

Conversing helps language development more than reading alone

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Adult-child conversations have a more significant impact on language development than exposing children to language through one-on-one reading alone, according to a new study in the July issue of *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

"Pediatricians and others have encouraged parents to provide language input through reading, storytelling and simple narration of daily events," explains study's lead author, Dr. Frederick J. Zimmerman, associate professor in the Department of Health Services in the UCLA School of Public Health. "Although sound advice, this form of input may not place enough emphasis on children's role in language-based exchanges and the importance of getting children to speak as much as possible."

The study of 275 families of children ages 0-4 was designed to test factors that contribute to [language development](#) of infants and toddlers. Participants' exposure to adult speech, child speech and television was measured using a small digital language recorder or processor known as the LENA System. This innovative technology allowed researchers to hear what was truly going on in a child's language environment, facilitating access to valuable new insights.

The study found that back-and-forth conversation was strongly associated with future improvements in the child's language score. Conversely, adult monologueing, such as monologic reading, was more weakly associated with language development. TV viewing had no effect on language development, positive or negative.

Zimmerman adds, "What's new here is the finding that the effect of adult-child conversations was roughly six times as potent at fostering good language development as adult speech input alone."

Each day, children hear an average of some 13,000 words spoken to them by adults and participate in about 400 conversational turns with adults. More conversations mean more opportunities for mistakes and therefore more opportunities for valuable corrections. Furthermore, they also provide an opportunity for children to practice new vocabulary.

Parents should be encouraged not only to provide language input to their children through reading or storytelling but also to engage their children in two-sided conversations, the study concludes.

"Talk is powerful, but what's even more powerful is engaging a child in meaningful interactions — the 'give and take' that is so important to the social, emotional and cognitive development of [infants](#) and toddlers," says Dr. Jill Gilkerson, language research director at LENA Foundation and a study co-author.

"It is not enough to speak to [children](#)," Zimmerman adds. "Parents should also engage them in conversation. Kids love to hear you speak, but they thrive on trying speech out for themselves. Give them a chance to say what's on their minds, even if it's 'goo goo gah.'"

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

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