a child points to a plane in the sky and says, “plane,” or points to a picture of a plane on his assistive communication device, say, “Yes. That is an airplane. The airplane is flying high across the sky.”);
- model how to use language correctly (e.g., if the child says, “Bear goed to sleep,” respond with, “Oh, your bear went to sleep? Good night bear!”) *Note:* Do not ask children to repeat the phrase correctly;
- ask questions that invite toddlers to provide explanations (e.g., “How did you get those blocks to stand up?”), descriptions (e.g., “What does it look like?”), or observations (“What is your sissy doing?”);
- read (and re-read) books written just for them, including books that encourage singing or clapping (e.g., participation books), books that teach new ideas (e.g., concept books), and books that tell a good story, especially picture storybooks. Adapt books for children who have difficulties holding books and turning pages, for example, attach tabs to book pages for easier turning; and
- encourage imaginary play and introduce words not used in everyday experiences (e.g., “Let’s blast off to the moon. Get ready for the countdown . . . 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 . . . Blast off!”).

Home visitors can support parents as they identify, adapt, and try the practices above during home visits and group socializations.

GOAL IT-IC 8. CHILD USES AN INCREASING NUMBER OF WORDS IN COMMUNICATION AND CONVERSATION WITH OTHERS.



| DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION | | | INDICATORS |
|---|---|---|---|
| Birth to 9 Months | 8 to 18 Months | 16 to 36 Months | By 36 Months |
| May use signs or verbalizations for familiar people or objects. | Imitates new words or signs and uses some words or signs for naming or making simple one-word requests, such as saying or signing “milk” when asking for a drink. | Uses an increasing number of words in communication and conversation with others and adds new vocabulary words regularly. Children who are DLLs may have a combined vocabulary in both languages that is similar in number to other children’s vocabulary in one language. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Shows rapid growth in number of words or signs used in conversation with others. ■ Demonstrates a vocabulary of at least 300 words in home language. ■ Asks questions about the meaning of new words. |



HOW TO SUPPORT PRESCHOOLERS AS THEY DEVELOP ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

Preschoolers are great (and sometimes tireless) conversationalists! By the age of three, children have developed relationships, interests, and knowledge about the world that they can share with others. They have learned to talk about many aspects of their lives! Some preschoolers are big talkers—eager to share everything they know—while others talk less as they observe the world quietly. In each case, preschoolers provide adults with many opportunities to extend children’s language development and support children as they learn new words.

Preschoolers develop oral language and vocabulary when adults

- use lots of different and interesting words (talking or using sign language) to help preschoolers build their vocabularies;
- explicitly teach what new words mean—especially when the child asks (e.g., “I was concerned. That means I was worried about you when you fell down today.”);
- “tuck in” definitions of new words during conversations with children (e.g., “That joke was hilarious. It was really, really funny!”);
- explain unfamiliar words when reading (e.g., “The pirate was massive. That means he was huge! Look how massive he is!”);
- read books to help children learn about their cultures and traditions as well as the natural world, and talk about them—ask open-ended questions, make connections, and follow their interests;
- adapt books for children who have difficulties holding books and turning pages (e.g., attach tabs to book pages for easier turning, and provide books with large print or Braille for children who are visually impaired);
- have one-on-one conversations every day, keep the conversation going by asking and answering questions, and aim for five conversational turns for each speaker;
- help children describe past events or tell stories (e.g., “So you hit a piñata with a bat, and then what happened?”);

Four-year-olds Ari and Jean are at the science center looking at some sprouts that they have planted. Their teacher, Kate, listens and supports their oral language and vocabulary by extending their language and thinking.

Ari: I see a new sprout!

Jean: Yes, right there!

Teacher Kate: Wow. What does it look like?

Jean: It’s little. It’s green.

Ari: No, it’s yellow. It’s like a dot.

Teacher Kate: So you have a little yellowish-green sprout?

Ari: Yes, it is yellowish green! Yellow and green.

Teacher Kate: How does it compare to the older sprouts?

Jean: It is smaller and newer.

Ari: The other ones are bigger and greener.

Teacher Kate: That’s a good observation. So what do you think will happen to this sprout as it grows?

Ari: Hmm. Will it get bigger and greener, too?

Jean: I think it will look like that one [points to a bigger sprout].

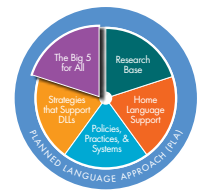
Teacher Kate: Let’s see. We’ll write in our journal that we predict that the sprout will get bigger and greener as it grows.

Ari: Yes, we predict it will be big. And green.

Jean: Now it is so little. It is just a baby sprout.

Ari and Jean are learning how to make observations by using oral language. Their teacher, Kate, asks open-ended questions with more than one possible answer, such as, “What do you think will happen?” She extends their talk by keeping the conversation going and adding some vocabulary (“compare,” “observe,” and “predict”) to help develop their oral language skills.





- take outings frequently and talk or sign to children about what they see, hear, touch, and smell (e.g., “Look, at that snowplow clearing the snow!”);
- model appropriate language without correcting children (e.g., when a child asks for an adult to remove the “banana skin,” the adult might say or sign, “Sure! I can take off the banana peel for you.”); and
- support pretend play by providing objects, such as boxes of different sizes, blocks, and dress-up clothes, and playing along (e.g., “Oh yes! I’d love to eat at your restaurant. Do you have a menu so I can see what I want to eat?”).



Home visitors can support parents as they identify, adapt, and try the practices listed above during home visits and group socializations.

GOAL P-1C.1. CHILD ATTENDS TO COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE FROM OTHERS.



| DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION | | INDICATORS |
|--|--|--|
| 36 to 48 Months | 48 to 60 Months | By 60 Months |
| Shows acknowledgment of comments or questions and is able to attend to conversations, either spoken or signed. | Shows acknowledgment of complex comments or questions. Is able to attend to longer, multi-turn conversations, either spoken or signed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Uses verbal and non-verbal signals appropriately to acknowledge the comments or questions of others. ■ Shows ongoing connection to a conversation, group discussion, or presentation. |

EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE ORAL LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY PRACTICES IN EARLY LEARNING SETTINGS

EXAMPLES WITH INFANTS AND TODDLERS

IN A MIXED-AGE CLASSROOM

Jennifer uses lots of language with the older mobile infants and young toddlers in her mixed-age group. She responds enthusiastically to their gestures and 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. The children like to name their favorite foods, though sometimes she has to guess what they are saying. Lissa asked for “pulls!” and Jennifer saw that a bowl of apple slices was just out of her reach. Jennifer said, “Oh, would you like some apples? Here are two slices.” Lissa replied, “Pulls! Pulls!” and ate the apples. Jennifer smiled and asked, “Would you like some more apple slices?” The back-and-forth continued for several minutes.

Jennifer uses self-talk to describe her actions to the children. For example, she will say, “I’m making your bottle now,” or “I’m spreading your favorite strawberry 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 hear her talk about what they are seeing and doing—which helps them understand language. 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. 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.



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 seems to enjoy “talking” with her papa. During a cooking activity, 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.” Alix makes sure to share with Vivian and Abi’s parents all the ways they support oral language and vocabulary development through their everyday interactions with their children.

IN AN INFANT CLASSROOM

Lucinda is changing a baby Nico’s diaper when she asks, “Should we throw away this dirty diaper?” At the sound of Lucinda’s voice, Nico responds, “Ba-ba-ba-ba.” “Ba-ba-ba-ba,” Lucinda echoes, “I agree! We should get rid of this icky, stinky diaper!” Lucinda drops the diaper into a nearby trash can. “All gone! Now here is a clean new diaper just for you.” As Nico continues to babble and coo, Lucinda responds, “You are welcome!”

ON A HOME VISIT

Anna, a home visitor, talks with Melanie, the mother of four-year-old José and six-month-old Soledad, about why it is so important for parents to talk to their children. “The more you talk to them, the more words they will learn!” Although Melanie now understands how important it is to talk to her children in Spanish at home, she is not sure what to talk about—especially with Soledad. “Talk about what you are doing,” Anna explains, “getting dressed, having a bath, making dinner. When she babbles, respond like she said something interesting—nod, smile, and talk to her. You can also talk about the things you see.” Anna continues and says, “Point to something and say, ‘Look! There goes the mail truck. It is delivering letters and packages.’ This will help Soledad and José learn new words.” Anna shares how important it is for José and Soledad’s father to also talk to Soledad so that she learns from all family members.



IN A FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME

Elena, a family child care provider, is getting ready to sing “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” with her three toddlers. Before she does, she engages the children in a short discussion about farm animals to help them make connections between the song and books they have read about farm animals. She begins by reaching into a basket of stuffed animals and holding up a small, stuffed pig. “Sara. What animal is this?” “Piggie!” Sara answers. Elena nods and says, “Yes. It is a pig! What do you know about pigs?” she asks the group. “Pee-ew!” says Theo, pinching his nose. “All dirty,” says Nikki. “That’s right!” Elena responds. “Pigs like mud and they can get a bit stinky. Do we remember what sound they make?” The toddlers oink enthusiastically while Elena reaches for another stuffed animal. “What can you tell me about this farm animal?” she asks.

IN A TODDLER CLASSROOM

Zoe, a toddler teacher, walks 18-month-old Tommy out to the playground. Her goal is to engage him in an extended one-on-one conversation. “Look!” she says, pointing to the garden. “Our plants are growing.” They walk over to the small garden the children planted. “See the stems poking through the dirt? Soon there will be leaves and flowers!” Tommy points to the stems and says, “Look! Flower!” “Yes, that’s right!” Zoe says, “The stems will grow leaves and flowers.” Tommy asks, “Boo flowers?” Zoe smiles, “You like blue, don’t you? I’m not sure that there will be blue flowers, but there might be purple and yellow flowers.” Tommy points again and says, “Rock!” “Yes,” Zoe agrees. “There are rocks around our garden. Let’s see if we can find the one you painted.” As they look for the rock, Zoe notes that Tommy already knows a lot about how to participate in a conversation.



EXAMPLES WITH PRESCHOOLERS

IN A PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

Lola loves to cook, and she notices that her preschoolers all mention eating bread at home. She decides to explore bread 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? Some children ask her questions about what her favorite bread is and what she likes to eat her bread with. Lola answers their questions and supports children as they practice having conversations, listening to each other, and using their new words.
- Lola finds a basic bread recipe and posts it. 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. She invites children who speak the home languages to tell each other how to pronounce the words.
- The children make bread together and she talks about what they are doing at each step. She invites them to comment on what they see each other doing.
- 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 done, 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 use their emerging writing skills to write about the experience. Lola tells families about the experience and encourages them to ask the children questions (in their home languages). Some families make bread at home!

IN A MIXED-AGE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

Mara is sitting with a small group of three-, four-, and five-year-olds during mealtime. “I am going to describe something on the table,” she says. “See if you can guess what it is.” As the children look at the items on the table, Mara says, “It is white.” “Napkin,” one child says holding up her napkin.” “Could be,” Mara says. “But I am thinking of something that is white and you drink it!” “Milk! Milk!” the children chant. “Yes. Milk,” their teacher agrees. “Let’s all take a sip of milk and then you can tell me how we get milk.”

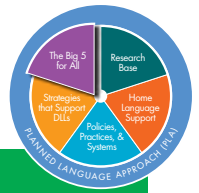
DURING A GROUP SOCIALIZATION

Camilla, a home visitor, and Wil, four-year-old Valentina’s father, observe Valentina and her friend, Luz, as they play with the doll house. “Goo goo! Gaa gaa. I’m the baby!” Valentina says. “Okay,” says Luz. “I’m the mommy. Let’s go to bed baby!” Valentina makes crying noises and says, “Put the baby to bed, on the upper case.” Luz looks confused. Camilla says to Wil, “Wow! Valentina just used some interesting words to describe the upper level of the doll house. What do you think she meant to say?” Wil thinks for a moment, then laughs. “I think she meant upstairs! We’ve been playing a game at home to see who can find the most upper and lower case Vs in books we’re reading together. So she’s hearing and using the words ‘upper case’ a lot.” Camilla says, “That’s great! She’s using new vocabulary, but I think she may need your help to find a better word for the upper level. Can you help her?” Wil smiles, turns to Valentina, and says, “Valentina do you mean upstairs?” He points to the upper level of the house. “This is the upstairs,” and pointing to the lower level of the house, “and this is the downstairs,” he adds. “Papi, yes! Upper case is upstairs!” As the girls resume their play, Camilla and Wil talk about using the words *upstairs* and *downstairs* in future conversations with Valentina. They also think about how they can build on Valentina’s understanding of the word “upper” and how it is different from “upper case” (capital letters).



IN A FAMILY CHILD CARE HOME

While the baby and toddler nap, Nikki, a family child care provider, reads a book about animals to her three preschoolers. “This part of the book is about oviparous animals. I had to look that word up. ‘Oviparous’ means animals that lay eggs.” She asks the children to tell her what animals they might see in this part of the book. The children call out, “A bird! A frog! A whale!” Nikki says, “Well, yes. Birds lay eggs, and so do frogs. But a whale is a mammal. Mammals’ babies develop inside the mother. The mammal mother does not lay eggs, so they are not oviparous.” Eli adds, “My sister’s favorite animal is a platypus. Is a platypus ovi—ovi...” his voice trails off. “Is it oviparous?” Nikki asks. “Well, yes it is. And a platypus is a mammal, too. What else do you know about the platypus?” After Eli tells them what he knows, Nikki returns to the book. As she reads, she notices that Eli is smiling. She knows he is excited to share his new knowledge—and his new word—with his sister when she comes for after-school care.



SUMMARY

This resource focuses on the importance of oral language and vocabulary as a foundation for learning in young children's development. It discusses the connection between these abilities and the goals in the HSELOF and provides examples of the developmental progression from birth to age five.

Authors also stress the importance of language and culture on oral language and vocabulary. When education staff understand the families' expectations for children's oral language, they can plan experiences that build on children's skills. Staff and home visitors should understand that code switching is a normal part of second language learning. They can plan learning activities using visuals, gestures, and motions that will help all children learn new words.

This resource also provides practical strategies for supporting the oral language and vocabulary development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in different early learning settings.

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