Closing the word gap: activities for the classroom

Key stage 1
Key stage 1

Jo Holmes has been teaching in Birmingham primary schools for almost 20 years. She specialises in English and has taught across the key stages, from EYFS through to KS3. Jo is passionate about encouraging children to read for pleasure. Here she shares practical ideas for developing children’s vocabulary and closing the word gap.

Introduction

While the games and activities below have been included to specifically address – and to begin to close – the word gap, it is important to bear in mind that vocabulary is ‘caught’ as well as ‘taught’. The role of the adults in school and at home is crucial in helping children to develop their understanding and use of language. This is particularly true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may suffer from a paucity of language which places them in a less advantageous position than their peers. The importance of providing a language-rich environment for these children cannot be overestimated. Every interaction with a child provides an opportunity to extend vocabulary, model standard English, encourage the use of extended sentences, and to have fun with language – the balancing act required here can be a delicate one, but it is incredibly worthwhile.

Books are another powerful resource for vocabulary development, and a school which promotes and fosters a culture of reading for pleasure will be giving children an enormous advantage in this area. Research has shown that reading for pleasure has more impact on educational attainment than any socio-economic factors. However, it is precisely those disadvantaged children most in need that are less likely to read often, to see themselves positively as readers, and to have access to a broad range of different reading materials. It is therefore incumbent on us in school to provide children with an environment that fosters a love of reading, offering every child the benefits associated with becoming a lifelong lover of books.

Strategies to promote an ethos of reading for pleasure may include:

- Providing a well-stocked class and school library, allowing children access to a wide range of reading materials, such as picture books, poetry books, newspapers and magazines for children, information books, and ‘classic’ texts, both modern and traditional.

- Ensuring there is time, every day, for children to be read to. This allows children to access books – and language – beyond their reading ability and to begin to internalise the music of language, as well as enjoying the sheer pleasure of being immersed in a great story. Building in time to talk about the stories being read will also help to build a community of readers.

- Developing teachers’ subject knowledge regarding high-quality children’s literature, including newly published works, and keeping up to date with the reading choices of their children. This is particularly important when assessing children against the national curriculum expectations in reading, which require teachers to assess children’s attitude to reading and their thoughts and opinions on a wide range of texts.

- Celebrating reading through whole-school events, such as World Book Day assemblies, author visits, and competitions.
Modelling a love of reading and valuing different ‘forms’ of reading – class reading displays could incorporate images of adults and children reading different types of text in different locations.

Providing cozy and comfortable spaces for reading which include peer recommendations for ‘your next favourite book’.

Responding to books in different ways, including those which incorporate drama and role-play, or visual art.

Building reading relationships via paired reading across year groups, inviting parents and friends into school for regular ‘reading for pleasure’ sessions, or building a relationship with a published author who acts as a ‘Patron of Reading’.

Finally, with all these wonderful new words and phrases being learned, it is important that children have some way of recording them for future reference. Working walls, word books, or vocabulary bookmarks can all be used to good effect, allowing children to collect and revisit words that they have learned before confidently using them themselves.

The activities in this section fall into two categories: quick activity ideas – ideal for registration, lining up, or for when you have a few minutes before lunch or at the end of the day – and session ideas – activities which require more time and a little more preparation. There is also a section at the end which you may wish to hand out to parents. This section comprises ideas for games and conversations at home, and useful links.

Please note that you will need to join [www.oxfordowl.co.uk](http://www.oxfordowl.co.uk) for free to access some of the featured resources.
Quick activity ideas

Activity 1: I say, I say
This game is ideal to play after learning synonyms for said (see session 2).

Agree a sentence with the children – standard or silly! Children take turns to repeat the sentence in different ways, for example, muttering, bellowing or whining, then invite others to guess the synonym for said.

This game can be adapted to relate to adverbs also – ‘she said reluctantly’.

Activity 2: True or false?
This activity is aimed at consolidating vocabulary that has been taught.

Offer children a word that has been previously taught or encountered, and then offer an accurate – or inaccurate – definition.

‘Grateful means thankful for something – true or false?’

Children or teams score points for correct answers.

If an inaccurate definition has been given, elicit or offer the accurate definition, and model using it in a sentence. Extra points can be awarded to children or teams who can use it accurately in a sentence of their own. Where children have used a new word inaccurately, remember to celebrate their efforts and model its correct usage.

Activity 3: Where are you?
Display a large copy of a class photograph. Ask children questions to develop their understanding and use of positional language.

‘Who is above and to the right of Isla?’

‘Who is three places to the left of Emmanuel?’

‘I am a row above Lucy and two places to the left of Mohammed. Who am I?’

‘If Tom moved four places to the right, where would he be?’ (Encourage higher attainers to answer this with ‘to the left/right of …’, rather than just ‘next to …’.)

Higher-attaining children could be invited to pose their own questions.
**Activity 4: Choose a word**

Give children a sentence with a missing word. This could be an adjective, a noun, a verb, or an adverb, according to the teaching focus. Encourage children to choose an appropriate word and say the complete sentence. Reward exciting vocabulary choices.

- ‘The wind blew through the trees.’
- ‘The wind whistled through the trees.’
- ‘The wind swept through the trees.’
- ‘The wind howled through the trees.’

**Activity 5: Odd one out**

Offer children three or four vocabulary options, and ask them to choose the odd one out. There does not have to be a ‘correct’ answer as long as children can explain their thinking.

- ‘I think that large is the odd one out because gigantic, enormous, and huge are more powerful adjectives.’

**Activity 6: Give me five!**

This is a quick-fire game for children to play individually, in pairs, or in groups. Give children a category, and ask for five appropriate word choices, encouraging the use of higher-order vocabulary.

- ‘Give me five adjectives to describe today’s weather.’
- ‘Give me five adjectives to describe how Spiderman moves.’
- ‘Give me five synonyms for said.’
- ‘Give me five nouns you find in the kitchen.’

**Activity 7: New words**

When they are lining up to be released at the end of the day, ask children about new words they have learned throughout the day, celebrating adventurous and exciting vocabulary. Award bonus points or stickers if children can define the word and use it in a sentence.

- ‘Today I learned the word captivate. It means holding someone’s attention. I was captivated by Holly’s dancing in PE. What is the best word you have heard, learned, or used today?’
Session ideas

Session 1: Modelled reading

You will need: text extracts for teacher modelling and for children, resources 1a and 1b.

Teach

Although it is less familiar to teachers than modelled writing, modelled reading – demonstrating to children what to do when a new, unfamiliar, or unexpected word is encountered while reading – is vitally important.

Choose an extract from a class text, or an e-book such as *Space Poems*, available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk. Read the text aloud until the new word is encountered.

‘Garment? That’s a new word for me, and I’m not sure what it means. Let’s see if I can work it out.’

Model how to read on for context, how to substitute known words, and how to look for etymological clues, such as prefixes, suffixes, or words within words. Involve children in working out a meaning and developing a definition of the word. Check the definition in a dictionary, and record the new word and its meaning on the working wall.

Practise and apply

Provide children with their own text extracts, chosen for their vocabulary-mining potential, or invite them to use their own reading books. Ask them to identify new words as they read and to complete one of the two differentiated worksheets – resource 1a for lower and middle attainers or resource 1b for higher attainers. Struggling readers may need support with this activity.

Review

Collect children’s vocabulary choices, and record them on the working wall. Ask a child to choose a new word and mime it / act it out for the rest of the class to guess.
## Resource 1a: What’s the word?

### New word:

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<tr>
<th>Use it in a sentence:</th>
<th>Draw it:</th>
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<tr>
<th>Explain what it means:</th>
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<th>Explain what it means:</th>
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<th>New word:</th>
<th>Use it in a sentence:</th>
<th>Draw it:</th>
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<td>Explain what it means:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Does it have any other meanings? Can you put these in a sentence?</td>
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<th>Use it in a sentence:</th>
<th>Draw it:</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Does it have any other meanings? Can you put these in a sentence?</td>
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Session 2: Find a friend

You will need: e-book Finn MacCool (available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk), enough sets of laminated word cards – cut out and shuffled – from resource 2 to provide one set per pair.

Teach

Read through the story Finn MacCool, recording a list of the synonyms for said. Ask children what is the same about each of the words, and elicit that they have the same – or a similar – meaning.

Introduce the term synonym and its meaning, and explain that today we are finding synonyms for given words.

‘Can anyone add any more synonyms for said to our list?’

Discuss the value of synonyms and how writers use them to engage their readers. Display the following sentences, and invite children to select different words from the synonym list to complete them.

‘Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman,’ ________________ the giant.

‘Tidy your room,’ ________________ Dad.

‘Please don’t eat me!’ ________________ the princess.

Ask children how their different choices affect the meaning and impact of the sentences.

Practise and apply

Give children word cards from resource 2 and ask them to place them, face down, on the table. Explain that they will be working in pairs, taking it in turns to turn over two cards. If the words are synonyms of one another, the player can keep them. The player with the most pairs at the end of the game wins.

This game can be differentiated by using either the yellow and orange cards, the orange and pink cards, or both sets of pink cards, depending on year group and ability.

Review

Work as a class to collect and display as many pairs of synonyms as possible. Add to the display whenever a new word is learned.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>said</th>
<th>cried</th>
<th>declared</th>
<th>stated</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>walk</td>
<td>march</td>
<td>plod</td>
<td>strolled</td>
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<tr>
<td>big</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>huge</td>
<td>enormous</td>
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<tr>
<td>small</td>
<td>little</td>
<td>tiny</td>
<td>miniscule</td>
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<tr>
<td>good</td>
<td>great</td>
<td>marvellous</td>
<td>incredible</td>
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<tr>
<td>bad</td>
<td>awful</td>
<td>dreadful</td>
<td>appalling</td>
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<tr>
<td>pretty</td>
<td>beautiful</td>
<td>attractive</td>
<td>pleasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yummy</td>
<td>tasty</td>
<td>delicious</td>
<td>mouth-watering</td>
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<tr>
<td>pleased</td>
<td>glad</td>
<td>delighted</td>
<td>thrilled</td>
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<tr>
<td>cross</td>
<td>angry</td>
<td>furious</td>
<td>livid</td>
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</table>
Session 3: Here Come the Aliens

You will need: a copy of Here Come the Aliens by Colin McNaughton, an envelope containing a set of the alien words from resource 3, a laminated cut-out of the alien image in resource 3 or an alien toy or puppet.

Teach

Read and enjoy Here Come the Aliens with the children. This story is a rich source of vocabulary, suitable for modelled reading (see activity 1). Once new vocabulary has been added to the working wall, turn to the page of alien language. Read the words inside the speech bubbles, and ask children what they think the aliens might be talking about. Emphasise that there is no correct answer, but allow children to share their ideas while enjoying playing with language. This is also an opportunity to consolidate any prior learning on word classes.

‘I think oompah oompah might be a verb because it sounds like a heavy animal moving to me.’

Practise and apply

Introduce Zagger the alien, who has brought some words for the children to read (see resource 3). Encourage children to use phonics to decode Zagger’s words, and then ask them for suggestions as to what each word means. Celebrate examples of higher-order vocabulary.

‘Rosie thinks that kinlay means amazing. I think that is an amazing word!’

Encourage children to use the template on resource 3 to write their own alien words and meanings.

Review

Add any new (non-alien!) vocabulary to the working wall, and refer to it whenever possible. Model using new words, and reward children’s use of the new vocabulary.
Resource 3: Here Come the Aliens
### Resource 3: Here Come the Aliens

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>kinlay</th>
<th>fleb</th>
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<tr>
<td>shoop</td>
<td>crite</td>
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<td>fruzz</td>
<td>poan</td>
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<td>lesh</td>
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<td>jemp</td>
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<td>heth</td>
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<td>wethless</td>
<td>clate</td>
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<td>dreb</td>
<td>hutlut</td>
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</table>
Now it’s your turn to make up some alien words!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alien word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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Session 4: Say what you see

You will need: a copy of *Gorilla* by Anthony Browne.

**Teach**

This activity is most successful when working in small groups, allowing children to look closely at the images.

Read the story aloud to the children, using the strategies from activity 1 when encountering new vocabulary. Give children time to think about and respond to the story before asking them to look at the pictures.

**Practise and apply**

Use a combination of questions and prompts to encourage children to talk about what they can see, with the aim of developing their visual literacy, critical thinking, and language development.

- ‘Tell me what you notice in the picture.’
- ‘Does the picture give us any clues about how Hannah is feeling?’
- ‘Is there anything surprising about the colours used?’
- ‘Do you think Hannah is awake or asleep? Why?’

Put children into pairs, and ask them to come up with a question of their own for the rest of the group. Record their questions for use in future book-sharing activities.

**Review**

Show the children other works by Anthony Browne, along with books by Oliver Jeffers, Allan Ahlberg, and Shaun Tan, and explain that these books are all interesting to look at and to talk about, as well as to read. Keep the books in a special basket in the reading area, and encourage children to pair up to share the books and their pictures together. Higher-attaining children could be encouraged to write down their questions to be discussed with a larger group.
Session 5: We’re going on an adjective hunt

You will need: We’re Going on a Bear Hunt by Michael Rosen, resources 4a and 4b.

Teach
Read the story with the children, enjoying the depth and breadth of vocabulary used.

‘What is the mud like? It is thick and oozy.’

Explain that these words are adjectives and that they describe the mud. Discuss the purposes of adjectives – for clarity ('Pass me the blue crayon.') and for effect ('… the heavy footsteps …').

Practise and apply
‘Today, we’re going on an adjective hunt! We’re going to find some great ones!’

This activity could be approached in different ways. Ideally, lower and middle attainers would be paired with high attainers to complete one or all of these activities.

Using resource 4a, pairs of children should hunt for adjectives around the school, investigating corridor displays or noticeboards and even asking any adults they encounter to suggest a favourite adjective.

Alternatively, ensure a small selection of books or topic-related text extracts is available. Ask children to read their text and identify the adjectives, recording which are used to describe objects, places or people on resource 4b.

Review
Collate the ‘best of’ each group’s adjectives, and display on the classroom working wall.
Resource 4a: We’re going on an adjective hunt!

Name: _____________________________________________

Write down all the adjectives you see (or hear!) around the school.

Our adjective hunt
Name: ________________________________

Look through the text to see which adjectives you can find. What do they describe? Add them to the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objects</th>
<th>Places</th>
<th>People</th>
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</table>
Session 6: Roll to write

You will need: laminated game cards (resource 5) and a six-sided dice for each pair of children.

Teach

This activity aims to consolidate teaching and learning around word classes, and to address the impact that different vocabulary choices has on the meaning of sentences.

Recap the meaning of the terms noun, verb and adjective. Display the following sentence on the board and ask children to identify the nouns, verbs, and adjectives:

The vicious dog bit the girl.

Ask children: ‘What happens if I change the noun dog to girl? If I change the verb bit to hugged? If I change the adjective vicious to friendly?’

Work through similar examples with the children, considering the effectiveness of differing vocabulary, and referring to prior learning on synonyms (see session 2).

‘Which synonym works best and why – nice, friendly, or affectionate?’

Practise and apply

Children work in pairs, using a laminated game card (see resource 5) and a six-sided dice between them. They take it in turns to roll the dice and add an appropriate word choice to the sentence frame on their game card. The first to complete their sentence wins.

Roll 1 to add an adjective.
Roll 2 to add an adjective.
Roll 3 to add a noun.
Roll 4 to add a verb.
Roll 5 to add more information.
Roll 6 to add punctuation.

Review

Share sentences. Consider what worked well and what was tricky. Celebrate examples of higher-order vocabulary.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>adjective(s)</th>
<th>noun</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>more information</th>
<th>punctuation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Player 1 name: ____________</td>
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<td>Player 2 name: ____________</td>
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<td>Player 1 name: ____________</td>
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<td>Player 2 name: ____________</td>
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<th>punctuation</th>
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<td>Player 1 name: ____________</td>
<td>My</td>
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<td>Player 2 name: ____________</td>
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Session 7: *Where the Wild Things Are*

You will need: a copy of *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. This book talk activity works well with any book, including non-fiction. For other suitable texts see BookMatch on Oxford Owl.

**Teach**

Read the story to the children, and allow them quiet thinking time to reflect on the story. After a few moments, encourage them to share their first thoughts with a talking partner, expressing anything that struck them about the story. Ask them:

‘Is there anything unusual about the story that you would like to know more about?’

‘Can you think of a question you would like to ask about the book?’

Children may need to be given open-ended questions to begin with, but as they become more practised at this activity, they should aim to generate their own questions.

**Practise and apply**

‘Our question today is *Why was Max’s supper still hot?* There is no correct or incorrect answer – we are sharing what we think.’

Encourage children to contribute their ideas and opinions, facilitating the discussion and eliciting and celebrating language which develops creative and critical thinking skills.

‘I like Kate’s use of the word although, as it shows that she is thinking about different ways of looking at the question.’

Other adults that are available to participate in the discussion can play a powerful role in modelling the use of language in philosophical debate.

**Review**

Conclude the discussion with an opportunity for last thoughts, and allow children quiet thinking time to reflect on the discussion.

Record a list of words and phrases which were useful during the discussion, such as because, although, but, and however. Display and refer to this list during future discussions.
Session 8: Clever conjunctions

You will need: an enlarged version of the first page of resource 6, enough copies of the differentiated worksheets (resource 6a or 6b) for every child.

Teach

Display the two short texts on the resource, and read both aloud.

‘What is different about these pieces of writing?’

Elicit that the second text flows better due to the use of conjunctions. Ask children to identify the conjunctions used, and record these for display on the working wall.

Explain that the conjunctions do different jobs and that it is important to choose the correct conjunction for the correct sentence.

‘I took my umbrella or it was raining.’

‘I took my umbrella because it was raining.’

Which conjunction works for that sentence?

Practise and apply

Children complete differentiated worksheets, resource 6a or 6b, choosing and using appropriate conjunctions to complete sentences.

Review

Ask children to talk about what they have learned today, celebrating the use of conjunctions in their spoken language. Explain that you will secretly be listening for their use of conjunctions and will reward examples at the end of the day.
It was a hot day. The sun was shining brightly. I wanted to go outside. My parents said no. I was furious! I had to stay inside. My friends were having fun at the park.

It was a hot day and the sun was shining brightly. I wanted to go outside but my parents said no. I was furious because I had to stay inside while my friends were having fun at the park.
Choose the correct conjunction to complete each sentence below.

and       but       because       or

1. I love dogs ___________________ I love cats more.
2. Will you choose an apple ___________________ a pear?
3. It is cold today ___________________ it is winter.
4. I am good at reading ___________________ I am good at writing.
5. I was late ___________________ the traffic was bad.
6. Mum said I could play football ___________________ go swimming.

Now write a sentence of your own. Don’t forget to include a conjunction!

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Name: ___________________________________________

Choose the correct conjunction to complete each sentence below.

and but because or when if that

1. I love dogs ______________________ I love cats more.
2. I will be allowed to play outside __________________ I put my coat on.
3. Will you choose an apple ______________________ a pear?
4. I have a great book ______________________ you will love!
5. We will play outside ______________________ it has stopped raining.
6. It is cold today ______________________ it is winter.
7. I am good at reading ______________________ I am good at writing.

Now write two sentences of your own. Don’t forget to include a conjunction!

1. ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
2. ___________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________
Conversations and vocabulary games to try at home

Whatever your child’s reading ability, enjoying a book together allows them to develop their understanding, as well as to learn lots of new and exciting words. Read to your child whenever you can, ask them to read to you, or take turns reading pages or chapters of a book. Public libraries are a fantastic resource for allowing children to borrow books for free (and often have storytelling sessions and other craft and activity sessions in those long school holidays!).

Talking with and listening to your child teaches them the importance of spoken language and supports them in developing their vocabulary. When chatting with your child, try to avoid asking too many questions, but let them hear your own thoughts; children need to hear language in order to use it themselves. When you do ask your child a question, it is ideal to ask an ‘open’ question – one that cannot be answered with a single word. For example, ‘What was the best thing that happened today?’ rather than ‘How was school?’; to which the inevitable answer is ‘Fine’!

Here are some more suggestions:

- Introduce a new element to the game of ‘I went shopping and I bought …’ (where a player names an item, for example, apples, and the next player names this item and adds another, so players end up reciting a list) by using alliteration, where two words begin with the same sound: ‘I went shopping and I bought chunky chips / tasty tomatoes / bright berries,’ etc.

- Play I Spy where one player says, ‘I spy with my little eye something beginning with …’ and makes or names the first sound or letter at the beginning of the name of something they can see near them. The other player(s) try to guess what it is using the first sound or letter as a clue.

- Play Who am I? Take turns describing book/TV/film characters and guessing their identities.

- Play Where am I? Take turns describing a room in your house or another identifiable place, such as a familiar shop / the park / the station – anywhere you both know. The other player has to guess the place being described.

- What am I? is another good version of the above. Describe animals or objects around the house or streets.

- Play Would you rather? Would you rather fly or be invisible? Why? Would you rather be an astronaut or a deep-sea diver? Why? Would you rather there was always sun or always snow? Why?

- Play the yes/no game. Ask a series of questions to which your child is not allowed to reply either yes or no. Count how many they answer before slipping up, and then swap roles. It is a great way to think about different ways to reply!

- Riddles and jokes that rely on word play are a fun way to think about language in different ways. A joke of the day will help your child to realise that playing with words is fun, and riddles are good for developing critical thinking skills. There are plenty of examples online.
Keeping a notebook or card with any new vocabulary that your child has learned will be a great resource for them to go back to, helping them to remember those fantastic new words! Decorating it with pictures or stickers will make it fun and will encourage them to use it in the future.

For more ideas, see:
https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/for-home/advice-for-parents/fun-ideas-learning-at-home/

For more information on why the word gap matters and how you can help your child to develop their vocabulary at home, see:
For further information

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