

How can children learn so many new words so quickly? One possible explanation is **fast mapping**, which involves children's ability to make an initial connection between a word and its referent after only limited exposure to the word (McGregor, 2017; van Hout, 2017). Researchers have found that exposure to words on multiple occasions over several days results in more successful word learning than the same number of exposures in a single day (Childers & Tomasello, 2002). Also, fast mapping brings a deeper understanding of word meaning, such as where the word can apply and its nuances.

What are some important aspects of how word learning optimally occurs? Following are six key principles in young children's vocabulary development (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011):

1. *Children learn the words they hear most often.* They learn the words they encounter when interacting with parents, teachers, siblings, and peers, and also from books. They especially benefit from encountering words that they do not know.
2. *Children learn words for things and events that interest them.* Parents and teachers can direct young children to experience words in contexts that interest the children; playful peer interactions are especially helpful in this regard.
3. *Children learn words best in responsive and interactive contexts rather than passive contexts.* Children who experience turn-taking opportunities, joint focusing experiences, and positive, sensitive socializing contexts with adults encounter the scaffolding necessary for optimal word learning. They learn words less effectively when they are passive learners.
4. *Children learn words best in contexts that are meaningful.* Young children learn new words more effectively when new words are encountered in integrated contexts rather than as isolated facts.
5. *Children learn words best when they access clear information about word meaning.* Children whose parents and teachers are sensitive to words the children might not understand and provide support and elaboration with hints about word meaning learn words better than children whose parents and teachers quickly state a new word and don't monitor whether the child understands its meaning.
6. *Children learn words best when grammar and vocabulary are considered.* Children who experience a large number of words and diversity in verbal stimulation develop a richer vocabulary and better understanding of grammar. In many cases, vocabulary and grammar development are connected.

## Advances in Pragmatics

Changes in **pragmatics**, the appropriate use of language in different contexts, also characterize young children's language development (Fujiki & Brinton, 2017). A 6-year-old is simply a much better conversationalist than a 2-year-old. What are some of the improvements in pragmatics during the preschool years?

Young children begin to engage in extended discourse (Akhtar & Herold, 2008). For example, they learn culturally specific rules of conversation and politeness, and they become sensitive to the need to adapt their speech to different settings. Their developing linguistic skills and increasing ability to take the perspective of others contribute to their generation of more competent narratives.

As children grow older, they become increasingly able to talk about things that are not here (Grandma's house, for example) and not now (what happened to them yesterday or might happen tomorrow, for example). A preschool child can tell you what she wants for lunch tomorrow, something that would not have been possible at the two-word stage of language development.

Around age 4 or 5, children learn to change their speech style to suit the situation. For example, even 4-year-old children speak to a 2-year-old differently from the way they talk to a same-aged peer; they use shorter sentences with the 2-year-old. They also speak to an adult differently from a same-aged peer, using more polite and formal language with the adult (Shatz & Gelman, 1973).

**fast mapping** A process that helps to explain how young children learn the connection between a word and its referent so quickly.

**pragmatics** The appropriate use of language in different contexts.