10 Big Ways to Build Word Consciousness



I looked around the crowded restaurant, feeling suddenly overheated. I had just had a one-sided conversation with a baby about green beans. It was too quiet, so several people heard:

“Soft, squishy green beans. I love ‘em. You love ‘em. We all love yummy green beans!”

The baby wasn’t mine. He sat in his father’s lap, two tables down, with a green bean in each hand. I watched as the baby tossed one of them to the floor.

“Why’d you do that?” the father asked, but the baby just grinned.

It sometimes looks odd to talk to something that doesn’t talk back. But we do—as humans, communicating is a basic need. That’s why we want to tell our cat about our bad day or ask our plant if it’s thirsty. One creature we love to talk to: a baby. It doesn’t even have to be our baby. We're totally fine with a baby not replying when we ask him how he's doing.

From their very first day on earth, children are learning language from the world around them—even if they aren't talking. That's why the job of being word conscious is so important for families and educators.

The 30 Million Word Gap

In 1995, a landmark study by Betty Hart and Todd Risley discovered the jaw-dropping number of words that 18- to 48-month olds can learn, if given the chance. The study revealed that, in this case, not all children were equal. When the vocabularies of “affluent” preschoolers were measured, a vast and unsettling language gap appeared between them and children with lower socio-economic status—some by as much as 30 million words.

The study illuminated the importance of directed speech, focused conversations, and time spent on engaging children in language, and emphasized a real need for intentional teaching.

Becoming Word Conscious

The good news is that anyone can be word conscious, from educators to parents to siblings to caregivers. Word consciousness scales up or down, depending on the age and stage of the child.

* For a newborn, word consciousness might mean flipping on and off the light switch and repeating “Lights on, lights off.”
* For a two-month old, word consciousness might mean describing “the soft, brown bunny.”
* Older babies and toddlers may already be ready for sophisticated descriptions, sounds, and action words like “scorching hot,” “sizzle,” and “nibble.”

What’s important is to model usage of language, even if the child doesn’t talk back.

1. Stay away from short commands.

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| Instead of: | *"Come over here." “Get your blanket.”* |
| Try: | *“Come over to the sidewalk.” “Get your fluffy blanket.”* |

Research tells us that commands don't help children learn language. On the contrary—commands inhibit language. In a 2013 Stanford University study, researchers found that commands halt language acquisition because they are usually short, simple sentences. They put a cap on creative words. Every child needs to hear useful commands, but they’re better with rich descriptions.

2. Be specific, not generic.

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| Instead of: | *“Bring your toys.” “Do you see the animals?”* |
| Try: | *“Bring your cars and boxes.” “Do you see the giraffes?”* |

Children hear words like “toys” and “animals” every day. They’re useful, familiar terms that can mean so many different things. And that’s exactly why it’s more intentional to be specific.

3. Provide context.

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| Instead of: | *“We need to go to the post office.”* |
| Try: | *“Here’s the post office. We drop our envelopes in the blue mailbox...”* |

It’s much more useful for children to have an image in their brain than a blank space. When you’re talking about something new, it’s better to show than to tell.

4. Model your words.

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| Instead of: | *“Be gentle.”* |
| Try: | *"Pat the bunny's head with two fingers, like this. Shhh...use a quiet, whisper voice.”* |

What does it mean, if it’s not modeled? Particularly in the abstract area of social-emotional development, children need to see what they need to do.

Additionally, even if children have been told to “be gentle” or “play nicely with others” throughout their lifetimes, they don’t know what that means to you, at that moment.

5. Infer meaning of new words.

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| Instead of: | *“Here’s your ball.”* |
| Try: | *“Here’s your bumpy ball. It feels so bumpy. Can you feel the bumps?”* |

Go a step further with language whenever you can. If your children know the word *ball*, they may be able to figure out what the word *bumpy* means just by inferring.

Children get better and better at using inference as they age (and as adults, we do it all the time).

6. Use rhythmic, repetitive language.

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| Instead of: | *“Eat your green beans.”* |
| Try: | *“Eat your green beans. Chomp, chomp, chomp. Yum, yum, yum.”* |

Songs, poems, and phrases that “stick in your head” encourage the brain to put language on repeat.

It can be annoying to have a song that you can’t get out of your head, but it does help you remember language.

7. Read books with text-picture match.

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| Instead of: | *“He always said that she could dig as much in a day as a hundred men could dig in a week…”* |
| Try: | *“Where’s Spot? Is he inside the clock? No.”* |

Of course, babies need short, punchy board books and lift-the-flap rhetoric. But as children age, they may pick out lengthy books at the library or choose a book based on its cover, not its word count.

Reading a magazine to a baby is better than reading nothing at all, but a book with text-picture match seals in language.

8. Stay out of a rut.

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| Instead of: | *“Time to go to the park.”* |
| Try: | *“Here’s a tennis ball. Can you hit it with the racket?”* |

As humans, we value routines. It’s also super-comforting for children to have predictable routines every day.

However, new experiences help children learn fresh, new words in context. Visit new places, sample new foods, listen to different music, and add new activities to your daily routine.

9. Abandon the notion that they’re “too young” or “not ready.”

According to the Stanford University researchers, a majority of babies are born with similar brain connections and capacities to learn language. It’s primarily through experiences—or lack thereof—that the trajectories begin to splinter into “advantaged” versus “disadvantaged” groups.

Babies are never too young to hear robust language, and anytime is the right time to start.

10. Talk, even if they don’t talk back.

Babies, toddlers, and preschoolers are absorbing everything around them. The ages between birth to five are the most critical for acquiring language.

It can feel strange—particularly with newborns and tiny babies—to emphasize concepts and new words, but engagement is key to later learning. So keep talking, even if all you hear is an awkward silence.