

Early experience found critical for language development

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We know that poor social and physical environments can harm young children's cognitive and behavioral development, and that development often improves in better environments. Now a new study of children living in institutions has found that intervening early can help young children develop language, with those placed in better care by 15 months showing language skills similar to children raised by their biological parents.

The study, in the journal *Child Development*, was conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota, Ohio University, The Ohio State University, the University of Virginia, Harvard Medical School and Children's Hospital Boston, the University of Maryland, and Tulane University.

Researchers studied more than 100 children who were part of the Bucharest Early Intervention Project, a [longitudinal study](#) of institutional and foster care in Romania. Historically, institutions there have provided very limited opportunities for language and [social interaction](#) among children. In this study, about half of the children were placed in foster homes at about 22 months, while the other half continued living in institutions. About 60 typically developing children who lived with their biological families in the same communities served as a comparison group.

"Because institutional care was the norm for these children, it was possible to create a [natural experiment](#), comparing those in institutional

care with those placed in foster care," according to lead author Jennifer Windsor, professor of speech-language-hearing sciences at the University of Minnesota.

The study found that children who were placed in foster care before they turned 2 had substantially greater [language skills](#) at age 3-1/2 than children who stayed in institutional care, with those placed by 15 months showing language skills similar to the comparison group. In contrast, children placed in foster care after they turned 2 had the same severe language delays as those who stayed in institutional care.

"This shows that not only is the change to high-quality [foster care](#) beneficial for these children, but the timing of the change appears to be important," according to Windsor.

The findings highlight the importance of intervening early to help young children develop language. They also provide insights for parents who adopt internationally. "Many infants and toddlers who are adopted from other countries and come to the United States develop language quickly," Windsor notes. "However, older [children](#) who have been living in poor care environments may be at high risk for language delays."

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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