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What the research found

Children learn the vast majority of abstract words and concepts between the ages of six and ten. However, they learn some abstract words earlier. These words refer to emotions such as ‘happy’ and ‘sad’ or have emotional content such as ‘good’ and ‘bad.’

Up to the age of nine, the abstract words that children know often have greater emotional associations (e.g., ‘truth’, ‘dream’, ‘fair’) than those with non-emotional associations (e.g., ‘role’, ‘habit’, ‘plain’).

Crucially, when we taught children abstract words that they did not know, we found that they learnt more easily those with emotional associations (e.g., ‘tyranny’) than new abstract words without emotional associations (e.g., ‘lucid’). This means emotional development is an important factor underscoring learning abstract vocabulary.

After the age of 10, children learn and know equally well both abstract words with and without emotional associations.

It had been assumed that children with DLD, and those children with ASD that have poor language, would find learning abstract words more difficult than concrete words. However, the research has found this not the case.

Key learning points

The teaching of abstract words and concepts should take into account that up to age 9, concepts with emotional association may be easier to learn than those without.

Speech and language therapy should equally focus on concrete and abstract words and to allow children with language impairments to access abstract ideas.

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