

Cracking Open Words

Use this tool to show children that things that appear simple are actually complex when multiple perspectives are welcomed.

Step 1

Choose a meaningful word to crack open. A meaningful word is one that:

- is connected to an important concept that you intend to explore with the children. These words might emerge from the work in progress or serve as a starting point for making connections to big ideas.
- reflects what you have noticed about children's hopes, questions, conflict, play, or theories.
- allows for complexity and multiple meanings.
- you predict already has meaning for children, but which may differ among the children. This is not a "guess the right answer" exercise. You are genuinely curious about what meanings "live inside" this word for the individuals who make up the group.
- holds an element of surprise or delight, or calls up a mental image.
- connects to your values or the values of the community.

Step 2

Write the word in the center of a large piece of paper or other writing surface intended for whole group conversation. Read the word to the children and explain that you see this word as a very big one that probably holds many different ideas. You are curious to find out how others understand this word.

Step 3

Ask children to share the images, words, phrases, inferences, and stories that come to mind when hearing this word. Ask: *What lives inside this word for you?*

Step 4

Write the children's ideas (without correction or debate about the meaning of the word) around the word. Ask for clarification as necessary. When children offer an idea that's unexpected, invite them to tell you more. Accept a meaning without determining if it is right or wrong. Write a question mark next to any idea you or other children are wondering about in order to indicate that you might want to dig deeper.

Step 5

Invite the group to look over the collection. Ask questions such as:

- *What do you notice?*
- *What do you wonder?*
- *What connections or patterns do you see?*
- *What surprises you?*

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Children benefit from exploring complexity.

Over 50% of words in the English language require context in order for us to fully understand their meaning. Words act as labels for concepts we learn; words carry histories, memories, feelings, ideas, and cultures. Because collaboration is such a critical skill for invention, children need ample opportunity to learn that words carry personal meaning and to practice being curious about varied interpretations. When children associate this experience with the pleasure of discovery, they will understand that different meanings are a normal part of developing language.



Suggested Time Frame

15-30 minutes

When and How

Use this tool when exploring the varied perspectives of a word that is especially meaningful and that will advance children's learning.

Tips and Variations

- Pacing and timing will vary; feel free to pause a day or more between steps.
- Keep the word visible in the classroom with a plan to revisit the word and continue cracking it open. Make changes on the same page when you revisit it over time — perhaps using a different color for each occasion.
- Be selective about the words you choose to crack open. This tool loses power when overused.

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