Early years practitioners are well aware that a language-rich environment helps children through the early stages of language development, from identifying words in speech to using them in sentences. But here, we look more closely at how children learn words, particularly names for objects, and how they use their environment to guide this process.

Helping children to learn words at an early age is incredibly important, because the number of words that a toddler knows predicts how well they will learn to read when they get to school. However, word learning is enormously complicated, and there are two primary reasons for this.

First, children need to understand that some of the sounds that grown-ups make actually relate to things around them. For example, when we hear a lion roaring, we tend not to assume that the lion is telling us anything – what it had for dinner, for example. But children have to figure out that human speech is completely different from other sounds they hear, because it carries meaning.

The second reason that word learning is hard is because children have to link new words to their meaning, and there are many ways these links could be made. When someone says, ‘Look, a rabbit’ as a rabbit runs past, children cannot know for certain how this phrase relates to what they see – it could be to the rabbit itself, but it could also be the rabbit’s fur, the running motion, the beauty of the scene, or other aspects of the environment.

Fortunately, though, young children are extremely sophisticated word learners. By age two, children have started to learn the meaning of a word after hearing it only a few times. Children can even learn meanings without being explicitly told them, if they already know the names of other objects that are around at the same time.

So, what is known about how children learn the meanings of words, and how well children learn words is influenced by many things, including the environment and the manner in which adults speak to them. Communication experts Dr Rebecca Frost, Dr Katherine Twomey, Dr Gemma Taylor, Professor Gert Westermann and Professor Padraic Monaghan explain.
and how can we help children to learn more effectively?

**WHAT INFLUENCES WORD LEARNING?**

- **You may not be surprised to hear that learning is not quite so effective if**
  - In the words of the paper, “we communicate with them, and how often we do so.”
  - Adults speak to children in a different way than they do to adults. Drawn-out words, spoken at a higher pitch and with exaggerated pronunciation are the hallmarks of child-directed speech. But is this also true for young children in this way for word learning? The evidence seems to say yes.

  **Child-directed speech captures infants’ attention more than adult-directed speech.** At two days old, infants are already showing a preference for hearing child-directed speech, and it is more advantageous for word learning. This is good news, as children learn word names for objects that have been shown to a child and explored for themselves, it becomes increasingly challenging for us to talk about what they are looking at when they are looking at it. Fortunately, toddlers are very good at learning words by using whatever information is available.

  For example, children can learn words for objects that have been moved out of view, such as toys in a toy box. They are also keen listeners – research has shown that children can learn words for new objects from conversations between adults, without actually being part of the conversation themselves.

  Because children need to learn to link words with objects, it makes sense that language learning is boosted when the pairings between words and objects are clear and apparent. If we take the example of the rabbit given earlier, children can’t be sure what a rabbit is if they don’t see one instance of hearing the word. But if every time they hear ‘rabbit’ they also see a rabbit, then this will increase their confidence about the word’s meaning. Learning is not quite so effective if there are lots of other words around too – it is easier for children to link a word to an object if there are only a few objects to choose from to look at.

  Research has shown that gesturing while speaking and promoting children’s pointing and gaze-following can all be helpful for language learning. Emphasising the key word that we want children to learn seems to improve learning too.

  So, what else can we do to help children learn word meanings?

**HOW CAN WE HELP CHILDREN’S WORD LEARNING?**

**What children hear**

- Children are experts when it comes to learning words, but very few people know what they are looking at when they are looking at it. Fortunately, toddlers are very good at learning words by using whatever information is available.

  For example, children can learn words for objects that have been moved out of view, such as toys in a toy box. They are also keen listeners – research has shown that children can learn words for new objects from conversations between adults, without actually being part of the conversation themselves.

  Because children need to learn to link words with objects, it makes sense that language learning is boosted when the pairings between words and objects are clear and apparent. If we take the example of the rabbit given earlier, children can’t be sure what a rabbit is if they don’t see one instance of hearing the word. But if every time they hear ‘rabbit’ they also see a rabbit, then this will increase their confidence about the word’s meaning. Learning is not quite so effective if there are lots of other words around too – it is easier for children to link a word to an object if there are only a few objects to choose from to look at.

  Research has shown that gesturing while speaking and promoting children’s pointing and gaze-following can all be helpful for language learning. Emphasising the key word that we want children to learn seems to improve learning too.

Repeated reading of storybooks is helpful for learning, as it means that children can predict the patterns in the stories, which helps them to pull out new information.

**Repetition is also advantageous for word learning.** This is good news, as children learn word names for objects that have been shown to a child and explored for themselves, it becomes increasingly challenging for us to talk about what they are looking at when they are looking at it. Fortunately, toddlers are very good at learning words by using whatever information is available.

For example, children can learn words for objects that have been moved out of view, such as toys in a toy box. They are also keen listeners – research has shown that children can learn words for new objects from conversations between adults, without actually being part of the conversation themselves.

Because children need to learn to link words with objects, it makes sense that language learning is boosted when the pairings between words and objects are clear and apparent. If we take the example of the rabbit given earlier, children can’t be sure what a rabbit is if they don’t see one instance of hearing the word. But if every time they hear ‘rabbit’ they also see a rabbit, then this will increase their confidence about the word’s meaning. Learning is not quite so effective if there are lots of other words around too – it is easier for children to link a word to an object if there are only a few objects to choose from to look at.

Research has shown that gesturing while speaking and promoting children’s pointing and gaze-following can all be helpful for language learning. Emphasising the key word that we want children to learn seems to improve learning too.

So, what else can we do to help children learn word meanings?

**How can we help children’s word learning?**

**What children hear**

- Children are experts when it comes to learning words, but very few people know what they are looking at when they are looking at it. Fortunately, toddlers are very good at learning words by using whatever information is available.

  For example, children can learn words for objects that have been moved out of view, such as toys in a toy box. They are also keen listeners – research has shown that children can learn words for new objects from conversations between adults, without actually being part of the conversation themselves.

  Because children need to learn to link words with objects, it makes sense that language learning is boosted when the pairings between words and objects are clear and apparent. If we take the example of the rabbit given earlier, children can’t be sure what a rabbit is if they don’t see one instance of hearing the word. But if every time they hear ‘rabbit’ they also see a rabbit, then this will increase their confidence about the word’s meaning. Learning is not quite so effective if there are lots of other words around too – it is easier for children to link a word to an object if there are only a few objects to choose from to look at.

  Research has shown that gesturing while speaking and promoting children’s pointing and gaze-following can all be helpful for language learning. Emphasising the key word that we want children to learn seems to improve learning too.

**WHAT ABOUT MEDIA INPUT?**

We know that the amount of language children are exposed to is important, but do media sources such as television count as helpful language input? Studies have shown mixed results, reporting negative, neutral and positive links between television exposure and language development.

When learning from television, children must transfer what they learn to the real world. As a result, something researchers refer to as ‘scaffolding’ is required to enable children to learn language from television. When parents interact with children about the relationships between objects on the television screen and real-world objects, children can learn language from television. When viewed passively, however, television may not be a beneficial source of language input.