

How parents help toddlers catch up on language skills

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Gigliola Perez and her daughter, Jaime, work to develop early language skills with Nereyda Hurtado, director of the Habla Conmigo! program developed by Stanford psychology Professor Anne Fernald. Credit: L.A. Cicero

A conversation about the day's events can play a critical role in a toddler's language development.

Studies have shown that children who hear fewer words from caregivers during the first years of life process language more slowly than do children who hear more and richer speech directed to them. This disadvantage, known as the "word gap," predicts slower vocabulary growth and can carry over into elementary school.

At a recent White House meeting on "bridging the word gap," a Stanford psychologist presented findings indicating that well-designed intervention techniques with mothers and children can help address this important problem.

In recent years, Anne Fernald, a Stanford psychology professor, has conducted experiments revealing that the language gap between rich and poor children emerges during infancy. Fernald and her research team have previously shown that children in families of low socioeconomic status (SES) develop language processing skills and vocabulary more slowly. By 24 months, children from low SES families have only the language proficiency of 18-month-olds from high SES families.

They also found that children of high SES parents – both English and native-Spanish speakers – hear tens of thousands more words spoken to them each day, and that this [richer experience with language](#) strengthens their skill in picking up new words and concepts more quickly. The gap continues to grow, so that by age 5, low SES children can be as much as two years behind in language skills that are critical to school success.

A call to action

This research has contributed to a growing consensus among policymakers that attention to learning in the first years of life should be a national priority. Last spring, President Obama [highlighted](#) the importance of supporting learning among the nation's youngest children to bridge the "word gap" and improve their chances for success in school and in life.

Fernald, the Josephine Knotts Knowles Professor of Human Biology, presented her [latest results](#) at the White House at an event called Federal, State and Local Efforts to Bridge the Word Gap: Sharing best practices and lessons learned with the broader community. The Oct. 16 event was

hosted by the Obama administration, Too Small to Fail, and the Urban Institute.

Since 2012, Fernald and her Stanford research team have collaborated with Grail Family Services (GFS), a nonprofit community service organization in San Jose. With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, they have worked together to develop a parent-education intervention program for low-income, monolingual Spanish-speaking mothers and their [young children](#) – a group particularly at risk for being caught in the word gap.

This program, called Habla conmigo! (Talk with me!), helps Latina mothers support their infants' early brain development and learn new skills for parent-child interaction through more effective use of child-directed language.

"This 'science and service' partnership is quite unusual for laboratory researchers," Fernald said. "We had a lot to learn from our community partners at GFS about how to design a culturally sensitive parent-education program that was grounded in an understanding of both the traditional family values in this population and the many challenges faced by vulnerable immigrant families."

Half of the 100 Latina mothers with toddlers recruited for the intervention study are randomly assigned to participate in the Habla conmigo! program – a series of eight group workshops at GFS, as well as three home visits for personalized coaching. The rest participate in control group discussions that do not focus on parenting.

In both groups, observations of mother-child interaction and rigorous measures of toddlers' language processing skills provide baseline data when the child is 18 months old. Follow-up measures when the child is 25 months old are used to assess the success of the intervention.

"We are testing two hypotheses," Fernald said. "First, that it's possible to help vulnerable parents gain knowledge and skills which will actually cause behavior change, increasing the amount of verbal engagement with young children. And second, that when parents learn to engage more richly in these ways, their children will show greater gains in language skills critical for later school success."

For many mothers in the Habla conmigo! program who have only an elementary school education, learning about brain development and new approaches to engaging with young children is an unfamiliar experience.

"At first we worried these moms might find it difficult to change their style of interacting with their toddler if they didn't see immediate results," said Nereyda Hurtado, a research associate in Fernald's lab and the program director. "But after a few weeks, they started talking about all the positive changes they observed and how much more they now enjoyed interacting with their child."

Turning workshop into academy

Based on data from 55 families in this ongoing study, preliminary results are promising.

When children were 18 months old, there were no initial differences between intervention and control groups in parents' behaviors or children's [language skills](#). When assessed in a play session seven months later, however, those mothers who participated in the intervention had increased the amount of child-directed speech to their 2-year-olds by 25 percent, compared to only an 8 percent increase by mothers in the control group.

Children's language growth was tracked from ages 18 to 25 months using tests of real-time comprehension that measure emerging language

proficiency.

"What's most exciting," Fernald said, "is that by 25 months the children of moms who participated in the Habla conmigo! program were significantly more efficient in their language processing skills than children in the [control group](#)."

Based on these preliminary findings, Fernald and colleagues have received three years of private funding to develop an expanded version of this program called the Habla Conmigo Academy.

"Our goal is to provide continuing education for Latina mothers, by extending this program across the first, second and third years before preschool," Fernald said. "Caregivers need to continue learning new skills to keep up with rapid developmental changes in the growing child over this critical period."

Veronica Goei, director of Grail Family Services, agrees this is a top priority.

"In this innovative collaboration, the scientific expertise of the Stanford team is integrated with our deep knowledge of the community and with constant input from the families we serve," Goei said. "The Habla Conmigo Academy project has the potential to change [children's](#) learning trajectories, addressing a critical need in the Latino community."

Provided by Stanford University

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