

Closing the word gap:

KS2–3 transition support



Closing the word gap: introduction for teachers

Having a limited vocabulary – a word gap – can profoundly affect children’s academic progress. As a teacher, you will probably have first-hand experience of working with ‘word-poor’ young people and also understand the impact it has on their personal development and self-esteem.

The Oxford Language Report, *Why Closing the Word Gap Matters*, found that secondary teachers are concerned about the impact of the word gap on younger children, estimating that 43% of year 7 students have a limited vocabulary that affects their learning. Equally worryingly, 60% of teachers are concerned that this word deficit is growing (OUP, 2018). A range of literacy reports and studies also point to the challenges faced by students with a lower vocabulary, not only at school but throughout the rest of their lives.

This resource is designed to help you to engage with parents of year 6 and 7 children during their transition to secondary school, as a way to tackle the word gap. Share it with parents and primary teacher colleagues on move-up/transition days, during taster lessons and at open evenings.

Addressing the word gap during the transition period can also help to strengthen relationships between primary feeder schools and their secondary counterparts, and lead to a more joined-up approach to addressing vocabulary needs across the key stages. By collaborating with primary schools, and engaging with year 6 parents, the whole school community – parents, teachers, and students – can work together to close the word gap.

Engaging Parents

Here are a few suggestions for ways schools can engage with parents and year 6 and 7 children to help to close the word gap:

- Consider how you will engage with the hardest-to-reach parents. Make sure your approaches are accessible and welcoming, but never patronising.
- Share your school’s plans to close the word gap with year 6 and 7 parents: ensure everything is written with a parent audience in mind. Include videos if possible, and use your social media platforms to extend the reach of your word gap campaign throughout the year. Your literacy coordinator will be central to this work.
- Share year 6–7 booklists widely with feeder schools, on your website and at open evenings, helping to encourage reading at home.
- Promote reading every day, particularly with year 7 students, and use tutor time to focus on reading and books whenever possible. Create a photo wall display of staff reading their favourite books, particularly those not in the English department, and run ‘My favourite book’ assemblies for year 7s.

- If you celebrate any literary events in your school (World Book Day, World Book Night, National Poetry Day, author visits, etc.), think of ways to involve new parents, and invite them to attend.
- Get parents, staff, and older students involved as word gap ambassadors. If you have any professional writers, poets, journalists, or copywriters among your parent body, or as contacts, set up one-off 'writer in residence' events or longer-term projects.
- Invest in special reading spaces for younger children around the school – older students in the school and/or parents might be able and willing to volunteer with ideas or time.
- Encourage subject teams to make book boxes – teachers choose books that they love or think will inspire younger learners in their subject – and perhaps move them around different classrooms.
- Transform a classroom into a pop-up book festival with props (big pillows, lamps, comfy chairs, etc.), or launch a little free library and invite parents to come along with a copy of a book they would be happy to donate to the school. Alternatively, organise a storytelling day, and ask teachers from every subject to read their favourite stories.

If you're looking for additional support for the word gap, you can also find practical classroom strategies and teaching resources for [English](#), [maths](#), [science](#), [history](#), [geography](#), and [RE](#) teachers in *Closing the word gap: activities for the classroom*, along with suggestions for a [whole-school](#) approach.

Closing the word gap:

a guide for parents of year 6 and 7 children

What is the word gap?

The term *word gap* is used to describe how children with a smaller vocabulary than others are disadvantaged in a range of ways. Government studies and reports have recently identified that having a limited vocabulary can have a huge impact on a child's life.

These studies have shown that children with a poor range of vocabulary make slower progress in reading and writing, and achieve worse results in their tests in school. They also find it difficult making friends and working independently, and have lower self-esteem.

Recently surveyed secondary teachers believe that nearly half (43%) of all year 7 pupils have a limited vocabulary that affects their learning, according to a study by Oxford University Press (*Why Closing the Word Gap Matters, 2018*).

By reading this guide, you're already helping your child with their vocabulary development because parent involvement is key to helping children to learn new words and to closing the word gap. You'll also be helping them to settle in at their new secondary school because having a wide vocabulary will help your child to thrive.

There are two main ways you can support your child and help to build their vocabulary as they move from primary to secondary school:

- by encouraging **reading for pleasure**
- by finding ways to **talk together more** at home.

You'll find a range of free ideas to help your child to develop a wider vocabulary on the following pages, including suggestions for the summer holidays.



Reading for pleasure at home

Reading for pleasure is so important for children's vocabulary development – and a great opportunity to escape into the world of the imagination too. It can be really helpful to listen to your child reading, even for a short time, and to read to your child, again, even if that's just for a short period of time. Whether your child is a keen or reluctant reader, there's an idea for everyone.

Reading for pleasure over the summer holidays

1

Book swap

Swap books with a friend's child who has similar or different tastes in reading.

2

Really free reading

All reading is good reading, so encourage your child to read whatever and wherever they want to at home.

3

Extreme reading

Join thousands of children around the world photographing themselves in unusual and unlikely places simply reading a good book. Google 'extreme reading' for inspiration, and challenge your child to come up with a new location every week over the summer.

4

Join the library

Free books, magazines, audiobooks and DVDs for everyone might sound too good to be true, but join your local library and you'll have access to thousands. Many libraries run the Summer Reading Challenge, with motivational rewards for children who read six books or more.

5

Window shopping

Visit your local newsagent, bookshop or library together, and spend time looking at books or magazines. Talk about which covers look interesting and which you both might like to read and why. It might spark ideas for future birthday or Christmas presents, and it's a great way to show your child that you like books too.

6

Book caching

Book caching is like a game of hide-and-seek for books. Encourage your child to think of the most interesting or imaginative place in your area to hide a book for another young person to find. They could even team up with friends in the local area to stash books in secret locations for each other to find (along with a series of clues).

Choose a book that you'd be happy to see rehomed, pop it in a clear bag, and hide it somewhere. Stick a card inside summarising the book in 10 words if you like.

And if your child catches the caching bug, take it to the next level and join nearly two million others 'releasing books into the wild' with bookcrossing.

7

DIY book festival

There's nothing like seeing a favourite author talking about a favourite book to inspire a child to read more, but literary events can be expensive. Local bookshops also often host free children's author events and book readings – contact yours for details.

If your child likes a particular author, try searching for the book title online. Many publishers have free author videos, games, and activities for children, all of which can be accessed from home.

8

City inspiration

If you're planning a trip this summer, find books with a local connection. Novels like *Framed* by Frank Cottrell-Boyce and *Stoneheart* by Charlie Fletcher feature famous museums in London and would make any visit more familiar.

9

Graphic designer

Children often enjoy designing mini-magazines, websites, or book covers. Encourage yours to make their own featuring a favourite author, character, or non-fiction topic. Make a paper version or try free online templates such as [Wix](#) and magazine tools like [Canva](#).

10

Vlogging

If your child loves making videos, film them reviewing a book they have read, or encourage them to make their own adaptations of books with friends in the starring roles, or using Lego figures, sweets, or even fruits and vegetables as characters.



Reading for pleasure over the longer term

Ten ideas to inspire your child to read more in year 7 and beyond.

1 Random acts of (book) kindness

Some young people are inspired to read more if they know it will be helping others. Reading with younger children can be a great way to develop vocabulary skills, and can boost your child's self-confidence and communication skills too.

2 13 before you're 13

If your child is motivated by targets or prizes, set them a reading-based challenge. Can they read 13 books – in a category of their choice – before they are 13? These could be classic novels, comics, famous books, etc. Decide whether there's a prize at the end.

3 Audiobooks and apps

Try audiobooks if your child is a reluctant reader or even just for a change. You can access thousands of audiobooks online or via apps like Hoopla and Audible, and many libraries also offer a free service such as *BorrowBox* or *RBdigital*. Try the BBC Sounds app for music, podcasts, and radio shows as an alternative.

4 New books for free

Book review websites such as [Toppsta](#) and [Lovereadings4kids](#) invite children to sign up to become reviewers. Your child can select the books they are interested in reading, and publishers will send a free copy to your home in return for writing a short online review.

5 Book club

Encourage your child to set up a book club with friends and take it in turns to host. [Chatterbooks](#) has free downloadable resources to kick-start conversations.

6 Reading for charity

Take part in a [Readathon](#) or other sponsored reading event to raise money for good causes and funds for school books. And if your child has caught the fundraising bug, they could organise a book sale of donated books, a book quiz, or a '[Big Book Off](#)' challenge, all with reading at the heart of the event.

7 Reading ambassador

Sometimes it takes time to settle at a new school, but a good way to make friends and have something to do during lunchtimes is to help out in the school library or find ways to get involved as a reading ambassador.

8 Creative competitions

There are lots of short, fun writing and book-themed competitions for children, including reviews, short stories, journalism, handwriting, and poetry. Look online for something that will appeal.

9 Just 100 words

If your child likes writing stories as well as reading, encourage them to share their work with the [100 words](#) audience. They just have to write five sentences or 100 words, and someone from the team will comment

10 Stage and screen

If there's a film adaptation of a novel at your local cinema, or a play by the school drama club or local theatre, see if you can get tickets. Alternatively, watch a film or TV version of a book at home.

Finding ways to talk more

Twenty simple ideas to support your child's vocabulary development at home and when you're out and about:

Easy things to do at home

- Watch TV together – and talk about what you're watching like the families on *Gogglebox*. Discuss any new words or things that you find interesting.
- Try to find time to chat daily, even if it's when you're just doing chores around the house.
- When you can, try to listen carefully and with real interest when your child talks to you. Leave pauses to encourage them to say more.
- Praise your child if they use an interesting or unusual word: '*Great choice of word!*' or '*You just used a really interesting word!*' or '*I love that word!*'
- Eat together whenever possible, and chat about everyday things. Let your son or daughter lead the topics of conversation.
- Become more word conscious – use 'adult' words in normal conversation, and take the time to explain what they mean.
- If you like to cook together or to make things following instructions, discuss the meanings of any unfamiliar words you come across.
- Share your own favourite words.
- Talk about (hopefully funny) times when you've used the wrong words!
- Create book boxes, and leave them around the house in the places people often sit, such as in the loo, by the sofa, on a table, or near the bath. Fill them with anything you think others would like to read (magazines, newspapers, football annuals, comics, cookbooks, etc.).
- Try to solve problems together. Discuss and agree on your approach.
- Play word games together. *Pictionary*, *Taboo* or *charades* can be played easily at home with just a piece of paper, or try board games such as *Articulate*, *Upwords*, *Hedbanz*, *Trivial Pursuit*, *Quiddler*, or *Bananagrams* that involve new words.
- Talk about your favourite childhood book, and ask your child about theirs. On a rainy day, watch a film or TV adaptation of a book together. Which version – book or film – do you each prefer and why?
- Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) is something that many primary and secondary schools do to encourage reading and to develop vocabulary. Try this at home one evening together to show your child that reading is a type of entertainment too. Add popcorn and treats, or tuck yourselves up with pillows and pyjamas.

Easy things to do on a journey

- Listen to talk radio together, and discuss the news or topic.
- Listen to music, and talk about the lyrics.
- Play word game apps together such as *Alphabear 2*, *Wordscapes*, *Wheel of Fortune*, *Scribblenauts Remix*, or *Four Letters*.
- Listen to audiobooks or podcasts on longer journeys.
- Find puzzle books, crosswords, word searches and anagrams in discount bookshops and newsagents. Solve them together.
- Play car games:
 - *20 questions* – try to identify a person or object in 20 questions or fewer.
 - *Two truths and a lie* – take it in turns to guess the lie.
 - *Would you rather?* – ask each other ‘Would you rather...?’ about a range of topics such as ‘Would you rather eat a snail or a hippo?’ or ‘Would you rather be trapped in a room with Donald Trump or Simon Cowell?’
 - *Alphabet game* – choose a category (football teams, sweets, music, etc.), and take it in turns to work your way through the alphabet starting with A, e.g. AC Milan.
 - *Word association* – start with a word, and the next person has to think of a word that’s associated with it.

For further information

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