



Word-Finding Problems in Children

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

Are you ever unable to retrieve the name of a friend, movie, or object -- even though it feels like it is on the tip of your tongue? For some adults these difficulties seem to increase in frequency as they age. You may be surprised to learn that word-finding problems can occur in children as well – and that many children have an undiagnosed word-finding disorder. What are the signs of a word-finding disorder, what does it mean, how does it impact learning, and what can be done?

Symptoms of a Word-Finding Disorder:

- Obvious difficulty retrieving words (expressing frustration, saying “watch-ya-ma-call-it,” or saying “It starts with a “pa.”)
- Long pauses when speaking (more than 4 seconds)
- Frequent use of conversational fillers (e.g. *umm, uh*)
- Repetition of words or phrases (as “place savers”)
- Frequent use of non-specific words (e.g. *stuff, things*)
- Disorganized language: backing-up, starting over, circling around to express an idea. The following language excerpts from children with word-finding disorders illustrate these language reformulations:
 - *But um ... it turned out that F---red, uh... ah... Billy was.... Fred and Billy were scared more than Bobby.*
 - *And this is a.. just it, this is the.. this is just getting to the funny part*

Types of Word-Finding Problems:

- 1) **Semantic** – Semantic word-finding problems occur when there is a breakdown between the semantic meaning of a word and the entry for that word in the mental “lexicon” or dictionary. A person may express frustration at their inability to retrieve the word, they may experience the “tip of the tongue” phenomena, or they may substitute a semantically similar word without even realizing it (e.g. *lion/tiger, microscope/binoculars, or uncle/aunt*).
- 2) **Form Based or Phonologic** - This type of error occurs when there is a breakdown in accessing the correct phonological form of the word. Instead of “*elephant*”, the child may say “*elevant, elgephant, or ephelant*”. They may also substitute a word that begins with the same sound or has a similar word form (e.g. *potato/tomato, chicken/ kitchen, October/octagon*). This type of error pattern is due to a weak link between the semantic form (or meaning) and the word’s phonological or articulatory speech form.

Impact of Word-Finding Problems

Word-finding problems can affect many areas of learning, including reading, test-taking, math, and classroom participation.

- 1) **Reading:** Research has shown that the word-retrieval and naming speed of kindergartners accurately predicts their reading fluency in grade school. This is because reading requires fast and accurate retrieval of sounds, phonetic patterns, and whole words, in addition to the semantic meanings for those words.



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Children who struggle with reading fluency often end up avoiding reading. This causes them to fall even further behind in word recognition and comprehension skills - because they miss the vocabulary growth that occurs through higher-level reading.

- 2) **Test-Taking:** Word-retrieval problems can render testing formats such as fill-in-the-blank or short answer difficult, since a child may be unable to retrieve the correct word even when they possess the knowledge being tested. For these children, test-taking accommodations may include alternate formats such as matching or multiple-choice, or allowing the use of a vocabulary list they can consult during the test.
- 3) **Math:** Some children with word retrieval difficulties also have difficulty with rapid retrieval of math facts. Tasks such as “mad math minutes” where they have to solve a certain number of math problems in 60 seconds may be too challenging for children with slow retrieval.
- 4) **Verbal Expression:** Children with word retrieval disorders often struggle to express their thoughts fluently. While it may be less obvious when conversing with peers, it can become more apparent when they have to perform higher-level verbal expressive tasks, such as answering classroom questions on-demand, retelling a story or narrative, or giving oral presentations. Difficulties in this area often impact self-esteem and result in avoidance of classroom participation.

What can be done?

If you suspect your child has a word-retrieval disorder, the first step is to have an evaluation conducted to determine whether a clinical disorder exists. The evaluation results will discuss the nature of any language weaknesses in detail, provide treatment recommendations, suggest home activities, and outline appropriate classroom accommodations.

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