

Understanding Word-Retrieval Problems

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Have you ever found yourself unable to remember a specific word—a word you normally know well—in the middle of a conversation? You might remember something about the word, such as the sound it starts with or whether it's a long or short word. When this happens, you may feel like the word is "on the tip of your tongue."

Children and adults with *language disorders* may struggle more frequently to find words, which can cause frustration and interfere with communication. When a word-finding—or *word-retrieval*—problem affects daily communication, it will also impact academics, social communication, and self-esteem.



How Do I Know If My Child Has Word-Retrieval Problems?

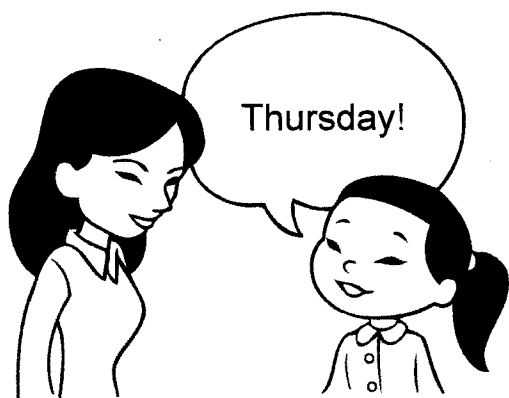
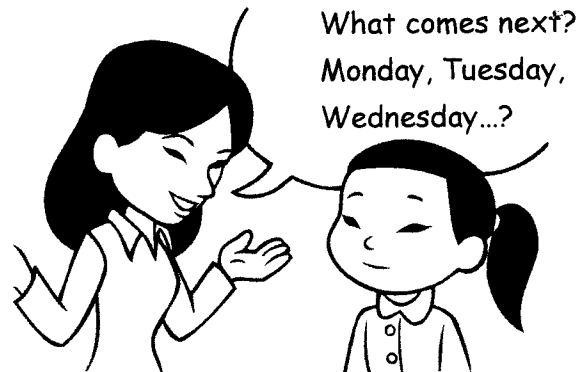
Adults can often tell a speech-language pathologist (SLP) when they are having trouble finding words. For children, however, word-retrieval problems can be difficult to diagnose. It is nearly impossible to separate the skill of word retrieval from other speech and language skills. A child may struggle to say a word for many different reasons. Perhaps he/she lacks prior knowledge of the word or is having difficulty pronouncing it. The child may be too shy to say the word, or too distracted. The SLP will use a variety of observations and assessments to decide whether word retrieval is a true problem. This typically includes measuring expressive and receptive vocabulary (words we know and can say), observing conversation, and evaluating narrative skills (telling a story).

What Can I Do to Help My Child?

The following listening, thinking, and speaking activities can help children who have difficulty retrieving words they already know. *Note: these activities do not teach new vocabulary.*

- Give a visual cue such as a picture or gesture. If the visual cue doesn't help, try an auditory clue (the first sound is..., it rhymes with..., it goes with...).
- Encourage the child to use words he/she knows well to promote confidence in speaking.
- Play games that require naming photos, such as a photo lotto game.

- Don't let the child struggle for too long to "find" or recall a word. Give the child the word he/she is looking for after a few seconds. Then, after the child finishes his/her thought, provide an additional verbal cue to help the child remember or practice the word again.
- Read books that contain rhymes, opposites, classifications, animals, names, repetitions, and predictable text.
- Use "cloze" activities that ask the child to recognize contextual meaning. For example, ask the child to complete the sentence: "I gave my teacher the ___ I did the night before." (homework)
- Tell simple riddles and knock-knock jokes.
- Play timed games: Name all the (sports, colors, tools, vegetables, movies, fruits, games, states) you can in one minute. (This must be age-appropriate.)
- Play category naming games: "Giraffes, lions, and elephants are all..." (zoo animals). "Sink, toilet, tub, and towel are all..." (bathroom items).
- Play association games: "Shoes go with ___."
- Play opposites naming games: "The opposite of night is ___."
- Play synonym naming games: "Cold is the same as ___." (Chilly or another word that means the same.)



- Have the child identify what comes next: "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, ___."
- Play word games that transform verbs into nouns: "If I teach, I am a ___."

If you suspect your child has difficulty retrieving words he/she knows, contact a local speech-language pathologist. An SLP can assess and help determine if your child has word finding difficulties and can offer treatment activities specific to his/her needs.

Resources

Tutorial: *Word Retrieval and Word Retrieval Problems*. Retrieved November 1, 2008, from http://www.bianys.org/learnnet/tutorials/word_retrieval_problems.html

Speech Pathology.com. Retrieved November 17, 2008, from http://www.speechpathology.com/articles/article_detail.asp?article_id=292

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Speech-therapy-on-video.com. *Word Retrieval Strategies*. Retrieved November 1, 2008, from <http://www.speech-therapy-on-video.com/wordretrieval.html>

Bowen, C. (1998). *Stuck for words? Word retrieval activities for children*. Retrieved November 1, 2008, from <http://www.speech-language-therapy.com/wordretrieval.html>