

Teaching Categories

Learning how to categorize is an important language processing skill. Vocabulary or language processing is important in how children develop this understanding of language and retrieve the correct words as they speak.

When learning language processing skills, young children first learn to label basic nouns (names of people, places or things) and then learn verbs or action words. As they develop, they next learn the functions of items (e.g., “you write with a pencil”). Later still, they begin to develop associations, or links between words (e.g., a crayon goes with paper). Next, children develop the understanding of categories. These are things or words that are part of a group or that have similar features.

Learning categories or how to group items, allows children to store new words and information correctly in their mind. Young preschool children first need to learn to use very simple words and categories (e.g., animals, food, etc...) when learning these concepts.

There are 3 different types of categorization tasks you can practice with your child, listed from easiest to hardest.

- 1) Having your child name things that are part of a category (e.g., name things that are “foods”- i.e., pizza, eggs, bread, etc...).
- 2) Having your child say the category name when given examples of items in that group (e.g., car, truck, and motorcycle are all vehicles, or things you drive).
- 3) Having your child identify which items do not belong in a category (e.g., Lego, doll, table, blocks. Table does not belong in that group).

Here are some activities for practicing categories at home:

Daily Routines

Laundry

Your child can help you name the items that you are sorting for laundry and label the category name (e.g., “jeans, t-shirts, and socks are all types of clothes”). Later on, you can highlight sub-categories such as summer clothes vs. winter clothes.

Tidying up

Your child can help you organize his/her toys into categories. For example, as you tidy say “The dog goes with the stuffed animals, snakes and ladders goes with the games, and the Clifford story goes with the books”.

Grocery Shopping

Your child can help you make up the grocery list as you ask questions, such as: “What fruits should we buy?”, “What vegetables?”, “What snack foods?”, “What drinks should be buy?”, etc. At the grocery store, talk about how goods in the store are put into groups and sub-groups.

Mealtime

Talk about which foods are meats, vegetables, fruits, etc. When preparing foods you can talk about what kinds of things go together and which do not. For example, when making a fruit salad, ask “I have bananas, apples, eggs, and grapes. What is a fruit and should go in the fruit salad? What is not a fruit?”.

Games

Sorting

Put objects of various categories into a bag (e.g., animals, food, toys, clothing) and have your child pick out items and put them into the appropriate category. You can model what to say such as, “The bear goes with the animals”. Gradually introduce more complex categories or sub-categories, such as farm animals vs. zoo animals and fruits vs. vegetables.

Games for the car or Going on a Walk

Before going into the car or on a walk, make a list of a group of things you want your child to look for, (e.g. birds, bugs/insects, shapes, plants, vehicles, etc.). When your child finds them, s/he can say “the ant is a bug, the mosquito is a bug, the ladybug is a bug....”).

Listing Words games

Take turns with your child thinking of as many different words in each category you can think of, e.g., fruit- banana, pear, watermelon, mango, kiwi etc. Make a game of it and challenge each other to see who can come up with the most.

Books

Picture Books

Use books which talk about items that belong in a certain category, e.g., “My Clothes”, “My Food”, “My Home”, “My Toys”. Take the time to talk about what items do not belong in that category as well.

Catalogues

Use a flyer or catalogue to find and cut out objects which belong in different groups, e.g., summer clothes, winter clothes, tools, furniture, toys, food. When you have cut out a group of pictures, ask your child to come up with other items that you could also add to this group (even if you don’t have a picture of it).