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ALL-RUSSIAN CHILDHOOD RESEARCH PROJECT

Recommendations for Language and Speech Development

for Children Aged 4–8





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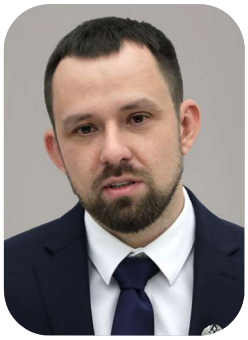
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Speech is one of the most important mental functions enabling a child to enter society.

Well-developed, grammatically correct speech is an important prerequisite for academic success and effective communication. This is why it is so important to develop a child's speech, especially in the transition from the senior preschool to the early school years.

These recommendations include developmental tools aimed at building vocabulary and the pragmatic aspects of speech.

The materials are intended for preschool and primary-school teachers, students in psychology and education programs, and parents.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
A Child's Vocabulary	7
• *How Can Vocabulary Be Developed?*	7
• *What Features Are Typical of the Vocabulary of Bilingual Children?*	12
A Child's Pragmatic Competence	14
• *How Can Pragmatic Competence Be Developed?*	17

РАСТЁМ ВМЕСТЕ

INTRODUCTION

Language is the most important means through which a child masters the culture into which they were born. Language gives a person knowledge about the world, enables them to formulate thoughts, and allows them to communicate with other people.

Language is a system of signs and the rules governing their formation, modification, and combination. Knowledge of a language includes vocabulary and grammatical rules. The ability to use a language, however, is speech ability.
Speech is the realization of language in specific circumstances. Therefore, we distinguish language development - a child's knowledge of words and grammatical rules - from speech development - the ability to use those words and rules appropriately depending on context.



While early childhood is the period when a child's vocabulary grows most rapidly and grammatical norms are developed, preschool age is the time of active development of coherent monologic speech.

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In typical development, language acquisition occurs naturally in all children who have access to adult speech: it is the adult who serves as the model for the child's speech imitation. Children naturally acquire the words needed to meet basic needs and intuitively infer rules for changing and combining them. Without purposeful language development, however, language may remain at a relatively basic level, supporting mainly everyday communication without creating the conditions for more complex forms of cognition and interaction.

Speech activity requires several conditions to be present at the same time:

1. A need and necessity to interact with other people.
2. A need and readiness to say something, which requires understanding the situation in which speech interaction is needed.
3. The ability to use the necessary linguistic means: knowing the required words and being able to construct a phrase and a complete utterance.



Speech does not emerge and develop by itself; it develops in situations of communication that are meaningful to the child. A child speaks when there is internal motivation - interest in interaction, enjoyment of communication, or a need to achieve a particular result through communication.

Speech develops not so much through isolated exercises as through activities that interest the child. When a child is engaged in play, creating a project, or doing something together with others, language becomes not an end in itself but a necessary means of communicating, conveying their own ideas, and understanding other people.



A CHILD'S VOCABULARY

A CHILD'S VOCABULARY

Receptive vocabulary	Expressive vocabulary
the number of words a child understands	**the number of words a child** uses

HOW CAN VOCABULARY BE DEVELOPED?

1 **New experiences.** Vocabulary does not grow by itself; it grows when a child encounters something new:

- new experiences in everyday life *(trips, walks in unfamiliar places, visits to museums, parks, and shops);*
- shared activities with adults *(cooking, repairs, caring for plants or animals);*
- new books, cartoons, and songs;
- communication with different people *(peers, adults, children of different ages);*
- learning new kinds of activities *(sports, creative activities, music, construction).*

A child discovers new objects and phenomena and, together with them, new words. Therefore, the more new experiences a child has in life, the larger their vocabulary becomes.

2 Encouraging the use of new words.

Through new experiences, children most often remember nouns first: they need names for new objects, characters, phenomena, and so on. Knowledge of verbs, adjectives, and adverbs often lags considerably behind. These therefore need special attention.

It is important to continually encourage the child to use new words they have heard. For example:

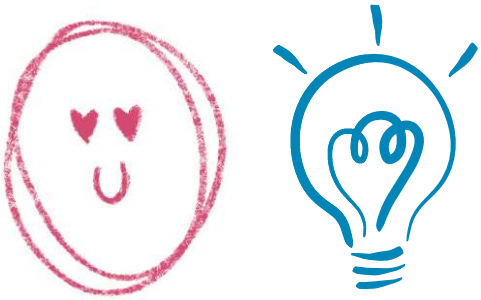
- ask the child to describe a favorite character in detail *(appearance, personality, behavior);*
- ask them to list the qualities for which they like a character or person;
- ask the child to describe not only what a character or person does, but exactly how they do it *(for example, “quickly,” “carefully,” “bravely”);*
- ask clarifying questions that encourage the child to expand their utterance and use new words;
- discuss situations from the child's everyday life *(what happened, who was involved, what people felt, why they acted as they did);*
- ask the child to name their emotions and feelings;
- discuss the emotions of other people and characters;
- help the child explain the reasons for actions and connect them with internal experiences;

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Research shows that shared book reading is particularly beneficial for a child's vocabulary development, whereas excessive screen time on weekdays is associated with the lowest developmental outcomes.

3 **Using pictures.** Looking at and discussing pictures of objects helps a child learn and remember new words.

Most methods for assessing vocabulary are based on pictures depicting objects and situations. Such pictures can be used both to assess vocabulary and to develop it.



- To work on expressive vocabulary, ask the child to name the pictures they see. For a bilingual child, it is important to name all the objects in both languages.
- To work on attributes, ask the child to explain how one object differs from another.

EXAMPLE

You show the child a card on which the target word is “parachute.”



First, the child points to the picture that depicts a parachute (picture 3). Then ask clarifying questions that help the child identify distinguishing features:

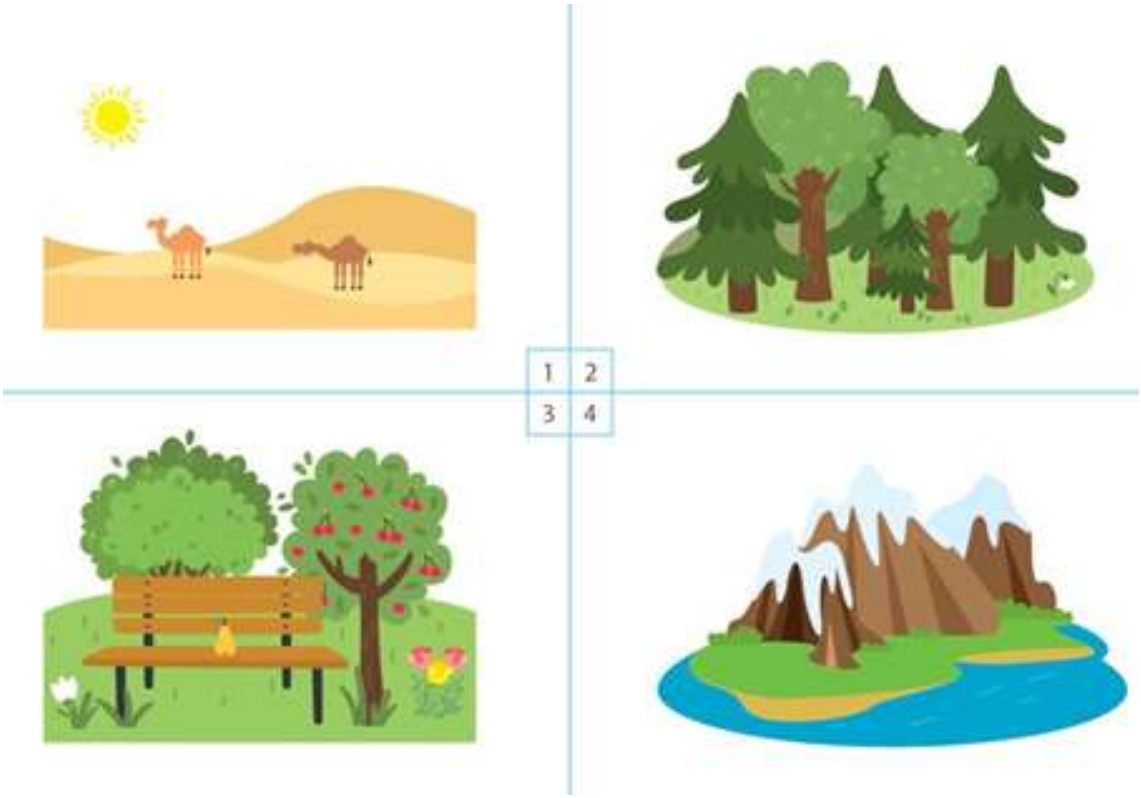
- What are the objects shown in pictures 1, 2, and 4 called?
- How is a hot-air balloon different from a parachute?
- How is a hang glider different from a parachute?
- How is a kite different from a parachute?
- Describe what each object is made of. What is it like?
- Which of these can a person fly in/on, and which cannot they fly in/on?

For children in a group, you can turn this into a game: who can name the greatest number of words or the greatest number of differences between one object and another, and so on.

You can also invent many different exercises for working with adjectives and verbs by asking clarifying questions.

EXAMPLE

Take a card where the target word is the adjective “sandy” (picture 1).



After the child points to the correct picture depicting this adjective, ask about the other pictures and use clarifying questions.

- And what kind is this? – hot, dry, etc.
- What can be described as "sandy"? What can be described as "forest"? How are garden strawberries different from wild strawberries? How are mountain rivers different from forest rivers?
- Why did you decide that picture 1 represents "sandy"? What is shown in it? What can you see in a desert? and so on.

WHAT FEATURES ARE TYPICAL OF THE VOCABULARY OF BILINGUAL CHILDREN?



- Bilingual children commonly go through a period in which they mix two language systems and insert words from one language into speech in the other. This is normal. Nevertheless, it is useful to explain to the children that the languages are different and that people who do not know their second language may not understand them if they insert words of this language into their speech.
- Vocabulary in the two languages may differ at different ages.
- Bilingual children may more often experience difficulty retrieving the “right” word. If a child cannot find an appropriate word to complete a sentence, it is important to help them.

Research shows that although bilingualism may have a negative effect on the size of a child's vocabulary in each individual language, bilingual children construct coherent, integrated narratives from picture sequences just as successfully as their monolingual peers.

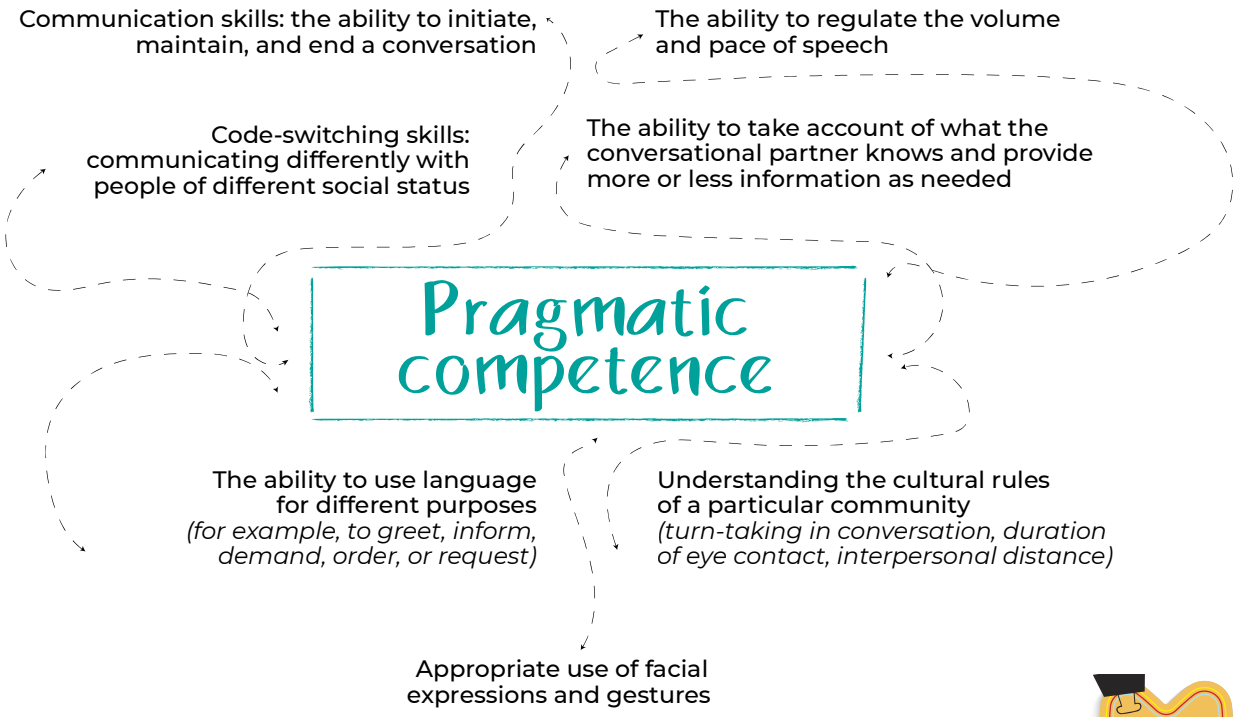
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PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Above, we considered preschool children's language development - building a broad vocabulary and mastering grammatical rules. It is now important to turn to speech development: pragmatic competence.
Pragmatic competence is the general ability to communicate: to speak appropriately for the situation, understand one's conversational partner, and behave appropriately in social interaction.

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE INCLUDES:



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Research shows that in the senior preschool and early school years, pragmatic competence is most strongly associated with understanding emotions and with the development of behavioral regulation.

It is important to pay attention to a child's level of pragmatic competence because insufficient development may be reflected not only in communication but also in behavior. Difficulties understanding and using speech in different situations may increase emotional tension and complicate the child's socialization.

LOW LEVEL OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Behavioral difficulties

A child may display behavior such as refusing to attend social events, including birthday parties, or inappropriate behavior such as pulling a peer's hair or shouting at someone to attract attention

Difficulties completing tasks set by a preschool or school teacher

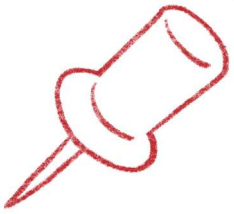
A child may misinterpret task instructions and/or experience difficulties with creative assignments

Socialization difficulties

A child may frequently come into conflict with peers or refuse to play together with them



YOU SHOULD PAY ATTENTION IF, AT AGE 6, A CHILD:



- Has difficulty staying on topic in conversation and speaks incoherently.
- Tends to stand too close to the person who is speaking.
- Hardly looks at the conversational partner at all, or stares too intently.
- Constantly interrupts others, tries to dominate, and does not listen to other people.
- Does not ask for clarification when they do not understand and does not ask follow-up questions.
- Cannot tell from a person's tone whether they are angry, pleased, or joking *(with people other than the parents)*.
- Uses language in only a limited range of situations *(for example, only asks and demands, does not tell you about their experiences, and does not ask questions)*.
- Has difficulty understanding another person's point of view, metaphors, proverbs, and hints.



If you notice several of these features, the child may need consultation with a speech therapist, neuropsychologist, or special-education specialist. Some developmental disorders directly affect pragmatic competence; therefore, if you notice substantial pragmatic difficulties, it is advisable to consult a specialist.

HOW CAN VOCABULARY BE DEVELOPED?

1 Sociodramatic play.

For a child, pretend (role) play provides an opportunity to practice, without fear of making mistakes, using different kinds of language for different characters and situations, as well as nonverbal communication such as eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures.

To support speech development through pretend play, it is important to:

- Create opportunities for group play with children of different ages *(at home, on the playground, in preschool, etc.)*.
- Practice games involving adults in order to model social situations *(for example, going to a shop, a school lesson, a celebration)*. The adult demonstrates how a character can use speech, facial expressions, and intonation within the role.
- Act out scenes or performances *(including puppet shows)* to model a character's personality or reactions. If the child finds this difficult, show several examples of how it can be done.
- Show the child that different situations call for different volume, tone of voice, and intonation *(for example, play out situations in which shouting is acceptable and situations in which it is not)*.

Research has shown that pretend play makes the greatest contribution to the development of a child's pragmatic competence.



2 Games with rules.

In games with rules, a child needs to take turns, follow the rules, and use language appropriate to the particular play situation, all of which contributes to speech development.

Games with rules include, for example, board games, active games with rules (tag, hide-and-seek, etc.), card games, and team games (volleyball, football, etc.).

- It is useful to practice games in which turn-taking is important, so that the child becomes accustomed to sometimes having to wait for their turn.
- It is important for the child to experience losing in games so that they can learn that losing is normal and learn how to respond appropriately *(for example, how to express sadness or how to congratulate the team that won a competition).*

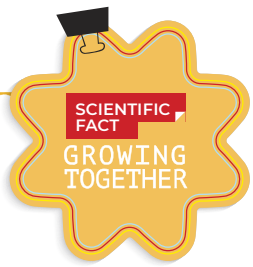


3 Storytelling and describing situations.

Storytelling draws on several different communication skills, including sequencing actions in a description, describing a situation, and explaining characters' motives and actions.

- When you tell a child a story yourself, try to include a variety of stylistic devices. For example, when describing a character, use adjectives to give a more detailed description of their appearance.
- Use visual materials as prompts for stories or discussions *(for example, magazines, book illustrations, pictures from cartoons, photographs and pictures showing characters' facial expressions, and the child's own drawings and crafts).*
- Discuss characters from books, cartoons, and films, as well as real people: their emotions in a particular situation and the reasons for their actions.
- Ask the child questions as they construct the story.
- Ask open-ended questions about the child's personal experience.
- Encourage verbal creativity *(inventing new words and expressions, composing poems).*

A child's pragmatic competence is substantially associated with their level of emotional competence, whereas vocabulary development is practically unrelated to it.



4 Demonstrating the rules of everyday interaction.

Discussing the rules of everyday interaction and seeing adults follow them helps a child better understand how speech is used in different social situations. This develops communication skills and makes speech more meaningful and appropriate.

- If the child does not make eye contact with conversational partners, model it: make eye contact yourself when talking with the child, draw their attention to it, and ask other people interacting with the child to do the same.
- Gently bring the child back to the topic of conversation; do not allow constant jumping from one topic to another.
- Encourage verbal politeness in social interactions *(saying "hello," "goodbye," "thank you," etc.)*.
- To help the child understand when to speak and when to listen, model this yourself: listen attentively when the child speaks, but do not allow them to interrupt you when you are speaking. You can explicitly manage turn-taking by saying, for example, "It's my turn to speak now," or "Now I want to hear what you have to say."



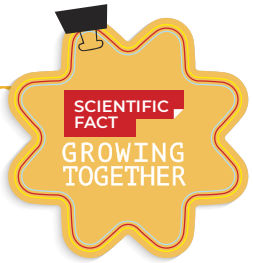


5. Variety and proficiency in adult speech.

Interaction with adults plays a key role in a child's speech development: it is the adult who provides the model for how language and speech are used in different communication situations. Adult speech should therefore be varied, grammatically correct, and rich in content. Using a rich vocabulary, extended utterances, and varied speech constructions creates the conditions for the child's full acquisition of language.

- Use humor when talking with the child and encourage the child to use jokes.
- To make adult speech more varied, use more proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and metaphors. It is also important to explain what they mean.
- If the child rarely asks adults questions independently, it is important to teach them how to ask questions. First in play and then in real life, show the child how they can approach different people with questions and receive answers and help from them.

Research has shown that children's exposure to the literary language of writers and poets through shared book reading makes a substantial contribution to both vocabulary development and pragmatic competence.



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