

## Word-Finding (Memory) Difficulties

Have you ever had the experience of knowing exactly what you wanted to say, but in the moment, you failed to come up with the word you needed? Most of us experience this once in a while, especially when we are tired, distracted or under stress. In some children the problem happens more often. They have difficulty finding many of the words they need and as a result may become frustrated when they fail to make their listener understand what they are trying to say.

### What does a word-finding difficulty look/sound like?

- The child may use a word that sounds like (e.g. popcorn for popsicle), belongs to the same category as (e.g. animal for dog), or is associated with (e.g. drink for milk; airplaning for flying ) the word he wants to say.
- The child may invent new terms e.g. calling a scale a “foot weigher”
- The child may use gestures and vague words like “stuff” or “thing” when he tries to tell you something. e.g., “The thing where you go like this (gestures).”
- The child might use “fillers” while he’s trying to find the word he needs e.g. “I know that... it’s a... hold on... a... um... a fork... no, a spoon.”
- The child may describe the word he wants to say e.g., “You know... the shiny thing... for eating soup.”

### Why do some children have word-finding difficulties?

Word finding difficulties are thought to be related to one or more kinds of memory. To remember something our brain “files” it away for storage. Some children may have difficulty with filing. They may not understand the word well enough to “file” it away in the right place. Other children may understand and store the words well enough, but when they go to “look” for (retrieve) the word they want something gets in the way. They might find words with similar sounds or meanings but the one they want seems temporarily “lost”. Some children have difficulty with both “filing” and “retrieval”.

### How can we help “in the moment”?

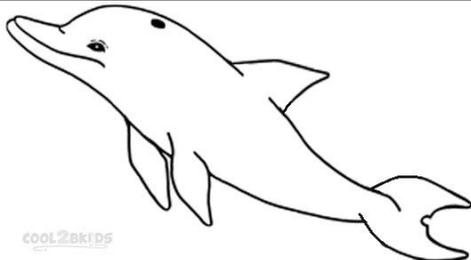
When a child is experiencing difficulty finding the words he needs, be patient. Try the following:

- Ask him to show you what he is talking about or have him act it out.
- Have him draw what he is talking about if that is something he is good at.
- Ask him for a description e.g. Who does that? Where do you find it?, When did you see it? What does it look like?, etc.
- Ask yes/no questions e.g. Is it an animal? Is it brown?
- If you’re pretty sure you know what the word is, give him the first sound of the word and see if that helps him retrieve the whole word.
- If you’re pretty sure you know the word, give him the opposite e.g. oh you mean, it’s not cold, it’s \_\_\_\_\_.

### Activities speech pathologists use to help children file away and find words:

- Increase the student’s knowledge of words and their meanings (**semantics**). The table below shows ways that we can “deepen” a child’s understanding of new words. The student is encouraged to apply these strategies when he encounters new words that he needs to learn (remember).

Word: <b>Dolphin</b>		
What groups does this word belong to?	Noun	Sea life
	Animal	Cetacean
	Mammal	Carnivore
Use it in a sentence	A dolphin can leap out of the water. The fisherman’s net caught the dolphin.	

Draw a picture	
Synonyms or Opposites	Orca whale (is a type of dolphin).
<b>Word: Addition</b>	
Categories	Noun Mathematical term
Sentences	They welcomed the new addition to their family. They built an addition to their house, adding a bedroom. We did 10 addition questions in math.
Draw a picture	<b>10 + 2 = 12</b>
Synonyms	Plus
Opposites	Subtraction, loss

- Provide practice to help the child remember what the word looks and sounds like (**phonological** form). Have them write the words repeatedly. Have them write the word in syllables when you provide boxes to help them identify the number of syllables. Have them clap out the syllables as they say the words.
- Teach students to let others know what will help them when they have difficulty e.g. ask the teacher to tell them the first sound in the word.
- Teach students to use the semantic and phonological cues that will help them recall words.

If you are concerned that your child may have word-finding problems please bring this concern to the teacher's attention to arrange for a screening of your child's speech and language skills.



