

Closing the word gap: reading at home

Primary EYFS, KS1, and KS2



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Closing the word gap: introduction for teachers

Limited vocabulary prevents children from accessing their learning, developing self-esteem, and enjoying meaningful social interactions, severely affecting their future life chances. Furthermore, 69% of primary teachers surveyed for [Why Closing the Word Gap Matters: Oxford Language Report](#) believe this vocabulary deficit is increasing.

As Andrea Quincy observes, 'one of the key challenges facing primary teachers is the growing number of children coming into our schools with a limited vocabulary and poor communication skills' (OUP, 2018).

How can we help?

Alongside ensuring our teaching is rich in language – see [Closing the word gap: activities for the classroom](#) for easy-to-use ideas and resources – it is imperative that we foster in children a love of reading. James Clements states, 'Reading and listening to a wide range of different texts gives children a reservoir of language that they can draw on when they wish to communicate their own ideas.' (OUP, 2018)

Of course, this will not come as news to teachers, who have long banged the drum for regular reading and book talk in school and at home. Step into any primary school, and you are instantly struck by varied and wonderful initiatives to promote reading for pleasure. However, getting children and parents to march to that same tune is not always easy.

The following ideas and activities aim to get families reading and talking about books. They are divided into three sets – those for all primary ages, those for EYFS and KS1, and those for KS2 – and are presented as printable handouts for parents. They are designed to be simple, engaging, and parent-friendly. After all, we need to get parents onside. As James Clements declares, 'Ultimately, reading gives children a voice of their own.' (ibid.)

Closing the word gap: introduction for parents

What is the word gap?

Quite simply, the word gap refers to a lack of language. According to a study by Oxford University Press (*Why Closing the Word Gap Matters: Oxford Language Report, 2018*), over half of teachers believe that 40% of the children they teach do not have a good enough vocabulary to learn effectively, and in primary schools 69% of teachers believe the situation is getting worse.

Why does it matter?

Jane Harley notes, 'Without enough language – a word gap – a child is seriously limited in their enjoyment of school and success beyond.' (OUP, 2018)

Children with a good vocabulary are four or five times more likely to do well at school and in the workplace, to develop strong relationships, and to have good mental health (OUP, 2018).

How can parents help? By supporting children with their reading.

Reading and listening to a variety of books exposes children to new ideas, new places, new people, and, importantly, to new words and phrases. All this improves children's own language and understanding, their communication skills, and, in turn, their chances in life.

This set of simple, fun activities is designed to help you and your child to enjoy books together at home, and you don't need to spend a fortune on books to enjoy reading together. Joining the library is completely free and will give you and your child access to hundreds of books to enjoy. You'll find more on libraries on page 5.

You can find out more about the word gap and the importance of learning vocabulary at [Oxford Owl for Home](#).

“If you are going to get anywhere in life you have to read a lot of books.”

Roald Dahl

Ideas for all ages

1

Use the library

Join your local library, and take advantage of all the services they provide. Libraries are free to join, and children can borrow a large number of books for three weeks at a time. Not only can children borrow books, but libraries usually have a selection of audiobooks and DVDs to borrow too, so there's plenty on offer for a wet weekend or a long school holiday.

Libraries often run storytelling sessions in school holidays, along with reading challenges and other activities. Why not take advantage?

Try the resource **Resource 1: Library detectives** (page 7) to help your child discover how to use the library.

2

Reading dens

Children love dens! Create a reading den somewhere in your house or garden. It doesn't have to be large or elaborate – curling up under a sheet or duvet with a torch is great fun! Add cushions, blankets, and soft toys if possible. Low lighting creates a cosy atmosphere, so a lamp, lantern, or good torch will make the experience even more special. And if you can get inside the den with your child, all the better!

If your den is permanent, encourage your child to choose their own small stash of books to place there to start with, and then swap others in now and again. If not, create space in your child's bedroom for a bookshelf or a box of books, and do the same.

If space and finances allow, there are some great indoor tipis online. Or look for further inspiration on Pinterest.

3

Book swaps

Swapping the books on your child's shelf or in their book box now and again can really help to keep them interested. Swap with friends or colleagues with children of a similar age, and encourage your child to borrow from the school library. Get other parents in school involved, and arrange a regular book swap. Your school might be keen to support with this by providing a space to meet or simply by providing a box for people to place old books into. Non-fiction books, comics, and magazines can all be included.

Encourage your child to use the **Resource 2: Book swap** (page 8) to let others know why they should choose that book or magazine. Slip it inside the cover before placing it in the book swapping area.

It's also important to remember that rereading old favourites is just as good a way to help develop language and a love of reading. A familiar story can be a real comfort at times.

4

Make it a family affair!

Enabling your child to see you reading is incredibly valuable in developing their own enthusiasm for reading. Draw attention to your own reading – whether that be fiction, non-fiction (such as a cookbook or a manual), a newspaper, or a magazine – and tell them what you're reading and why. Tell them whether you're enjoying the book or finding it useful, and why you chose it, and encourage them to do the same. Share snippets from the book or newspaper where possible.

Make time to read together. You might all read something different, or you may want to read something together. You could read aloud to one another or in silence. Add some interest by reading in different places, whether in different rooms in the house, in the garden or the park, on the bus or the train, or anywhere else you can think of! Reading outside after dark with a torch or an outside light can be particularly exciting for children. When reading aloud, encourage your child to think about how the characters might sound; if you can, put on different voices and accents, and encourage your child to do the same.

5

Book talk

Talking about reading is an important part of developing reading skills and vocabulary. Remember to ask your child about their reading and to share your own thoughts.

For fiction:

- Which character is their favourite? Why?
- What do they think is going to happen? Why?
- What would they do in this situation?
- Is there anything about the book they would change?
- What was their favourite part of the book? And their least favourite?
- Did anything in the book remind them of their own experiences?
- How does the book make them feel?

For non-fiction:

- What is the book about?
- Why would someone use this book?
- How is the information presented?
- What was the most interesting part?
- Is there anything about the book they would change?
- Is there anything missing from the book?

6

Watch, listen, interact

Audiobooks are a great way to encourage an interest in books. Borrow from the library, and listen in the car, at bedtime, or anywhere you can. Encourage your child to respond to what they're hearing and to look for books by the same author, or in the same style or genre. For younger children, [CBeebies Bedtime Stories](#) is a lovely way to introduce new stories. For older children, the [CBBC Book Club](#) is a great source of information on good books and allows children to read and submit reviews, drawings, comments, and book-related selfies! Children can also access a wide range of free [eBooks](#) via Oxford Owl Home (please note you will have to register for free first).

Try [BookTrust](#) too – a fantastic source of information about children's books with a range of [quizzes](#) for children.

7

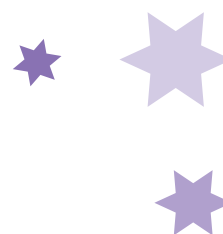
Visit a bookshop

It sounds obvious, but taking your child to browse in a bookshop is a wonderful way to spark their interest. A good bookshop will have a great children's section with some very colourful displays and willing advisors. Some also have places to sit and read. [Waterstones](#) is a great example, and they run regular events such as author visits, book signings, and storytelling sessions. Look for events near you on their website. And don't forget independent bookshops – these can be a real treasure trove!

If you don't have the funds to buy new, visit second-hand bookshops and charity shops for some real bargains.

Resource 1:

Library detectives



Join your library, and see if you can find the answers to these questions. Write the answers yourself, or ask an adult to help you.

Which days is your library open?

How many books are you allowed to borrow at once?

How much do you have to pay if you return them late?

Who is the first author in the fiction section for your age?

What is the title of the last book in the non-fiction (reference) section?

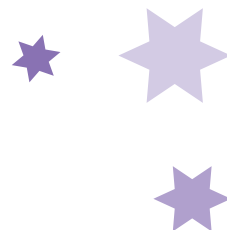
How many books can you find by Julia Donaldson?

How many books can you find by Roald Dahl?

Which books by David Walliams can you find?

How many non-fiction books about animals can you find?

What is your library card number?

Resource 2:**Book swap**

Why should your friends read this book? Fill in the sheet yourself, or ask an adult to help. Then cut it out, and put it inside the book you are swapping.

Read me!

I am funny/exciting/scary/sweet/_____

I am suitable for children aged _____

Children who like _____ will enjoy reading me.

Read me!

I am funny/exciting/scary/sweet/_____

I am suitable for children aged _____

Children who like _____ will enjoy reading me.

Ideas for children in reception to year 2

1 Words are all around us

Reading isn't just about books! Read signs aloud when you're out and about, and ask your child to do the same. If the words are tricky, encourage them to look for clues to their meanings: where is the sign? Does it have a picture or a symbol? If it's on a lorry, what's the lorry carrying? Look at speed limit signs and ask your child whether you should be driving faster or slower than at the previous sign.

'I am packing a bag with three plums, four oranges, once slice of watermelon, one lollipop, and one piece of chocolate cake.'
This is a bag for the Very Hungry Caterpillar.

You can make this more challenging by naming one item at a time and seeing how quickly each of the players guesses the owner of the bag. The player who guesses with the fewest clues wins.

2 The number plate game

Look at the letters on vehicle number plates, and try to make up silly phrases or rhymes beginning with the letters:

BF14 TEH = Big Fierce Tortoises Eat Haribo

3 Shop till you drop

Take a shopping list with you next time you go, and ask your child to read it to you as you shop. (You may need to write in capital letters to help them with this.) Ask them for help reading labels too. Add a bit of fun by thinking of words to describe the item, especially ones beginning with the same sound: *brilliant bananas, marvellous mince*.

5 Design a home

Encourage your child to draw or build a home for a favourite book character. They could use simple pencil and paper, Lego, recycled materials such as cereal boxes, or sticks and leaves, etc. if outside. Encourage them to think about what the character might particularly need or like in their home. For example, the Gruffalo might want a big, strong door to protect him from the mouse!

6 Who am I?

This is a game for two or more players where you each have the name of a character, and you take turns to ask questions to guess the identity of your character. The tricky part is that the player answering the question can only answer with a yes or a no!

4 Pack a bag

Take turns to pack an imaginary bag for a book character known to you and your child, but don't reveal who the bag is for. The other player must guess.

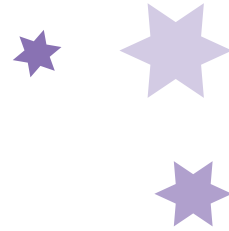
'I am packing a bag with straw, sticks, and bricks.'

This is a bag for the Three Little Pigs.

Cut out the character cards from the resource **Resource 3: Who am I?** (page 10) and give one to each player. Use the questions in the resource as a guide. Or, of course, make up your own! (And if you don't know some of them, why not go to the library?)

Resource 3:

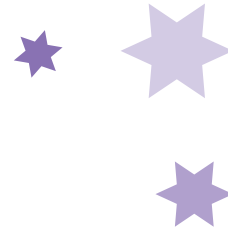
Who am I? Character cards



Cinderella	Goldilocks
The Gruffalo	The Big Bad Wolf
The Enormous Crocodile	The Very Hungry Caterpillar
Paddington Bear	The Tiger Who Came to Tea
Harry (and the Bucketful of Dinosaurs)	Winnie the Witch
The Twits	Fantastic Mr. Fox
Mog	Horrid Henry
Elmer	Kipper
The Cat in the Hat	Peter Rabbit
Hairy Maclary	Percy the Park Keeper

Resource 3:

Who am I?



Suggested questions for the Who am I? game

Is this character a person?

Is this character a girl/boy/man/woman?

Is this character an animal? (Is it a dog/cat/elephant, etc.?)

Is this character young/old?

Is this character funny/sad/lonely/kind?

Do I like stories about this character?

Does this character have adventures?

Does this character have a special outfit?

Does this character have a special friend?

Is this story written in rhyme?

Does this character change at the end?

Does this character live with their family?

Ideas for children in years 3 to 6

1

Set up a book group

Encourage your child to set up a book group with friends. They could meet in the library at school, or, even better, they could take turns to 'host' at their own houses. The idea is that the group meets regularly (for example, once a month or once a term) to discuss a book that has been chosen by one of the members well in advance of the meeting. (The children will need plenty of time to read the book.) At the meeting, the children use **Resource 4: Questions for book groups** (page 14) as a prompt to talk about the book. Each member then gives the book a score out of 10. Then one of the other members chooses a book for next time. If plenty of time is allowed between meetings, children can share a copy of the book or borrow a copy from the library.

You can help by providing refreshments to encourage participation!

2

Online reviews

Why not encourage your child to submit an online book review? The site [Lovereadings4kids](https://www.lovereadings4kids.com) offers children the chance to join their review team, where they can sign up to receive books before they are released and to review them for the publisher. It also hosts competitions to win free books. Or try [A Pocketful of Books](https://www.apocketfulofbooks.com), where children can complete a review form and submit it straight away.

3

Just three words

This is a great activity for developing vocabulary. Ask your child to describe a book/setting/character in just three words.

For example, Alex Rider might be *brave*, *quick*, *clever*...

Encourage them to be adventurous with their vocabulary (*courageous* instead of *brave*, for example). You could even ask them to improve on their choices by using a thesaurus. There are some good tools online if you don't have a thesaurus at home.

4

Compare and contrast

We all love a chance to relax in front of a film or TV series, and there are plenty around that are based on children's books. Why not encourage your child to read by showing them the beginning of a book-based film or series and then reading the beginning of that book together, comparing the two versions? Move on to the next part, and do the same until you finish. (You can do this over several days.) Which version did you both prefer and why?



5

Lucky dip

Give your child a random page number and a random line number. Ask them to pick a word on that line and remember it (or write it down). Repeat several times. Using the given words, make up a poem or phrase. It can be as silly as you like! (Any unfamiliar words can be looked up in the dictionary.)

6

Top Trumps

In the game Top Trumps, every card has a list of categories, each of which has a score. The aim is to compare these scores in order to 'trump' opponents' cards.

Each of the **Top Trumps cards in Resource 5** (page 15) is based on a well-known book character. The categories for comparison are: age, goodness, strength, intelligence, and humour.

The age category has been filled in for you. The other categories have been left for you and your child to discuss and decide upon a score. This is a great way to share your opinions! You can decide between you whether you give a score out of 10, 20, or 100. There are some blank cards for you and your child to choose your own characters should you wish.

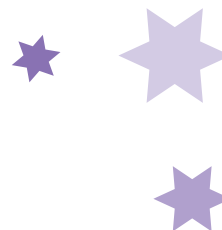
Once you have filled in the scores, cut out the cards to play the game.

Take turns to present a card and choose a category. Read out the score for that category. The highest score wins the card. You must win all cards to win the game.



Resource 4:

Questions for book groups



1. What did you think of the opening?
2. Who was your favourite character and why?
3. What did you think about the setting? Would the book have been better in a different setting?
4. Who was your least favourite character and why?
5. Did the book live up to your expectations?
6. What would you change about the book?
7. Did you enjoy the ending?
8. Was the book well written?
9. Did the book remind you of an experience you have had?
10. Did anything surprise you?
11. Would you recommend the book? If so, who to?
12. Have you read any other books by this author? Will you?
13. Can you sum up the book in one word?

Danny, Champion of the World

Age: 9

Goodness:

Strength:

Intelligence:

Humour:

Alex Rider

Age: 14

Goodness:

Strength:

Intelligence:

Humour:

Harry Potter

Age: 11

Goodness:

Strength:

Intelligence:

Humour:

Tracy Beaker

Age: 10

Goodness:

Strength:

Intelligence:

Humour:

Professor Dumbledore

Age: 115

Goodness:

Strength:

Intelligence:

Humour:

Percy Jackson

Age: 17

Goodness:

Strength:

Intelligence:

Humour:

Matilda

Age: 5

Goodness:

Strength:

Intelligence:

Humour:

Billionaire Boy

Age: 12

Goodness:

Strength:

Intelligence:

Humour:

Hermione Granger Age: 11 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Horrid Henry Age: 10 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Alice in Wonderland Age: 7 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	The Wimpy Kid Age: 13 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:
Hiccup Haddock Age: 15 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Ron Weasley Age: 11 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Gandalf Age: 2020 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Tom Gates Age: 10 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:

Professor Snape Age: 38 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Miss Trunchbull Age: 48 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Asterix Age: 35 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Hagrid Age: 60 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:
Pippi Longstocking Age: 9 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Huckleberry Finn Age: 13 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Mowgli Age: 10 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:	Charlie Bucket Age: 11 Goodness: Strength: Intelligence: Humour:

<div>Character:</div> <div>Age:</div> <div>Goodness:</div> <div>Strength:</div> <div>Intelligence:</div> <div>Humour:</div>	<div>Character:</div> <div>Age:</div> <div>Goodness:</div> <div>Strength:</div> <div>Intelligence:</div> <div>Humour:</div>	<div>Character:</div> <div>Age:</div> <div>Goodness:</div> <div>Strength:</div> <div>Intelligence:</div> <div>Humour:</div>	<div>Character:</div> <div>Age:</div> <div>Goodness:</div> <div>Strength:</div> <div>Intelligence:</div> <div>Humour:</div>
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