Vocabulary Development and Word maps

What is a word map?

Word maps are a great way of helping children and young people develop their vocabulary. A word map is a visual tool which helps organise information about a word. The key word is placed in the middle of the page and different 'branches' are drawn around it to represent different pieces of information e.g. what it looks like, what it does, what group it belongs to etc.

Why use word maps?

We need to develop our understanding of words and how one word relates to another in order to learn words and store them in an organised way. If we have not stored enough information about what a word means, it will be difficult to retrieve or 'get hold of' and say.

How do I spot word finding difficulties?

Some children and young people may find it difficult to learn and remember information about new words and have 'word finding difficulties'. They may:

- Find it difficult to name familiar words or picture
- Find it difficult to link words together and say the wrong word from the same category (e.g. calling a tiger a lion) or say a similar sounding word (e.g. saying candle for camel).
- Pause or hesitate when talking or talk more slowly.
- Restart or re-phrase what they were trying to say
- Use fillers like 'um' or use general words like 'it', 'that' or 'thingy' a lot.
- Be reluctant to communicate with others or avoid speaking in larger groups.
- Become self-conscious or frustrated if they can't think of the right names.

How to use word maps

1. Introduce the word map template to your child.
2. Choose a word they already know such as an every-day item and help them draw or write it in the central box.
3. Explain the colour-coding: “Green is for what the word means, red is for how it’s said”.
4. Go around the outside boxes together answering the questions. You can expand and add more questions in your own word map e.g. What does it look like? What parts does it have? Who would use it?
5. Encourage them to add pictures to help illustrate the word or concept.
6. Model how to say or write a definition using the information on the word map.

More tips on supporting vocabulary development at home

- Try adding describing words to your own speech e.g. instead of saying “Pass me the spoon” say “Pass me the large blue spoon with the wooden handle” or “I feel more *energetic* after going for a walk”.
- Be repetitive! Children need to hear words lots of times and in different situations to fully understand them.
- Make it visual- point to what you are talking about or use images to support your child’s understanding of the word.
- When looking at pictures or books together, describe what you can see. Ask your children questions to extend their knowledge e.g. ‘how do you know he is *selfish*?
- If your child is finding it difficult to retrieve a word, you can cue them with questions from the word map such as ‘what sound does it begin with?’ or ‘what does it look like?
- Find out what topic your child is doing at school and help ‘pre-teach’ the words they will use. Ask your child’s teacher to give you a set of the key vocabulary.
- If you speak more than one language, help your child develop their understanding of a word in their home language. They can then learn how to label it in English at school.