

# New study shows toddlers are great at getting the conversation started

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Child contributing audio recordings in the Speech and Language Lab at Washington State University Credit: Mark VanDam, 2018

Conversation is an important part of what makes us human. Previous research has shown that children begin to develop this skill at a young

age. While many assume that mothers instigate communication with their children, new research suggests that children are the ones who get the conversation started.

"I was surprised that kids were drivers of conversation," said Mark VanDam, from Washington State University, who will present his team's [research findings](#) at the 177th Meeting of the Acoustical Society of America, which takes place May 13-17, at the Galt House in Louisville, Kentucky.

"This is exciting, because kids are active participants in shaping their own world. They have the freedom to pick what they talk about and when," VanDam said.

Conversation is important for [language development](#). VanDam and his team miked up 17 toddlers (about 30 months old) and gathered day-long audio recordings of conversations with their [parents](#). The team used automatic speech recognition technology to sift through more than 1,400 hours of recordings.

"This type of work would have been impossible a few decades ago," VanDam said. "With the power of computers and [automatic speech recognition](#), we have developed a new dataset that takes place in a naturalistic setting rather than in a lab."

The team started the study to understand how toddlers interacted with each parent. In particular, they wanted to explore who initiated the conversation in the family and if there were any differences in these conversations between boys and girls.

The team normalized the conversations to account for families that were naturally chattier. They found that children more frequently initiated conversations with their parents, followed by the mother and then the

father. (The study was limited to nuclear, different-sex parenting households.)

"There is a ton of evidence that girls at this age have a better command of language, but we found no difference in how boys and girls initiated [conversation](#)," VanDam said. "We also did not see any sex differences in how the children spoke to either parent."

According to VanDam, these results lay the groundwork to understand how mothers and fathers interact with their children.

"These results provide a template of how to use high-tech methods that are only very recently available to target new approaches to help moms and dads interact with their kids," VanDam said. "We could use this information to develop new targeted therapies to help [children](#) that have language delay or behavioral issues and to improve the ways we interact with computers."

**More information:** Presentation #2pSC4, "Preschoolers initiate more conversations than their parents," will be given during a poster session beginning at 1:30 p.m., Tuesday, May 14, in Grand Ballroom C of the Galt House in Louisville, Kentucky. [acousticalsociety.org/asa-meetings/](http://acousticalsociety.org/asa-meetings/)

Provided by Acoustical Society of America

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