

Molly F. Collins



## Sagacious, Sophisticated, and Sedulous: The Importance of Discussing 50-Cent Words With Preschoolers

**A** teacher once told me, “Don’t use a 50-cent word when a 5-cent word will do.”

While current expression of such sentiments might differ, we commonly follow this practice in many early childhood classrooms. Adults often use simple words instead of complex words when talking to young children. Reasons vary from teachers’ beliefs that young children cannot understand sophisticated vocabulary because they are too young or have limited language skills, to teachers’

unfamiliarity with complex words or with strategies for supporting vocabulary. As a consequence, sophisticated vocabulary learning is thwarted and opportunities to nurture children’s curiosity about words go unrealized. In this article, I show how to fortify the vocabulary knowledge of soon-to-be readers with *sophisticated vocabulary*—words that are high level, communicate subtleties in detail, and are less common in everyday parlance (sometimes called *rare words*).

## Early Language Foundations for Reading Development

Research on the early foundations of reading distinguishes two categories of skills—one related to word recognition and the other related to comprehension. Print knowledge, beginning writing skills, and phonological awareness have been grouped together as *word recognition* skills because they help children decode text. These *code-related* skills account for most of a child's success in word recognition, the major task of beginning reading. Vocabulary, syntactic and discourse skills, and background knowledge have been grouped together as *oral language or comprehension* skills (Storch & Whitehurst 2002; Sénéchal, Ouellette, & Rodney 2006). Developed in preschool, oral language skills predict later reading comprehension beyond the contribution made by word recognition skills in the early grades (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 2005).

Vocabulary is highly sensitive to early adult input and critical to preventing later reading comprehension difficulties (Dickinson et al. 2003). Also, vocabulary is causally related to comprehension—that is, it helps reading comprehension (Dickinson et al. 2003)—and it is highly correlated with the rate of learning new words (Rowe, Raudenbush, & Goldin-Meadow 2012). Thus, a meager beginning vocabulary slows the rate of vocabulary learning, which compromises reading comprehension.

Two widely examined contexts for early language development are conversations and storybook reading. Pan and colleagues (2005) found that exposure to unfamiliar words in mothers' talk with children is related to children's vocabulary growth. Research on teachers' talk at mealtimes shows a positive relationship between conversations and preschoolers' vocabulary development (Cote 2001). Robust word learning has been found extensively in story reading contexts (De Temple & Snow 2003).

While numerous studies have examined vocabulary acquisition, most focus on common words—that is, high-frequency vocabulary. A few studies examine children's acquisition of sophisticated, or low-frequency, vocabulary. Dickinson and Porche (2011) find that preschool teachers' use of complex vocabulary during play contributes to children's reading comprehension in fourth grade. Research shows that among preschoolers in families with low incomes, there is a positive relationship between the amount of exposure to sophisticated words and supportive explanations during conversations with parents and children's later vocabulary (Weizman & Snow 2001). In storybook reading contexts, Beck and McKeown (2007) find that kindergartners and first-graders from families with low incomes learn sophisticated words from robust instruction during read-alouds. Preschoolers who hear rich explanations of sophisticated words learn significantly more words than children who do not (Collins 2010). These studies provide compelling evidence for the benefits of teaching sophisticated vocabulary to children in preschool through first grade, and they describe useful strategies and contexts for supporting this development.

## Benefits of Talking About 50-Cent Words With Young Children

Opportunities for initiating conversations about rare words can come from storybook reading experiences. Discussing words with children prompts their active involvement and provides teachers with information about children's evolving lexicons. In fact,

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conversations about words provide more information about a child's developing vocabulary knowledge than we can learn from tests or observations of children's word use. Benefits of conversations about sophisticated vocabulary include the following, learned from talking with preschoolers.

**They expose children to new words and new concepts.** Talking about unusual (i.e., low-frequency) vocabulary exposes children to new words in a context that is visually and verbally supportive. The following illustrates how a teacher exposed children to the word *unruly* in the course of discussing the text in *Henry's Happy Birthday*, by Holly Keller.

**Ms. Doran:** *Unruly* means hard to control. It was hard for Henry to make his hair do what he wanted it to do—stay down. Your hair might be unruly when you wake up in the morning.

**Jason:** Yeah, my mom's hair is messy.

**Ms. Doran:** When she first wakes up?

**Jason:** Yeah, all over, like this (*hands circling head*).

**Ms. Doran:** It sounds like her hair is unruly, too. Hard to control.

Ms. Doran's use of *unruly* in a short discussion of Henry's appearance exposes children to a sophisticated word whose concept they can easily understand.

**They clarify differences in meaning between new words and known concepts.** Talking about words offers teachers opportunities to clarify nuances in word meanings. The following conversation during a reading of Lindsay Barrett George's *In the Woods: Who's Been Here?* shows how talking about sophisticated vocabulary helps adults understand what children pay attention to in definitions and how adults can provide clarification to help children understand word meanings.

**Mr. Myers:** When it (*pointing to butterfly*) was inside, its wings were together, but once it got out, it could splay, or spread out, its wings.

**Aquala:** Ya!

**Mr. Myers:** *Splay* means to spread out.

**Aquala:** Yeah, like peanut butter. Like spread with a knife.

**Mr. Myers:** Yes, but the peanut butter doesn't really get splayed because it doesn't have parts. *Splay* means to spread something that has parts. You have body parts that you can splay. You can splay your arms, legs. And spread out all over like this (*gestures*).

**Aquala:** (*pointing to stomach*) Can't splay this!

**Mr. Myers:** No, you can't splay your stomach. You can't splay your tongue. So you can only splay things that have parts to spread out.

**Aquala:** (*spreading arms apart*) This splay?

**Mr. Myers:** Yes, you are splaying your arms.

**Aquala:** (*to another child*) And you are splaying your whole body.

This conversation included general information about *splay*'s meaning. When the child applied a literal understanding of *spread*, however, the adult clarified that splaying requires parts and differs from spreading a substance.

**They deepen meanings of partially known words.** Sometimes children’s knowledge about words is limited to only one derivation, to a single context, or to examples, not meanings. Discussion provides opportunities to deepen children’s knowledge of words, as follows in a conversation during a reading of William T. George’s *Box Turtle at Long Pond*.

**Ms. Fradon:** A predator is an animal that eats other animals.

**Garth:** Like a tiger. Like a tiger eats an antelope.

**Ms. Fradon:** Yes.

**Garth:** Because (pointing to raccoon) they eat turtles.

**Ms. Fradon:** So, a raccoon is a predator of?

**Garth:** Of the ... of the (pointing to turtle)

**Ms. Fradon:** Box turtle. Exactly.

**Caritina:** (pointing to raccoon) Yep, that’s a predator.

This conversation provided information about the characteristics of a *predator*, a word for which Garth has partial knowledge through examples (tiger). Garth later indicated an understanding of the meaning of *predator* by stating “Because they eat turtles.” He seemed to use the basic meaning of *predator* to judge that the raccoon qualifies. Still using examples, Caritina agreed: “Yep, that’s a predator.” The conversation exemplifies application of the new information to animals in the book, deepening the children’s knowledge of predator exemplars.

**They repair misunderstandings.** Talking about sophisticated words with preschoolers enables adults to repair children’s initial misunderstandings of new words, especially if children have missed important distinctions in meaning, have not heard the word precisely, or have misapplied their existing knowledge or *metalinguistic information*—knowledge about language (e.g., knowing that words ending in *-ing* are probably actions). The following example is from a conversation about illustrations of *bunting* during a reading of *Henry’s Happy Birthday*.

**Mr. Chua:** Do you know what bunting is?

**Antoine:** Uh-uh [no].

**Mr. Chua:** (to Val) Do you know?

**Val:** Uh-huh [yes]. It’s putting up things.

**Mr. Chua:** Not quite. Bunting is a decoration.

**Val:** Uh-huh.



**Mr. Chua:** And it's cloth or paper that is hung up to make parties look pretty. It is a decoration—something pretty. Sometimes grown-ups put bunting up to decorate a room or even the outside of a building.

Val's first response indicates that she thinks the word *bunting* is a verb. The *-ing* ending seems to indicate to her that the word labels some action: "putting things up." Mr. Chua then clarifies that *bunting* is a noun, something that is put up, not the action of hanging something. When a teacher models accurate use of misunderstood information in the explanation, children learn exactly why the initial meaning is problematic.

**They prime children to value words and increase their knowledge about word learning.** Exposing children to uncommon words and their definitions can shape children's expectations to hear explanations and to wonder about word meanings. In the next example, a teacher reads Jim Arnosky's *Rabbits and Raindrops* and inserts a low-frequency word, *lawn*, which Ms. Krigstein had explained previously.

**Ms. Krigstein:** Mother rabbit hops out—jumps quickly—into the bright sunlight, onto the green grass, that green lawn. So mother rabbit is leading her babies on the green lawn.

**Wallace:** The green grass?

**Ms. Krigstein:** Yes, the green grass is the green lawn.

Modeling the belief that sophisticated words are interesting and important to know communicates to children that words are worthy of children's curiosity. Talking about unusual words provides benefits to children beyond simply hearing them or having rich definitions. When children learn sophisticated words through discussion, they might begin to realize that they sometimes misunderstand a meaning. Knowing this is a possibility, and that specific details are involved in distinguishing a sophisticated word, children seem to learn to check their understanding of key details in words' meanings. This child believes queries about words are welcome and that words in the story should make sense.

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## Implications for Teaching

Teaching sophisticated vocabulary from storybook reading and discussions of words requires that adults know the words and their variations across contexts. Helping children use words beyond the story-reading context requires expanding instruction, or "thinking outside the book."

### Knowing What to Know

Children need to know the basic definition of a word in its most typical or general form. The basic meaning gives children a working understanding of the word's most common meaning and use (Stahl & Nagy 2006).

Knowing a word includes understanding how its meaning varies. This contributes to depth of word knowledge and requires exposures across several contexts. When the same word is used in different scenarios, it strengthens children's understandings of its meaning. An umbrella's fabric *repels* water. Magnets also *repel* one another when like poles are aligned. Bug spray *repels* insects. Although these ideas differ, all mean to "push

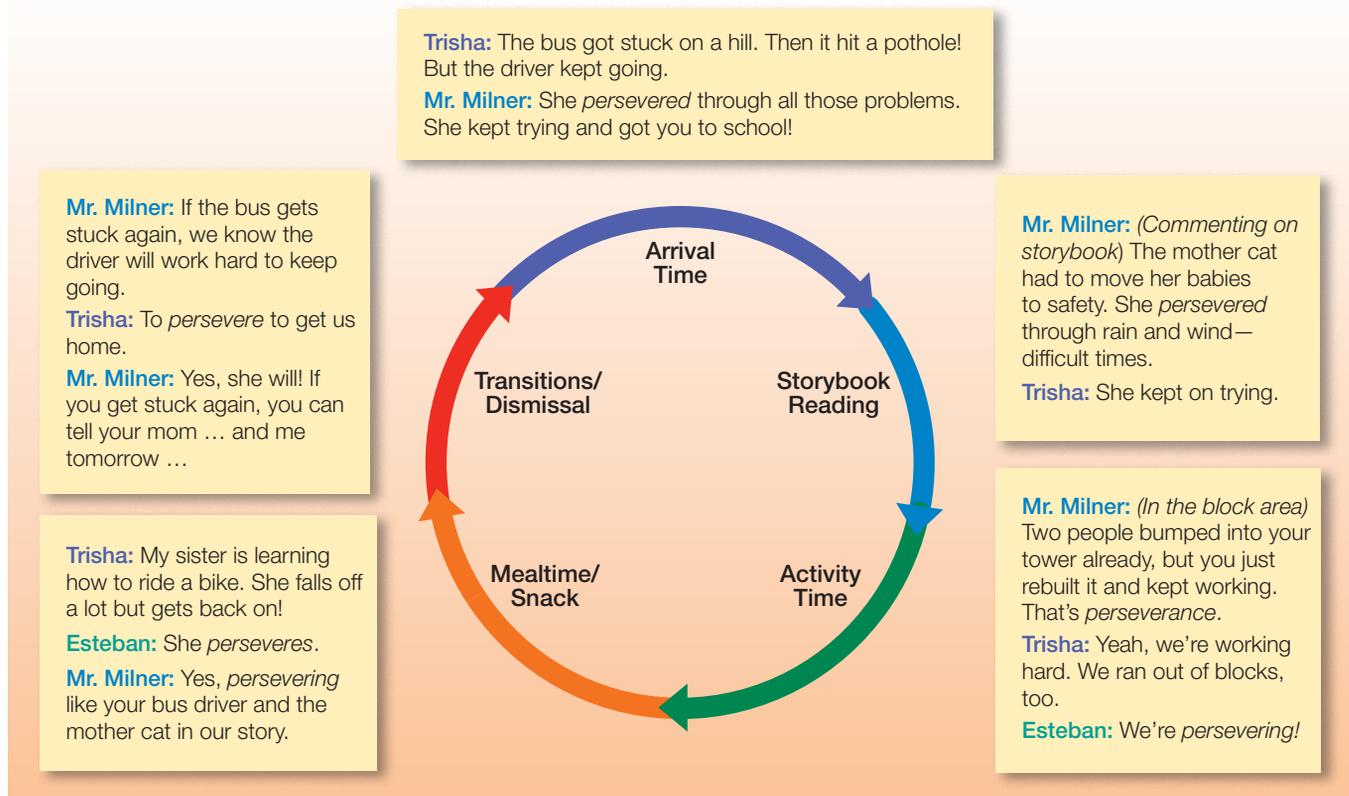
away from” or “ward off.” Exposure to the same word across settings can also teach differences in meaning. A shirt can have *crisp* folds. *Crisp* crackers break easily. Morning air can feel *crisp*. To know words means to learn variations. This requires early, continued exposure across contexts.

Knowing a word also means knowing its mechanics, such as its pronunciation, the slot it fills in a sentence (noun, verb, adjective, and so on), and the meaning of its parts (e.g., in *untidy*, the prefix *un* means *not*). Soon-to-be readers learn mechanics from adults’ modeling. For example, a person can have many *interests*. *Interest* can be shown. Being *interested* differs from being *interesting*. Children have access to this type of knowledge about words when adults use words with them.

### Thinking Outside the Book

Children’s exposure to sophisticated vocabulary must extend beyond discussions about storybooks. Using the words deliberately with children throughout the day, such as in conversations and during activities, provides repeated exposure and helps develop meaning across contexts. For example, a teacher might explain the word *persevere* when it is first encountered in a storybook, use the word later in activities with children, and use it again during a conversation about young siblings (see “Using *Persevere* Across Multiple Contexts”). In these ways, sophisticated vocabulary relating to meaningful content is modeled and valued in children’s vernacular.

### Using *Persevere* Across Multiple Contexts



Providing concrete examples of sophisticated vocabulary is another way to think outside the book. A teacher might show and label a sieve in a demonstration of washing berries. The teacher could give a definition of *sieve*—a wire mesh utensil—as well as information about its function: straining water from washed fruit. The sieve’s features (e.g., handles, size and placement of holes) make it suitable for some types of food but not others. The teacher might use it with children, show examples of types of sieves, discuss different functions (e.g., sifting, ricing, puréeing), or show examples of sieves in different contexts, such as construction, mining, or archaeology. Finally, children can use sieves in cooking and in outdoor and water play activities.

Another way to think outside the book is to use words in conversations. Children need opportunities to produce new vocabulary in a variety of settings. Small groups—which are especially helpful for dual language learners and children who are introverted—help children produce words. Combined with hands-on examples, this small group setting fosters rich interaction and talk about *grits*.

**Mr. Eacott:** Did you want any grits?

**Shareen:** Grits give you energy.

**Mr. Eacott:** Yes, they give you energy.

**Daaruk:** But I don’t like grits.

**Mr. Eacott:** Grits? But grits are made out of corn.

**Daaruk:** Grits? Grits?

**Mr. Eacott:** Mm-hm. Made out of corn. You don’t like corn? Don’t you like corn? I like corn.

**Daaruk:** At least that’s your favorite color—yellow.

**Mr. Eacott:** It sure is. They just take out the inside of the corn, grind it up, and make grits.

**Daaruk:** And you eat it?

**Mr. Eacott:** Mmmm-hmmm.

The small group setting lets children use the word *grits* in an authentic activity, to see and taste grits, and to hear descriptive information about its features, composition, and preparation. Children compared new information to existing knowledge (e.g., grits come from corn, are yellow, are eaten), offered information themselves (e.g., grits give you energy), and evaluated information in view of skepticism. Additional examples in “Using *Persevere* Across Multiple Contexts” show multiple opportunities for support of new words across several settings in a day. Moreover, word talk can extend beyond the book to talk at home.

Talking about unusual words with preschoolers not only exposes them to sophisticated words but also helps teachers understand children’s current knowledge. Talking about children’s new understandings in relation to their existing knowledge helps both adults and children learn why a child’s misunderstandings might be well founded and plausible in view of a naive understanding. Children’s skills and vocabulary intake thrive when adult input is rich and responsive. Therefore, effective teachers use opportunities to develop children’s sophisticated oral vocabulary knowledge by talking about words in books, conversations, and classroom activities. Families can use similar strategies at home to help develop children’s vocabulary.

## A Few Parting Words

Adults must be *sagacious* (wise) in providing exposure to, and support for, learning rare words in preschool. We must be *sophisticated* (complex) in our selection and consideration of worthy words and bathe children in supportive talk about these words. Finally, we must be *sedulous* (diligent) in preparation for teaching and using vocabulary across multiple contexts. If children start early to develop broad and deep oral repertoires, there is strong potential for their later reading comprehension to be robust. We can strengthen children's literacy development by exposing preschoolers to sophisticated vocabulary, by using it in multiple contexts, and by giving helpful information about a word's meaning through explanations and discussions. The 50-cent words are worth it.

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