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What Are Basic Concepts?

By Susie S. Loraine, M.A., CCC-SLP

Basic concepts are the foundation of a child's education. They are words that a child needs to understand in order to perform everyday tasks like following directions, participating in classroom routines, and engaging in conversation. A child needs to know basic concepts in order to be successful in reading, writing, and math. In fact, knowledge of basic concepts directly relates to a child's performance in school.



What Kinds of Words are Basic Concepts?

- *Basic colors* - red, blue, green...
- *Directions* - through, around...
- *Quantities* - few, many...
- *Sequences* - first, next...
- *Shapes* - round, square...
- *Size* - big, little...
- *Social/Emotional States* - happy, sad...
- *Characteristics* - old, new...
- *Textures* - rough, smooth...
- *Time* - late, early...
- *Spatial Relationships and Positions* - front, behind, top, bottom...

Basic concepts often occur in pairs and tend to be opposites. For example, a child needs to understand both *hot* and *cold* to understand temperature. Dr. Elisabeth Wiig surveyed more than 200 teachers across the nation to find out which basic concept pairs are the most important for a child to know in order to be successful in preschool and kindergarten. Here are the pairs the teachers chose:

- | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| • <i>In/Out</i> | • <i>First/Last</i> | • <i>Hard/Soft</i> |
| • <i>Big/Little</i> | • <i>Open/Closed</i> | • <i>New/Old</i> |
| • <i>Up/Down</i> | • <i>Loud/Soft (Noisy/Quiet)</i> | • <i>Empty/Full</i> |
| • <i>Happy/Sad</i> | • <i>Hot/Cold</i> | • <i>Behind/In Front</i> |
| • <i>On/Off</i> | • <i>Fast/Slow</i> | • <i>Outside/Inside</i> |
| • <i>Top/Bottom</i> | • <i>Before/After</i> | • <i>Asleep/Awake</i> |

Although the teachers selected more word pairs than are included in this list, these were consistently the top 20 pairs. Not all basic concepts occur in pairs. Words such as "middle" and "between" do not have a specific opposite. Colors and shapes also do not occur in opposites.



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How Frequent are Basic Concepts?

Think of a first grade classroom and a typical daily morning routine a child follows:

The bell rings and the children file into the classroom as the teacher announces, *"First, put your lunch money in the red bowl on the small table next to my desk. If you brought your lunch, put it into the bin by the door. Next, hang your coat on the lower hook and your backpack on the top hook. Then, have a seat at your desk, get out your writing folder, and wait quietly for me to come around and check it."*

A child in this classroom needs to understand at least 17 early basic concepts to successfully participate in the first 5 minutes of this day. Even in a preschool or kindergarten classroom, teachers expect a child to be able to *"sit in a circle"* or *"pick one crayon"* or *"wash [his/her] hands before [he/she] sits at the big table in the front of the room for a snack."*

Helping Children Learn Basic Concepts

Help your child learn basic concepts by modeling descriptive words. Talk to your child about everything you see and hear in your environment. Bring your child's attention to textures (e.g., the way things feel—smooth, bumpy, soft).

Expand the words you use when you describe things. For example, instead of using the word "big" just because you know your child understands it, use the word "huge" to expose your child to new words.

When talking about spatial relationships and positions (where things are), try not to show the child by pointing or gesturing. Use more descriptive words such as "below," "behind," "on top of," "in front of," and "above."

Use and encourage "Wh" questions and answers. "Wh" questions often encourage the use of basic concepts in response. For example, "where" encourages a response that uses spatial relationships and positions (behind, under) and directions (across, through). "When" encourages a response that uses time concepts (before, later).

Basic concepts are the building blocks a child needs to have success in school and in everyday life. They are common, but very important, words that you can teach your child through conversation, reading, and singing. Use these words often and every day.

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Resource

Wiig, E. H. (2004). Wiig assessment of basic concepts®. Greenville, SC: Super Duper® Publications.

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