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Low-income children missing out on language learning both at home and at school

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Children from poor neighborhoods are less likely to have complex language building opportunities both in home and at school, putting them at a disadvantage in their kindergarten year, finds a new study led by NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

The findings, published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, suggest that language learning should involve both families and teachers in order to overcome these early disadvantages and ensure learning opportunities for vulnerable students.

"Children may go from a home with limited physical and psychological resources for learning and language to a school with similar constraints, resulting in a double dose of disadvantage," said Susan B. Neuman, professor of childhood and literacy education at NYU Steinhardt and the study's lead author. "Our study suggests that neighborhoods matter and can have a powerful influence on nurturing success or failure."

Research shows that children's academic achievement is predicted not only by their family's socioeconomic status, but also by the socioeconomic status of their school. These two factors together have an impact on children's access to learning resources, including adults who create language-rich opportunities when they speak with children.

"Children's early exposure to a rich set of language practices can set in motion the processes that they use for learning to read, including the

vocabulary and background knowledge necessary for language and reading comprehension," Neuman said. "Consequently, children who have limited experience with these kinds of linguistic interactions may have fewer opportunities to engage in the higher-order exchanges valued in school."

In this study, Neuman and her colleagues examined language-advancing resources in both the homes and schools of 70 children who recently made the transition from preschool to kindergarten. Half of the families lived in poor neighborhoods in Detroit, while the other half lived in more demographically diverse Michigan communities that were largely working class.

The researchers followed the children through their kindergarten year, conducting targeted observations in both home and school settings. During four hour-long home visits, the researchers observed the engagement between parents and their children to understand the degree of cognitive stimulation in the home and the quality of the interactions. They also conducted four half-day observations in kindergarten classrooms during which the teachers' speaking was recorded. The researchers analyzed the language spoken by parents and teachers for both quantity (number of words spoken) and quality (using varied vocabulary and complex sentences).

These observations were combined with assessments of the children's school readiness skills, including vocabulary knowledge and letter and word identification.

The researchers found that children in low-income neighborhoods had fewer supports for language and early literacy developments than did those in working class communities. In both settings, there were significant differences in the quality of language directed at children, but there was no difference in the quantity of language overall.

At home, parents in low-income neighborhoods used shorter sentences, fewer different words, and had lower reading comprehension than did parents from working class neighborhoods. In the classroom, children from the low-income communities attended kindergartens characterized by more limited language opportunities. Teachers used simpler sentences, less varied vocabulary, and fewer unique word types, potentially oversimplifying their language for students.

Children in all neighborhoods experienced learning across their kindergarten year, but children in the working class communities outpaced their counterparts from low-income communities, particularly in expressive vocabulary.

"We found that the quality of one's educational opportunities is highly dependent on the streets where you live. Tragically, the children who need the greater opportunity to learn appear to be the least likely to get it," Neuman said.

The results suggest that no matter the strength of the early boost children receive in preschool, differences in later environmental influences can either support or undermine this early advantage.

"Too often we have focused on what happens within early childhood programs instead of the environmental supports that surround them. We need to account for the multiple contexts of home and school in our understanding of children's early development," Neuman said.

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