

Study finds maternal race not a factor for children experiencing a 'language gap'

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In a first of its kind study, researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute evaluated the language use of black mothers in comparison with

white mothers with the same education levels to measure the amount and complexity of the words they use with their infants and young children. This study resulted in the new discovery that race played no role in the amount and quality of the words they used with their children or with the language skills their children later develop.

Researchers found that [maternal education](#) did play an important role in predicting the amount and quality of the mother's language use and the child's [language development](#). This is significant because earlier studies have shown that children of parents with lower socioeconomic backgrounds and [education levels](#) have lower [language skills](#) when entering school, but those studies included parents with [higher incomes](#) who were primarily white and parents with lower incomes who were primarily black. As a result, educators and other child professionals were not able to distinguish between race, income or education as the cause of the language gap until now. These new findings were published in the journal *Child Development* on July 17, 2019.

"Over time, there were summaries of this early research that misrepresented the data. Many of these summaries suggested that black and African American mothers, especially those with lower-incomes, provided less and lower quality language to their children than white mothers," said Lynne Vernon-Feagans, Ph.D.

"Our findings represent a big shift from previous thinking that race-based differences in maternal language play a significant role in children's language outcomes," said Mary Bratsch-Hines, Ph.D.

Researchers Lynne Vernon-Feagans, Mary Bratsch-Hines and Elizabeth Reynolds of Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute teamed up with Michael Willoughby, Ph.D., of RTI International on the study to determine if and how much a mother's race or her education played a role in her child's language development.

Researchers were also able to determine that maternal education was very related to children's later language at school age regardless of maternal race, and that mothers' early language input quality and complexity were even more related to children's later language at school age.

These new discoveries will help improve parent, teacher and school system efforts by shaping their understanding of the importance of maternal education for both black and white children and allowing experts to focus available efforts and resources in better ways to improve child outcomes.

More information: Lynne Vernon-Feagans et al, How Early Maternal Language Input Varies by Race and Education and Predicts Later Child Language, *Child Development* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13281](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13281)

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