

Parent-child interactions contribute to language success

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/Public Domain

A new study co-authored by a UT Dallas professor in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences details that the quality of interactions

between young children and their parents is just as important—if not more important—as the quantity of words children experience in determining later language ability.

Dr. Margaret Tresch Owen, Robinson Family Professor and director of the Center for Children and Families, said previous studies have found that the small number of [words](#) heard by [children](#) in some homes—particularly in those of low-income families—has been strongly linked with poor [language](#) skills. This has become known as the "30 million word gap," representing the differences found in both the number of words heard and vocabulary differences between children from low- and high-income families.

But Owen said their new study, published in an online release of an upcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science* indicates that the quality of parent-child interactions—serving to build a strong communication foundation in the development of language skills—is much more important than the number of words heard.

"Learning to communicate is a shared endeavor," Owen said.

"Communication between parent and child is experienced in various ways from the beginning, long before the first word. Laying a foundation of communication through shared attention, routines and rituals, words and gestures—what we are calling parent/child 'conversational duets'—predicted successful language learning in the low-income children we studied."

While previous research has compared the word gap between children living in poverty and their more affluent peers, the new study focused only on low-income families. The study observed wide variations in the quality of nonverbal and verbal interactions between the 2-year-old children and their mothers. The quality of the interactions between the children and their parents predicted the children's later language ability,

trumping any prediction derived from the quantity of mothers' words in these interactions.

"When words are introduced within parent-supported shared activities, a child learns their meanings and also practices their use. Without that framework, parents' words might simply flow by like background noise, with no impact on child learning," Owen said. "However, with the right supports in quality interactions, low-income toddlers can and do become successful language learners."

Owen said the study identified three areas of parent-child interaction that help lay a strong communication foundation:

- Joint engagement in activities that are infused with symbols and objects, words and gestures.
- Shared routines and rituals: Activities that include gestures that symbolize meanings that are shared between parent and child.
- Fluid and connected conversations: Both nonverbal and verbal conversations, with contributions from parent and child that are balanced, and not monopolized by the parent simply feeding language to the child.

"Language learning is not promoted by talking at or to children," Owen said. "If parents engage in rich, interactive conversations with their children, using language and gestures, their children will be participating in conversations that foster language success and, later, their success in school."

Owen said young children learn the words that they hear most and the ones involving the things and events that interest them. By following the lead of the child, conversations and word learning grow and good language skills develop.

The importance of quality parent-child interactions is at the core of the curriculum and lessons shared with families in the Center for Children and Families' Juega Conmigo program. In the program, bilingual development specialists share information, support "parenting conversations" with parents, and facilitate play and learning activities with the children and their parents using toys, music, and movement. Such activities promote sensitive and growth-promoting parent-child interactions.

Researchers from Temple University, Georgia State University and the University of Delaware also contributed to the study. Based on this research, Owen and the research team are working to implement and evaluate a pilot intervention program to enhance the foundation for communication established between parents and their [young children](#). The new program will occur in collaboration with the Maternity Care Coalition, a highly respected agency based in southeastern Pennsylvania that serves low-income children ages 3 and younger, and their parents.

More information: "The Contribution of Early Communication Quality to Low-Income Children's Language Success." *Psychological Science* 0956797615581493, first published on June 5, 2015 [DOI: 10.1177/0956797615581493](#)

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