

What are the skills a child needs for kindergarten?

Let me make an analogy here. Inside a child's brain there is a huge reservoir called the **Listening Vocabulary**. You could say it's the child's very own Lake Pontchartrain, the famous estuary outside New Orleans that overflowed because of all the water brought by Hurricane Katrina. That extra water breached the levees and tragically flooded New Orleans. We want the same thing to happen but not in a tragic way—this time the levees will be breached inside the child's brain.

The first levee would be the **Speaking Vocabulary**. You pour enough words into the child's Listening Vocabulary and it will overflow and fill the Speaking Vocabulary pool—thus the child starts speaking the words he's heard. It's highly unlikely you'll ever say a word if you've never heard the word. More than a billion people speak Chinese—so why not the rest of us? Because we haven't *heard* enough Chinese words, especially in our childhoods.

The next levee is the **Reading Vocabulary**. It's nearly impossible to understand a word in print if you've never said the word.

And finally there's the **Writing Vocabulary**. If you've never said the word or read the word, how in the world will you be able to write it? All the language arts flow from the Listening Vocabulary—and that has to be filled by someone besides the child. Simple.

As you read to a child, you're pouring into the child's ears (and brain) all the sounds, syllables, endings, and blendings that will make up the words she will someday be asked to read and understand. And through stories you are filling in the background knowledge necessary to understand things that aren't in her neighborhood—like war or whales or locomotives.

The one prekindergarten skill that matters above all others, because it is the prime predictor of school success or failure, is the child's vocabulary upon entering school. Yes, the child goes to school to learn new words, but the words he already knows determine how much of what the teacher says will be understood. And since most instruction for the first four years of school is oral, the child who has the largest vocabulary will understand the most, while the child with the smallest vocabulary will grasp the least.

Once reading begins, personal vocabulary feeds (or frustrates) comprehension, since school grows increasingly complicated with each grade. That's why school-entry vocabulary tests predict so accurately.

