Literacy at Home: The Importance of Vocabulary

Parents often ask for tips on working with their children at home to build literacy skills. Daniel Willingham, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia who writes about the science behind reading comprehension, explained that whether or not readers understand a text has a lot to do with how much background knowledge and vocabulary they have relating to the topic. That's because writers leave out a lot of information that they assume readers will know.

In fact, a study by Nagy & Herman showed the following results:

Student A reads 1 minute each day in a school year	Learns 8000 new words
Student B reads 5 minutes each day in a school year	Learns 282 000 new words
Student C reads 20 minutes each day in a school year	Learns 1 800 000 new words

You can see that the difference is significant!

So, what can you do at home? Here are some ideas:

- Read with and to your child for 20 minutes each day.
- Have conversations with your child and try to include "big words" and new words.
- Tell stories to your child and encourage them to ask questions.
- Involve your child in the activities you do -- cooking, fixing the car, etc. Use terms specific to the activity to build vocabulary.

*Sources: Iowa Reading Research Centre, Nagy, William and Herman, Patricia: Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge: Implications for Acquisition and Instruction, Willingham, Dan: The Reading Mind