

Word Finding Difficulties

What is a word-finding difficulty?

Children with word finding difficulties have problems thinking of words when speaking or writing their thoughts down. They may be able to think of the exact word they need on another occasion, but their ability to recall it is inconsistent. Sometimes they may recall part of the word i.e. the first letter/sound (it begins with 'b') or accidentally use a word which sounds similar ('telescope' for 'stethoscope').

When a child has difficulty remembering a word altogether, they may describe the word, substitute it for an unspecific word *e.g. 'thing' or 'it'*, or use a word which is similar in meaning (i.e. from the same category of words) such as saying '*apple*' instead of '*pear*'.

Adults can sometimes experience word-finding difficulties when they cannot remember a word or someone's name, but feel it is on the tip of their tongue.

How can I help?

A child with a word finding difficulty can be helped by encouraging him to use general strategies to ease or get around the problem. It is very important to help the child to get his message across in any way possible if he is unable to think of a particular word. This should minimise the child's level of frustration and ensure communication is not disrupted by the word finding difficulty. Also you can use specific activities to develop the child's ability to think of words more consistently in the future.

Ways to Help

1. Describe it!

Encourage the child to think of a different word or to describe the word he is trying to think of. Ask questions such as; '*what kind of thing is it?*' '*what is it like?*' '*what do you do with it?*' '*where do you find it?*'

You can help the child practise this skill by playing guessing games, where one of you thinks of an object (or selects a picture) and has to describe it for the other person, one clue at a time, but is not allowed to say what it is called.

2. Cue the word

If you know the word the child is trying to say, try to cue him in by giving him the first sound eg '*it begins with a 'b''* and then the first part of the word if they are still not sure e.g. '*bis...*'

3. Ask either / or questions

Instead of asking an open ended question such as '*what is this called?*', ask the child an either/or question such as '*is it or ?*' or give choices for the child to select from, such as '*do you want eggs or cereal for breakfast?*'

4. My word book

Keep a record of words the child finds it difficult to think of in a word book at home. Ideally draw or stick a picture in the book, as well as writing the word down.

Talk about these words from time to time. Talk about everything you know about the word and what it means e.g. *a pencil is something we draw with. it's long and thin. you can rub it out. it's usually made out of wood. you use it at school. the word has 2 syllables (or parts – pen cil – you can clap the 2 parts of the word). it begins with p. it is like the word 'pen' – another thing for writing with.* Write this information in the word book. Practise saying the word together several times. The child will need to hear the word a lot before he is able to remember it well enough to say it when needed.

Sometimes go through the word book and ask your child if he can recall a word. If not, help him by giving him some of the 'clues' or a letter cue- *'it begins with'*

It may be helpful for the child to take the book to and from school, so words which are used during the day can be written down by a member of staff and discussed at home.

5. Repeat, repeat, repeat

Whenever the child remembers a word, make a point of using the word again several times in the next few sentences you say. This reinforces the word. You can use this as an opportunity to talk about the word meaning as well as above.

For example, say the child can't think of 'cow' and then does (either with your help or on his own). You might then say something that fits the situation, like: *'we get milk from cows, don't we? Do you remember when we saw the cows on the farm? What did the cows look like?'*

Helping Children with Word-Finding Difficulties

With acknowledgement to Maggie Johnson

1. Reduce Anxiety

Recall difficulties increase in unfamiliar situations and when the child feels under pressure to succeed.

2. Frequent Repetition

If a child cannot recall a word, tell them what it is and check a bit later on to see if it's been remembered. Check again an hour later, the next day, and so on until the word seems fairly stable.

3. Encourage Circumlocution

In conversation, it is important that a child's goal is successful communication, rather than finding precise words. The latter results in unfinished sentences, disrupted flow of thought, and frustration. Let children know that as long as they can get their meaning across, it doesn't matter which words are used. We, as listeners, must **congratulate** children who say *'you know, the place where you can see all the old bones and coins and stuff'*, when they can't recall the word. We can then say, *'oh yes, you mean the **'museum'**'* and check if they've remembered that word a bit later on..

Play this game to encourage circumlocution and to demonstrate that children can get their message across even when they can't remember the actual word.

To Model the Game:

Adult: *'I'm thinking of something you can see in the room * I'll describe it, can you tell me what it is?'*

e.g. 'it's round, it's a bit like a box, it's found on the floor, you put rubbish in it.....'

Child: *'waste paper bin!'*

The Game:

The adult now asks the child to think of something in the room* and to describe it without using its name. The adult then guesses what it is

* start with something in the room, and then make the game more abstract by thinking up things in other places. You can help the child to select a word by giving a classification
e.g. *'think of something in your bedroom', 'think of a person'*

4. Practise the Skill of Defining Words

This helps to build confidence in attempting to express oneself in different ways. There are various ways of defining, all of which can be practised. The best definitions use a combination of the following:

a) **Category:** e.g. orange - fruit ambulance - vehicle
 spanner - tool wasp - insect
 cupboard - furniture church - building

b) **Function:** e.g. pen - to write with
 ruler - to measure with
 money - to buy things
 rocket - to go into space
 wasp - it stings

c) Unique Characteristics:

e.g. elephant - trunk saddle - stirrups
 camel - hump cemetery - gravestones
 flower - petals piano - black and white notes

d) **Location:** e.g. crab - beach watch - wrist
 submarine - underwater kangaroo - Australia
 register - classroom pew - church

e) **Synonym:** e.g. noisy - loud wet - damp
 plunge - dive dirty - filthy
 stare - look dinner - lunch

f) **Specific Example:** e.g. You do that when
 You feel like that when
 It's what you get when

After some structured practise, make a game of this by giving the children in a group a number of 'lives' (e.g. ten counters). They take it in turns to define pictures on the table until the other children know for sure what it is (choose very similar objects or items from one category). For every attribute they lose a life – in this way they are encouraged to select the most salient characteristics (i.e. those features which most readily distinguish one item from another) and learn to be as economic as possible in their definition.

e.g. *it's red. you eat it. it's got lots of pips.* (3 lives)
it grows on trees. (1 life)

This game is made much harder by removing the choice of picture. Get a child to select a picture from a pile and give a definition to the others, keeping it hidden from view. This uses up more lives as you have to be much more specific.

5. Teach Words in Sentences Rather than Isolation

When asking for the name of something, cue children in with a short sentence at first, rather than saying, 'what's that?' In this way, they are encouraged to give themselves the same clue and provide the associated response when they get stuck:

e.g. *Let's think of some tools –*
We cut wood with the?
We bore holes with the?
We bang nails with the?

Frequent repetition will be necessary, in drill-like fashion, if automatic recall is to improve.

6. Introduce Vocabulary in Pairs or Groups

Similarly, children can be encouraged to cue themselves in with an associated word – either a semantic link (meaning) or phonological link (sounds) depending on their particular recall difficulty:

e.g. table and
cup and
salt and
needle and
oranges and
postman, milkman, dustman
finger, hand, wrist, arm, elbow

e.g. below, beneath, behind
above, across, around
drill, drip, drink
wrist, fist, mist, list
blew, grew, knew, drew
postman, poster, postbox, gatepost

7. Practise Word-Association

Encourage flexibility of thought by taking a single word and helping the child to generate as many associated words as possible. This can be done in structured fashion at first (see attached 'Word Search' sheet), gradually giving fewer prompts and clues as the child gets used to the various categories.

Make a game of this by allocating points as follows (this also helps definition and saliency – see Item 4):

Family	-	5 points
Function	-	4 points
Time/Place	-	3 points
Appearance	-	1 point (unless a unique characteristic, then 2 points)
Association	-	1 point
Reaction	-	1 point

Word-finding difficulty is commonly found in children (and adults) with developmental or acquired language/learning difficulties. There is no quick cure, but with patience and understanding we can ease the frustration it causes and provide the best framework for long-term improvement.

Other things to try: 8a

Developing vocabulary skills using 'word webs'



Why is this important?

'Word webs' build vocabulary. They help children make links between new vocabulary and old vocabulary which means that words can be stored (and retrieved) more accurately/easily and links in meaning can be made. This technique is also referred to as 'mind mapping'.

What to do

- Develop a list of words unfamiliar to the child – this could be new topic vocabulary or words that could arise during everyday activities.
- Introduce the new word (e.g. 'winter').
- Write the word 'winter' in the middle of a piece of paper.
- Ask the child what he/she knows about 'winter'. The child might say 'snow' or 'cold'.
- If the child can't think of anything, find a story about winter (e.g. about a snowman or Christmas) and then start the discussion from there.
- Think about how words might link together and think about action words (e.g. 'shivering', 'sledging') as well as adjectives to describe winter.
- Talk about different clothes to wear in winter and the weather that winter brings.
- Encourage the child to lead the conversation and write down his/her ideas linking them together (e.g. 'winter' links to 'cold' and 'snow'). Think of other things that are cold (e.g. ice-cream).

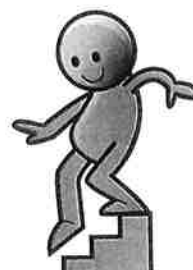


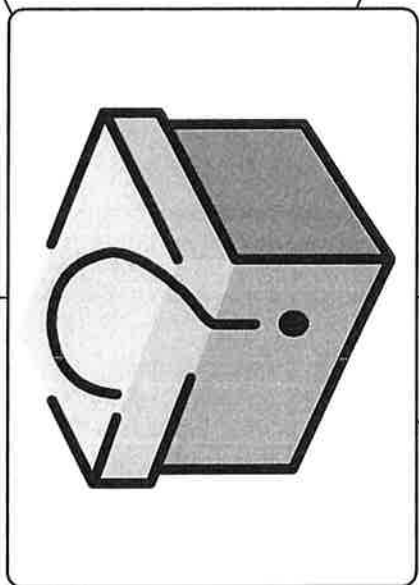
Step up

- Talk about opposites (e.g. 'winter' vs. 'summer').
- Talk about the months that make up winter.
- Find someone who has a birthday in winter and talk about different activities to do in winter as opposed to summer (e.g. stay inside more, put the fire on to keep warm).

Step down

- Start by talking about things that the child can see (e.g. snow). This is easier to begin with as the child can relate to it.
- Make a 'picture' word web.
- Use real objects to demonstrate the connections.

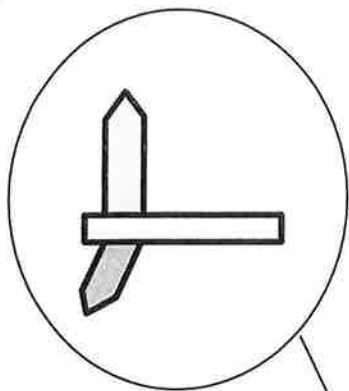




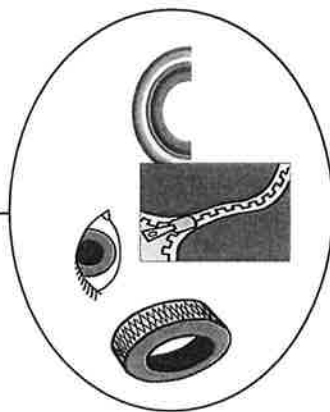
Category?



Where do it find
it? / where is the
word from?

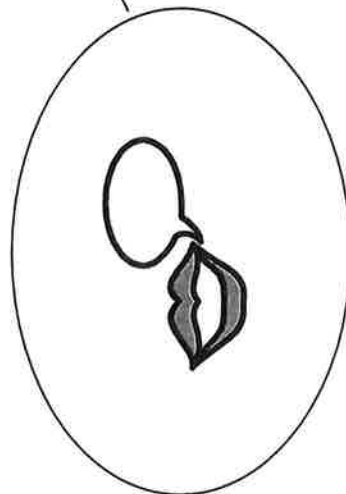


What does it
look like?

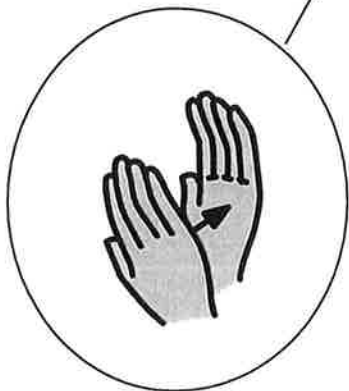


What do you do with
it? / what does it do?

First sound?



Syllables?



New word _____

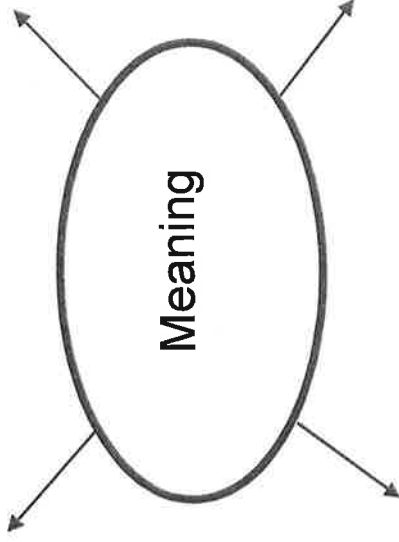
Sounds

✓ Say the word out loud

It starts with _____

It rhymes with _____

It has _____ syllables



Use the word in a sentence: