

Word Finding Difficulties

What are word finding difficulties?

Some children know lots of words but their vocabulary storage system is poorly developed, a bit like a filing cabinet without any dividers or labels. This means that they can have difficulty 'finding' the words that they want when they want them; we call these 'word-finding difficulties'.

These word-finding difficulties are often characterised by;

- Overusing general words such as "it," "things" etc.
- Using the wrong word e.g.
 - purple for puppy (similar sounding word)
 - spade for bucket (word in the same word group)
 - crunks for handcuffs (a made up word)
 - hot for cold (a related word)
- Silence - whilst they are trying to think of the word but it won't come
- Frustration - the feeling that it is 'on the tip of their tongue'
- Hesitations in speech and incomplete sentences
- Using several words to describe what they mean where one naming word would do
- A word used in a previous conversation may be said rather than one intended. It is as if the brain is locked into the previous 'gear' and can't easily change onto another subject
- Problems in written work (e.g. writing down the wrong word). If the child notices he/she will cross it out and try again which can make their work look untidy, but this is not through carelessness
- Saying the wrong word when reading, even though they are perfectly able to read the word in front of them

Word-finding difficulties can become more noticeable when a child is rushed, tired, stressed or unwell, and also when under time pressure to respond.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, audio, Braille or in a different language, please contact your health professional

How you can help

It is important to be sensitive when a child is finding it difficult to think of the right word. Try not to supply the word for them; give them extra time to think of it themselves. Giving prompts may help at times, these can include:

- Sound cues – giving the first sound in the word (e.g. “ch” for chair)
- Meaning cues - leading in with another related word (e.g. “table and ...” or a phrase e.g. “you sit on a ...”)
- Gestural cues – miming (e.g. pretending to sit on a chair)

If you are not sure which word the child is trying to find you could:

- Ask them to describe it (e.g. “What does it look like?” “What do you use it for?” “Tell me something about it”)
- Ask them to show you by gesturing/drawing what they mean, or by pointing to the object

Playing games that strengthen the skills we use for learning and remembering words can help make it easier for children to ‘find’ the words they want to use. These skills include: knowledge of categories, being able to describe words, judging similarities/differences, and identifying the odd one out.

Mind maps are another strategy that can help children to access words. Our memory is helped by ideas being connected in a visual way, the more connections made between ideas and words the more likely we are to be able to access them again. Mind maps are a good way to provide a visual representation of these connections.