

Sagacious, Sophisticated, and Sedulous

Introducing 50-Cent Words to Preschoolers

Molly F. Collins

A teacher once told me, “Don’t use a 50-cent word when a 5-cent word will do.”

Well-meaning adults, including preschool teachers, often do this when they use simple words instead of complex words when talking with young children. Perhaps they think that preschoolers won’t be able to understand sophisticated vocabulary. Complex words are high level, communicate details, and are less common in our everyday language. But, teachers can boost the knowledge of soon-to-be readers by introducing, using, and explaining the meaning of *sophisticated vocabulary*.

Early language foundations

Typically children learn vocabulary through interactions with adults (Dickinson et al. 2003). Preschoolers who hear rich explanations of sophisticated words learn significantly more words than children who do not (Collins 2010). It takes longer for children with limited vocabularies to learn new words. Understanding word meanings is critical to reading comprehension, so children with limited vocabularies have a more difficult time grasping what they read.

Benefits of introducing 50-cent words

Discussing words with children encourages their active involvement as thinkers and problem solvers. Read-aloud times are great opportunities to talk about rare words. The teachers in the following examples engage children in conversations about words found in the story.

Introduce new words and concepts.

Ms. Doran introduces the word *unruly* while discussing *Henry’s Happy Birthday*, by Holly Keller.

Ms. Doran: *Unruly* means hard to control. It was hard for Henry to make his hair stay down. Your hair might be unruly when you wake up in the morning.

Jason: Yeah, my mom’s hair is messy.

Ms. Doran: When she wakes up?

Jason: Yeah, all over, like this (*hands circling head*).

Ms. Doran: It sounds like her hair is unruly, too. Hard to control.

Ms. Doran’s use of *unruly* while speaking about Henry’s appearance exposes children to a sophisticated word whose concept they can easily understand.

Clarify differences in meaning between words that are new to the children and concepts they already know.

Mr. Myers reads aloud Lindsay Barrett George’s *In the Woods: Who’s Been Here?* In talking with the children he points out slight differences in the meaning of words. He provides general information to help the children understand a sophisticated vocabulary word, *splay*.

Mr. Myers: When it (*pointing to butterfly*) was inside, its wings were together, but once it got out, it could *splay*, or spread out, its wings.

Aquala: Ya!

Mr. Myers: *Splay* means to spread out.

Aquala: Yeah, like peanut butter. Spread with a knife.

Mr. Myers: But the peanut butter doesn’t really get splayed because it doesn’t have parts. *Splay* means to spread something that has parts. You have body parts that you can *splay*. Your arms and legs can spread out like this (*gestures*).

Aquala: (*pointing to stomach*) Can’t *splay* this!

Mr. Myers: No, you can’t *splay* your stomach or your tongue. You can only *splay* things that have parts to spread out.

Adapted from Molly F. Collins, “Sagacious, Sophisticated, and Sedulous: The Importance of Discussing 50-Cent Words with Preschoolers,” *Young Children* 67 (November 2012), 66–71.

Aquala: (*spreading arms apart*) This splay?

Mr. Myers: Yes, you are splaying your arms.

When Aquala applied a literal understanding of *spread*, Mr. Myers clarified. He explained that splaying requires parts (like body parts) and differs from spreading a substance (like peanut butter).

Help children deepen their understanding of words.

Ms. Fradon reads aloud William T. George's *Box Turtle at Long Pond*. During a group discussion she helps Garth develop a deeper understanding of the word *predator*.

Ms. Fradon: A *predator* is an animal that eats other animals.

Garth: Like a tiger. A tiger eats an antelope.

Ms. Fradon: Yes.

Garth: Because (*pointing to raccoon*) they eat turtles.

Ms. Fradon: So, a raccoon is a predator of?

Garth: Of the ... (*pointing to turtle*)

Ms. Fradon: Box turtle. Exactly.

Caritina: (*pointing to raccoon*) Yep, that's a predator.

Garth has some knowledge of predators through examples (he knows that tigers are predators). Ms. Fradon's definition of the word *predator* helped him fully understand the meaning. He showed this understanding by saying that a raccoon is a predator because it eats turtles.

Use conversations to correct initial misunderstandings.

Sometimes children miss important distinctions in meaning, do not hear the word precisely, or misapply their existing knowledge about language. A teacher-led conversation can help to correct these misunderstandings. Mr. Chua and the children discuss illustrations of bunting during a reading of *Henry's Happy Birthday*.

Mr. Chua: Do you know what bunting is?

Antoine: Uh-uh [no].

Mr. Chua: (*to Val*) Do you know?

Val: Uh-huh [yes]. It's putting up things.

Mr. Chua: Not quite. Bunting is a decoration.

Val: Uh-huh.

Mr. Chua: It's cloth or paper that is hung up at parties. It is a decoration—something pretty. Sometimes grown-ups put bunting up to decorate a room or the outside of a building.

Because the word *bunting* ends in -ing (like *throwing* or *riding*) Val thinks that it involves action. Mr. Chua clarifies that bunting is something that is put up, not the action of hanging something.

Implications for teaching

Teaching sophisticated vocabulary requires that adults know the words and their variations. In addition, teachers must model thinking outside the book.

Knowing what to know

Children first need to know the typical, common definition of a word. Knowing a word includes understanding how its meaning can vary, depending on how it is used. When teachers use the same word in different scenarios, it strengthens children's understandings of the word's meaning. An umbrella's fabric *repels* water.

Bug spray *repels* insects. Although these ideas differ, both mean to "push away from" or "ward off."

Exposure to the same word across settings can also teach differences in meaning. A shirt can have *crisp* folds. *Crisp* crackers break easily. Morning air can feel *crisp*. Knowing words means learning

variations. This requires early, continued exposure across contexts.

Thinking outside the book

Throughout the day, teachers can use words introduced in books. This encourages children to use the words in their own conversations.

- Use sophisticated vocabulary deliberately with children throughout the day. This provides repeated exposure and helps children understand what the word means in different contexts. For example, a teacher might explain the word *persevere* when it is first encountered in a storybook. Later she uses it during activities with children and then uses it again during a conversation.

- Provide concrete examples of sophisticated vocabulary. For example, when washing berries, show and label a sieve. Define *sieve*—a wire mesh utensil—and explain its function: in this case, straining water from washed fruit. Show examples of types of sieves, discuss different functions (e.g., sifting, puréeing), or show examples of sieves in different contexts, such as construction or archaeology. Encourage children to use sieves in cooking and in outdoor and water play activities.

Children need opportunities to practice new vocabulary in different settings. Small groups are especially helpful for dual language learners and children who tend to be shy. In small



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For more on this topic, read the *Young Children* article “Sagacious, Sophisticated, and Sedulous: The Importance of Discussing 50-Cent Words with Preschoolers” at naeyc.org/tyc.



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groups children can use the word in an authentic way: “I am using the sieve to sift the flour.” Children can compare new information to what they already know, offer additional new information themselves, and evaluate information shared by other group members.

A few parting words

Teachers and families must be *sagacious* (wise) while exposing preschoolers to sophisticated words and helping children use them during conversations and activities. They must be *sophisticated* (complex) while choosing and talking about worthy words. Finally, we must be *sedulous* (diligent) in preparing to teach and use vocabulary during different activities and experiences. If young children develop large vocabularies, they are more likely to become strong readers who understand what they read. The 50-cent words are worth it.

REFERENCES

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Using *Persevere* Across Multiple Contexts

Trisha: The bus got stuck on a hill. Then it hit a pothole! But the driver kept going.

Mr. Milner: She *persevered* through all those problems. She kept trying and got you to school!

Mr. Milner: If the bus gets stuck again, we know the driver will work hard to keep going.

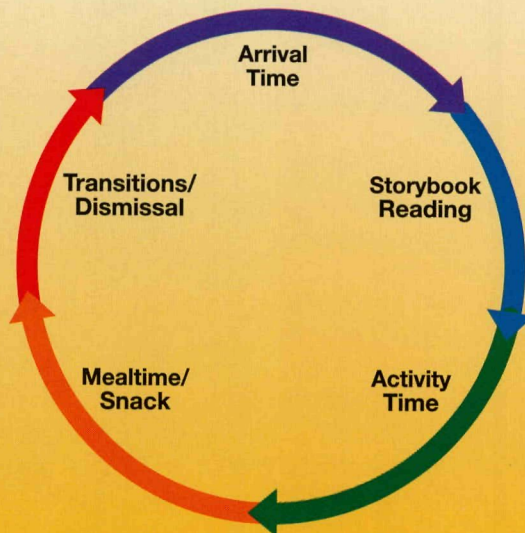
Trisha: To *persevere* to get us home.

Mr. Milner: Yes, she will! If you get stuck again, you can tell your mom ... and me tomorrow ...

Trisha: My sister is learning how to ride a bike. She falls off a lot but gets back on!

Esteban: She *perseveres*.

Mr. Milner: Yes, *persevering* like your bus driver and the mother cat in our story.



Mr. Milner: (Commenting on a storybook) The mother cat had to move her babies to safety. She *persevered* through rain and wind—difficult times.

Trisha: She kept on trying.

Mr. Milner: (In the block area) Two people bumped into your tower already, but you just rebuilt it and kept working. That's *perseverance*.

Trisha: Yeah, we're working hard. We ran out of blocks, too.

Esteban: We're *persevering*!

Reflective Questions

Know yourself

■ Reflect on a time you heard a word or phrase that was new to you. How do you approach learning new words and meanings? What is your comfort level in playing with, learning, and using complex vocabulary?

■ How would you assess your own vocabulary and your use of complex words with children? What would you need to do to increase your use of 50-cent words?

Consider multiple perspectives

■ What beliefs and values underlie teachers' use of sophisticated vocabulary with young children? What learning outcomes might result from this?

■ What other perspectives on the use of sophisticated vocabulary should be considered? How might cultural

or family background influence ideas about complex vocabulary?

Examine the environment

■ Observe your physical environment. Identify places where the joy of sharing words happens often. What might you add to encourage more vocabulary?

Find the details of children's competency

■ Listen carefully to children as they play. Notice specific examples of children using complex vocabulary. Where can you observe individual children's strengths and competencies with language as they play?

■ Notice children who use languages other than English. How can you encourage their use of sophisticated vocabulary?

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