

Teaching Verbs (Action Words)

Once a child has a naming vocabulary of about 20-30 words it is useful to teach some verbs or action words. This can help the child to move from a one word to a two word or phrase level of expressing themselves.

Children first learn to understand and use verbs by hearing them used to describe what they or others are doing. The verb is used to describe an action happening in the present tense. These verbs often end with 'ing' e.g. 'Eating...eating dinner'. Later children learn to use grammatical rules to alter verbs for use in the future and past tenses. Even later on they learn to remember the irregular verbs that need special grammatical rules e.g. to buy → bought, to catch → caught.

It is easiest to teach verbs which describe actions that the children themselves can do and which can be seen e.g. jumping, climbing, drinking. It is more difficult to teach verbs which can't be seen e.g. to like, to want.

Activities for Teaching Verbs

For very young children or those in the earliest stages of language development you may need to start at the most basic level. The first two sections are designed for this early input. For children needing to broaden their general experience of verb vocabulary any of the other activities will be helpful. It doesn't matter what order you carry them out and in fact it may be more fun to run a group session incorporating several different activities all working on verbs.

To teach a child to understand verbs (action words) at a one key word level.

1. Use a checklist of useful early verbs to work on.
2. Choose 2 or 3 verbs per week to target. Think about how this may fit into classroom topics or home activities.
3. An adult needs to model the target verb both during designated 1:1 time and then repeat the input during general activities where possible.
4. This level must be worked on first, as before you can expect the child to say the verbs, they must understand them. Think of this as an input level. It can take some time to 'feed' verbs in through modelling and repetition before a child will use them to answer questions.

To be able to say a verb to describe an action in response to the question 'What are you doing?'

Use the question 'What are you doing?' after you have carried out the 'input' for specific verbs only. As a stepping stone to helping a child answer this question, you can try...

- ask it and then answer it yourself i.e. modelling the required response
- ask it with two choices of response provided e.g. are you cutting or painting?

- ask it and then mime the answer to give a visual clue as to the verb you are trying to prompt.

Mime games

Use pictures or photographs showing a range of actions. Show a picture to one child in a group and ask them to mime it for the rest of the group to guess. You can repeat this idea in many different ways to keep interest. Try attaching the pictures to magnetic fish or shapes from a puzzle and play a fishing game, choose the pictures by taking turns to throw a bean bag on to them.

To make this easier you could hold up two pictures, mime one and ask children to show you which one you are miming then name the action for the children.

Songs

Action songs such as *I've got a body* and *Punchanella little fella* provide a musical way to reinforce verb vocabulary to describe the actions.

Follow the leader

At first you may want to use the action pictures to reinforce visually the instruction you say e.g. Let's all jump/dance/nod our heads/wave/clap etc. Ask a child to tell the group what you are all doing so you elicit the verb "x'ing".

Later take away the pictures and check their understanding of just the spoken word.

Books

For younger children the flap books can keep interest and the simple pictures allow you to use some verbs repetitively. The *Spot the Dog* and *Maisy Mouse* books are very useful for this purpose.

Play mats

Take turns to help a toy, preferably with moving limbs e.g. teddy or dolly to go to a chosen place on the mat such as the park, hospital or school. Choose an action picture and then ask the child to make the toy move in the way shown in the picture e.g. walking to the park, jumping to the farm, hopping to the hospital etc.

Digital cameras!

Now that most schools have access to one...it can go a long way to keeping children interested in looking at the pictures if they see themselves in them. Consider making a scrap book or wall display showing pictures of the children in the group carrying out different target verb actions. Label them with the 'ing' form of the verb i.e. we are sitting, we are drinking etc.