



Research-Based Strategies to Support Early Language Development

1

Supports
Vocabulary &
Reading
Comprehension

Interactive Read-Alouds

Activity: Choose a high-quality children's book and pause periodically to ask open-ended questions, define new words, and encourage children to make predictions.

Why it Works: Research shows that children learn new words best in meaningful contexts and when adults provide explanations (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; McKeown, Beck & Worth, 1993).

2

Supports
Vocabulary,
Reading
Comprehension &
Concept
Development

Prereading Discussions

Activity: Before reading a book, gather children and show the cover. Ask them to make predictions about what the book might be about based on the title and illustrations. Introduce a few key vocabulary words from the story and discuss them using kid-friendly definitions, gestures, or visuals. Prompt children to share what they already know about the topic or similar experiences they've had.

Why it Works: Research shows that activating prior knowledge and introducing key vocabulary before reading helps children connect new ideas to what they already know, increasing comprehension and word learning (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; Hadley, 2014). Pre-teaching vocabulary gives children an anchor when they encounter those words in context, making them more likely to understand and remember them. It also boosts engagement by building anticipation and curiosity.

3

Supports
Narrative Skills &
Social
Communication

Dramatic Play and Role-Playing

Activity: Set up a dramatic play area (e.g., a restaurant, doctor's office, or grocery store) and encourage children to engage in role-playing scenarios with peers.

Why it Works: Pretend play encourages children to use language creatively, develop storytelling skills, and practice turn-taking in conversations (Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013).

4

Supports Word Learning & Concept Development

Vocabulary Mapping

Activity: Create a word web where a new vocabulary word is placed in the center and connected to related words, pictures, and examples.

Why it Works: Graphic organizers help children see relationships between words and deepen their understanding (Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

5

Supports Pragmatic Language & Listening Skills

Barrier Games

Activity: Two students sit back-to-back. One describes a picture while the other draws it based on the description, without seeing the original image.

Why it Works: This activity builds listening comprehension, descriptive language skills, and the ability to give clear, detailed instructions (Gillam, Fargo, & Robertson, 2009).

6

Supports Sentence Structure & Expressive Language

Repeated Story Retelling

Activity: After reading a story, ask students to retell it using sequencing words (first, next, then, last) while using pictures or story props.

Why it Works: Retelling strengthens memory for story structure and improves sentence complexity (Spencer & Petersen, 2018).

7

Supports Early Literacy & Pronunciation

Explicit Phonological Awareness Activities

Activity: Play games like “I Spy” with beginning sounds (e.g., “I spy something that starts with /b/”).

Why it Works: Research shows that phonological awareness is a key predictor of later reading success (Lonigan et al., 2009).

8

Supports Social Communication & Listening

Turn-Taking and Conversational Games

Activity: Use structured conversation games where children take turns asking and answering questions, such as a “talking stick” activity.

Why it Works: Encouraging structured conversation helps children develop pragmatic language skills and learn how to take turns in dialogue (Brinton & Fujiki, 2017).

9

Supports
Grammar,
Sentence
Structure &
Expressive
Language

Sentence Expansion Games

Activity: Start a simple sentence (e.g., “The dog runs.”) and have children expand it (e.g., “The big, brown dog runs fast at the park.”).

Why It Works: Encouraging sentence expansion helps children develop more complex language structures and improve grammatical accuracy (Fey et al., 2003).

10

Supports
Grammar,
Sentence
Structure,
Expressive &
Receptive
Language

Barrier Games

Activity: Give children multiple simple sentences (e.g., “The dog is Excited. The cat is sleepy.”) and conjunctions (e.g., “because”, “and”) and have them choose the correct conjunction and combine the sentences.

Why it works: Explicit instruction can assist with acquisition of more complex language, such as complex sentences (Dudek-Brannan, 2018).
