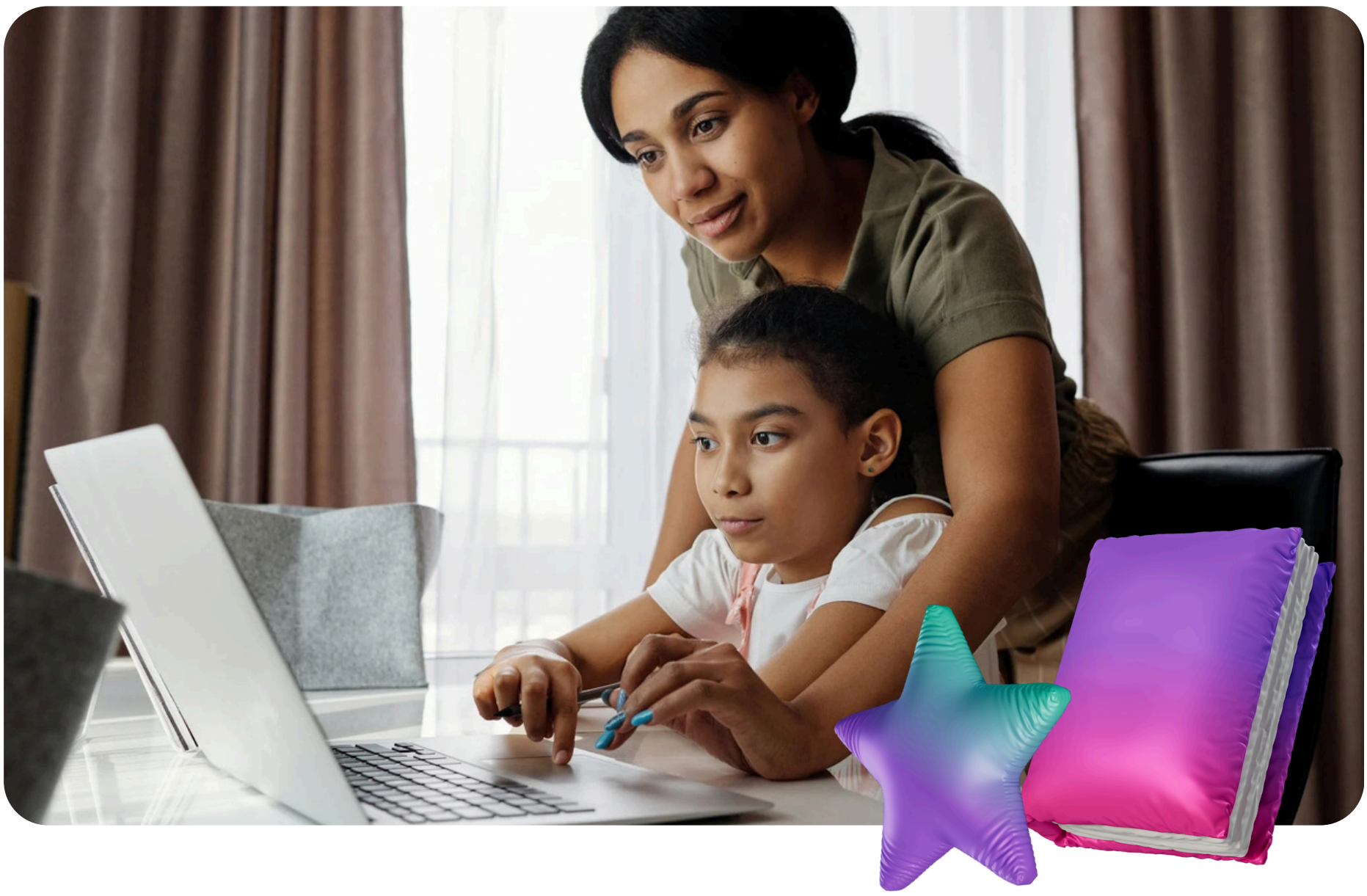
Make every interaction meaningful

Holiday activities to integrate vocabulary development into your home life

A child's education is not just about school. Support from those at home can make a huge difference to that child's progress, and small habits can have a big impact.

This guide explores the critical importance of reading in young people's academic development, providing a framework that will shape every interaction with your child for the better.



Bedrock Learning

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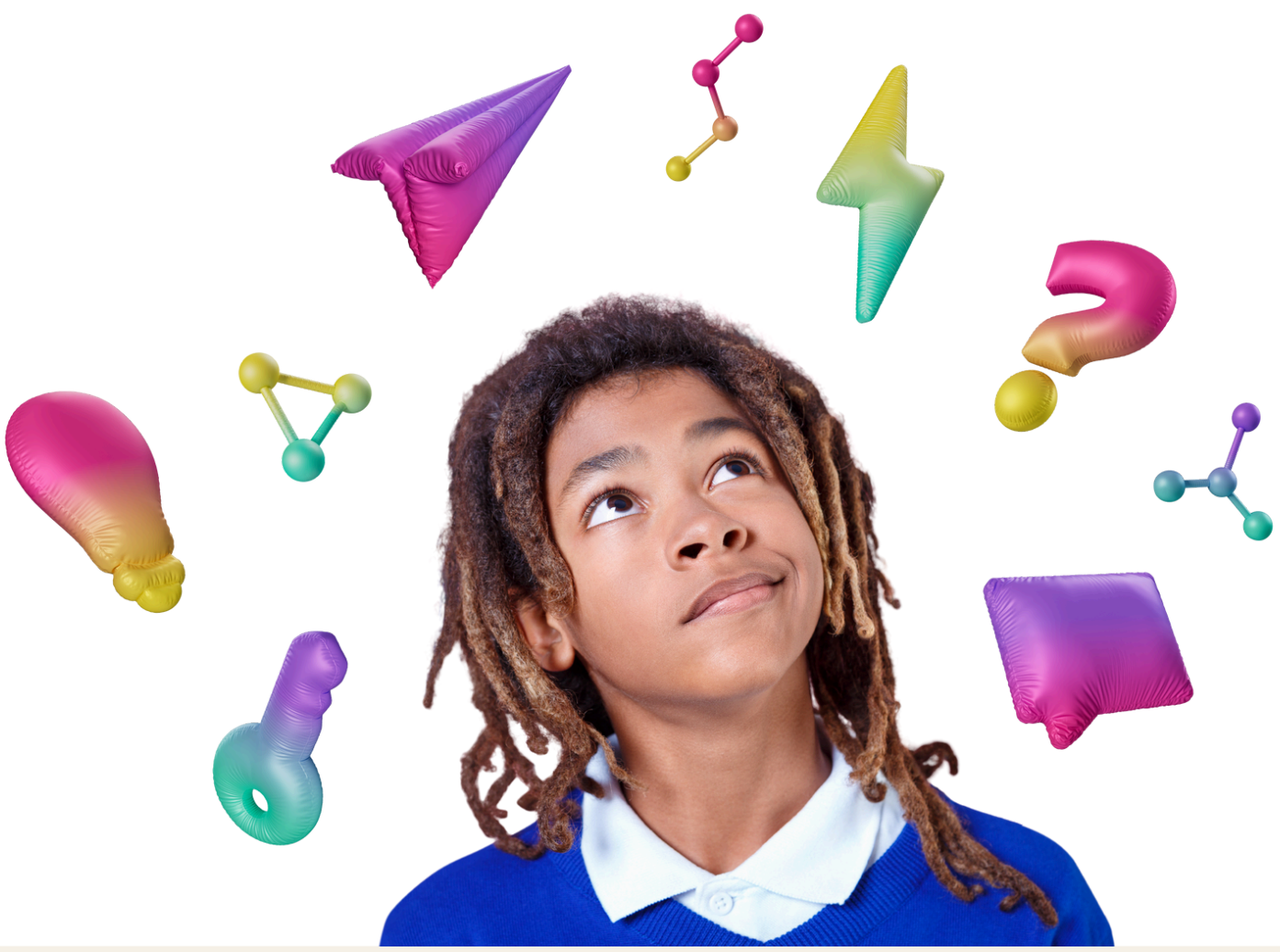


The research and your role

What is reading for pleasure and why does it matter?

The National Literacy Trust (NLT) defines reading for pleasure (RfP) as “reading we do of our own free will, anticipating the satisfaction we will get from the act of reading”.

It is more than a hobby – it is the cornerstone of a child’s learning experience. In fact, the OECD (2002) reports that RfP is “the single most important indicator of a child’s future success”.

The benefits of RfP are far-reaching. According to research (Clark and Rumbold, 2006), RfP positively impacts:

- Reading and writing ability
- Comprehension and grammar
- Breadth of vocabulary
- Reading attitudes
- Self-confidence
- Pleasure in reading in later life
- General knowledge
- Understanding of other cultures
- Community participation

Boosting self-confidence

26% of young people who read in their free time at least once per month say it improves their self-confidence (National Literacy Trust, 2024).

A growing vocabulary

Developing a wide vocabulary is fundamentally important for children. The vocabulary size of a four-year-old is an accurate predictor of educational outcomes at age 16, and a broad vocabulary boosts social skills and confidence through childhood and into adulthood.

Conversely, children who read very little will not reap these benefits: when struggling readers are not motivated to read, their opportunities to learn decrease significantly (Baker, Dreher and Guthrie, 2000).

The current landscape

Concerningly, the latest report by the NLT (2025) shows that RfP is now at its lowest level in 20 years:

- Only 1 in 3 (32.7%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 say they enjoy reading in their free time
- Only 1 in 5 (18.7%) say they read something daily in their free time.

> "When you cannot read very well and you have gaps in your vocabulary, reading for pleasure is, well, not very pleasurable."
>
> **– Alex Quigley, Closing the Vocabulary Gap (2018)**

According to the NLT's 2024 report, twice as many young people who enjoy reading in their free time have above-average reading ability compared to children who don't enjoy it (34.2% vs 15.7%). As RfP continues to wane, one thing is clear: for reading to feel pleasurable, it must first feel possible.

Fluent readers read more, causing them to become even better readers, while non-fluent readers shy away from reading, negatively impacting their growth in reading ability. This causes the gap between good readers and poor readers to widen over time – a widely recognised phenomenon known as the Matthew Effect (Stanovich, 1986).

The impact of reading ability on academic outcomes

"Thematically speaking, was George and Lennie's dream futile?"
This is a classic GCSE English question on John Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men' – a text many parents will remember studying at school. A student may have read and understood the novel in class, but to answer this question effectively, they must be able to **read and understand the question itself**.

Here, 'thematically' is an example of subject-specific terminology, while 'futile' reflects essential language knowledge. Unless both words are understood, a student cannot craft an accurate, relevant, or analytical response.

Thus, reading ability directly influences not only how much young people enjoy and engage with the curriculum, but also how successfully they are able to demonstrate this in assessments.

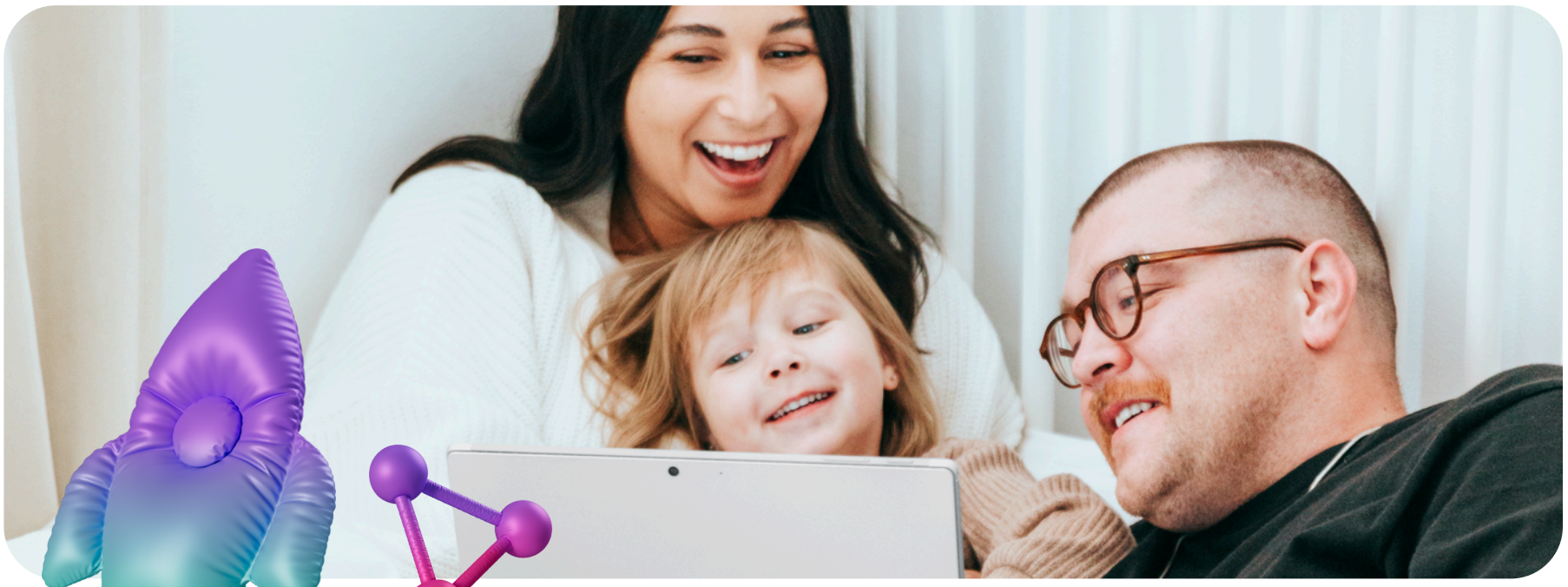
Your role

A lack of enthusiasm for reading is not set in stone. Parental involvement in learning increases children's motivation and achievement, so your input into your child's literacy development is crucial. Did you know, as much as 95% of the words a child knows are also found in their parents' vocabulary?

According to the DfE's 2012 report into Reading for Pleasure, a child's home environment has a huge impact on fostering a love of reading:

- Parental involvement in a child's literacy is a more powerful force than other family variables, such as socio-economic factors, family size and level of parental education (Flouri and Buchanan, 2004)
- Children whose home experiences promote the view that reading is a source of entertainment are likely to become intrinsically motivated to read (Baker, Serpell and Sonnenschein, 1995)
- Children are more likely to continue to be readers in homes where books and reading are valued (Baker and Scher, 2002).

So, where to start? Small habits can have a huge impact. When you know how, it's easy to integrate vocabulary development into your home life and everyday routines through reading, talking and playing. With that being said, we understand just how busy parents are. So, instead of thinking about these activities as something extra to fit into your day, try to view this guide as a useful framework – **one that will shape every interaction you have with your child for the better**.



Making every interaction matter

When you know how, it's easy to integrate vocabulary development into your home life and everyday routines through reading, talking and playing. In this section, we've compiled a list of high-impact habits you can implement at home to reinforce the language your child is learning at school.

Talking

1 Talk constantly with your child

Stimulating parent-child conversations are known to be one of the main influencing factors on vocabulary development. This can be as simple as describing what happened to you earlier while your child was at school, your daily routine at home, or even previous family outings. Further afield – whether you're visiting a museum, a supermarket or boarding a train – talk about what you see and experience and look out for new words on signs and labels. To find a comprehensive list of talking prompts, visit: **https://bedrocklearning.org/literacy-resources/talking-prompts/**

2 Have two-way conversations

Don't just launch into a monologue when talking to children. Make sure your chat develops into a conversation by asking your child open-ended questions about how their own day has gone (nothing is too mundane to be shared). The more practice they get at articulating their thoughts and feelings, the more confident they'll become in using newly learned words.

3 Don't 'dumb down' your own vocabulary

Use as wide a vocabulary as you can. Whether you're using nouns to name new or unusual objects, or adjectives to describe emotions, there's no need to simplify your speech – aim to speak to them as if you're speaking to another adult. Academics call the type of challenging words that you can drop into everyday life Tier 2 words - the language your child needs in order to succeed at school, such as 'procedure', 'consistent' and 'analysis'.

Reading

❶ Encourage your child to read books

This is an obvious point, but an extremely valid one. Unsurprisingly, numerous studies show that children who read a lot have wider vocabularies than those who don’t. This is because books typically include a far broader range of words than we use in everyday conversation.

❷ Read aloud to your child

Even if your child is a good reader, reading aloud to them helps them access harder texts than they’d be able to read on their own. This exposes them to more challenging words, and also creates the opportunity for conversation between you.

❸ Reading is everywhere!

New words can be learned in a multitude of places. At home, a cereal packet could introduce your child to the word ‘ingredients’, and a car handbook to the word ‘metallic’. Don’t overlook the merits of reading magazines, newspapers, online content and more.

❹ Allow your child to choose what they read

Whether they read alone or you read together, if they’re interested in a topic or author, they are more likely to become absorbed in the story and so be curious about any new words they encounter. This level of autonomy will also encourage them to develop a lifelong love of reading.

❺ Encourage them to tackle some challenging reads

The best approach to reading takes in a broad spectrum that includes some challenging reads to help stretch your child’s vocabulary – but don’t forget that just like adults, children will sometimes need some intellectual ‘downtime’ and an easy-to-digest, emotionally nurturing read.

6 Be seen to learn yourself, too

When tackling more challenging reads together, if you encounter a word that's new to you, make a point of remarking on this to your child and introducing it to them – however obscure. As well as teaching them a new word, it demonstrates curiosity and the lifelong nature of learning.

7 Stories aren't just for reading...

Encourage your child to write a story of their own! Incorporating words they've recently learned will boost their creativity and imagination, and they'll feel proud when they realise how far they've progressed.

Playing

1 Play games together

Board games such as Scrabble and Boggle (including their Junior versions) are a great way to discover new words and consolidate knowledge. Word searches can also introduce new words and provide conversation starters, while crosswords are a good way to link a word to its meaning. Even 'I spy...' can be a great way to introduce new nouns.

2 Encourage your child to query any new words they come across

If, for example, you play a word in Scrabble that your child has not come across before, make sure they don't feel embarrassed when asking you about its meaning. Take time to explain a new word if they ask you, or enthusiastically find out its meaning together. In the same way, show interest and delight whenever your child shares a new word with you.

3 Visualise new words on paper

For particularly obscure words, you can reinforce meaning by drawing a depiction of the word on paper. To visualise the word 'reluctant', for example, you and your child could draw a situation that represents that word for them - such as a picture of them eating Brussels sprouts.

Getting it right

What to do

❶ Bring new words to life

If your child learns a new noun, find a picture of it online or in a book. If it's an adjective, think of things that can be described using the word, like a 'meagre' lunch or a 'diligent' student. If it describes an emotion, show the feeling with a facial expression or hand gesture. It's fun to act out new verbs – try 'prowling' around the house or 'sauntering' to the shops.

❷ Put new words into context

A word that your child encounters in a meaningful sentence – whether that's heard or read – is far easier (and more fun) to learn than one that they come across in isolation or as part of a list. For example, if you were to describe a colleague who has lost their pet as 'disconsolate', the context of loss should help them understand its meaning.

❸ Position a word in different scenarios

When you drop a new word into conversations, try to use it in various guises to help embed your child's understanding of it. For example, if your child has learned the word 'fortunate', you could remark that you're 'fortunate' to be part of such a kind family, and later say you're 'fortunate' the supermarket hasn't run out of bread even though it's late in the day.

Alternatively, give a usage example yourself, then ask them to give their own: you might say you felt 'ecstatic' when they were born, for example, while your child might say they felt 'ecstatic' at their birthday party.

❹ Repeat, repeat, repeat

For the learning of a new word to become embedded, a child needs to encounter it more than once. Experts generally agree that a child needs to hear a new word between four and twelve times before it's committed to their long-term memory and truly added to their vocabulary.

5 Help your child look for word roots

If your child didn't understand the word 'audible' in the sentence, "Lily was barely audible", for example, think about other words with the root 'aud' that your child already knows, such as 'audio' and 'audience'. This will help your child understand that the word is about hearing and realise the sentence is describing how Lily is speaking very quietly.

6 Use synonyms (similar words) to help define a word

If you're reading or talking together and your child doesn't know a word, rather than interrupt the flow you could give a quick definition in the form of a synonym (e.g. 'bereft' – that means 'losing' something). Then at the end of the chapter or conversation, remember to go back to the word, pointing to it if it's in a book and repeating it out loud so they can get used to its sound. By the same token, dipping into a thesaurus can be useful because they offer a range of synonyms and antonyms (words that mean the opposite) too, for contrast. They can also be useful with creative writing by helping prevent overuse of a single word.

What not to do

1 Don't bombard your child with lots of new words at once!

Introduce a manageable number of new words – say, up to seven per week – for the whole family to drop into conversation as naturally as possible.

2 Don't over-rely on a dictionary to help understand new words

Contrary to popular belief, dictionaries aren't always the best way to help your child learn vocabulary, because definitions often include more unfamiliar words. When you encounter a new word, first try to look for contextual clues together. If you can't spot any clues, simply give them an easy-to-understand definition, for example, 'ecstatic' means really happy.

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