

Little Kids, Big Words

Using Colossal Words in the Library

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I recently led a seminar for two hundred nine-year-olds at the Brooklyn Public Library, all about big words. There were no animations or screens—just me and the (seemingly dry) subject matter, big words for big kids or, in the name of my new book, *Colossal Words for Kids* (Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2024). For an hour, the children were rapt, fully engaged by language, all of which left the organizer pleased but slightly astonished. For my part, however, I wasn't at all surprised!

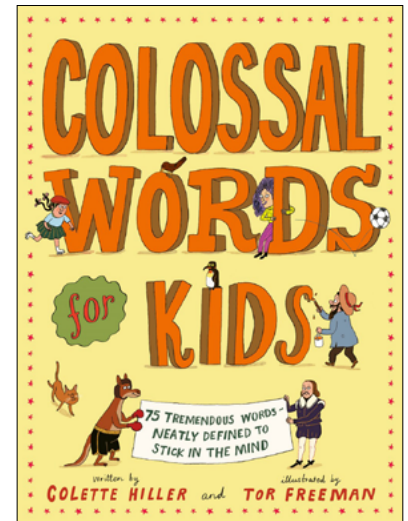
Children are natural wordsmiths. They love knowing and using big words. Despite this, adults often take pains to avoid seemingly sophisticated words. But they needn't. For if a child can grasp a word's concept, they'll relish using the word itself. Of course they can understand a word like *unbiased*. What child doesn't understand the principal of fairness? And who'd ever want to say *second to last* when instead you could say *penultimate*?

This was the thinking behind my new book, which introduces seventy-five useful, big words. From *capacious* to *voracious*, *procrastinate* to *unbiased*, these seemingly sophisticated words are usually taught in high school, but now younger children can understand and enjoy them. For these are no ordinary dictionary definitions. Move over Mr. Webster! Each word in this collection is defined in a simple rhyme. These meanings aren't just defined—they unfold, giving the reader a sense of personal discovery, which makes the business of discovering a new word entertaining rather than laborious.

Take the word *retaliate*. The dictionary definition is flat—"to perform one action in response to another." But define it in rhyme, and it's immediately accessible. In fact, when I tested these rhymes in a London primary school, *retaliate* proved a favorite (and could be heard shouted across the playground!)

Retaliate

If somebody calls you an old kangaroo
You might **retaliate** and call them one too
If someone should try, to give you a thwack
You might **retaliate** and give them one back
But really you mustn't respond in the way
No need to **retaliate**, just walk away!



After just three school workshops, with a class of thirty ten-year-olds, the results were noticeable. The teacher reported that the children were using the words they'd learned in spoken and written communication. Best of all, they'd developed a real appetite for language and wanted to learn more.

If the importance of a rich vocabulary is undisputed, if we know that language opens doors, if we know children love big words, why then, don't we usually teach younger children more complex, interesting words? It's a proper conundrum!

To my mind, a dash of imagination is missing. School vocabulary lists are often combined with spelling lists. They are (perhaps out of necessity) filled with everyday words like *genuine*, *dangerous*, *descriptive*—nothing to make anyone's pulse race. But offer more interesting shades of meaning and everything changes. *Disingenuous* is more intriguing than *genuine*. *Precarious*, more interesting than *dangerous*. And while the word *descriptive* is unlikely to inspire anyone, *nondescript* is a very different story. (Can something be so unremarkable as to not even deserve a description? The very notion prompts discussion!)

Ultimately, the reason to teach vocabulary from an early age is not to create irritating youth who can sail through exams. (That may be an added bonus!) The real aim is to spark a lasting joy of language. When we teach young children ambitious words, we show them that they are not intruders and that the English language is theirs for the taking! &



Colette Hiller is a children's writer and arts producer residing in the UK. Her first book *The B on Your Thumb: 60 Poems to Boost Reading and Spelling* (Frances Lincoln, 2020) used rhyme to boost early reading.