

Talking & Teaching



Families hold similar dreams and hopes for their children. They want them to be happy and healthy, to know they are loved, and to be successful in whatever they choose to do in life. The opportunity for such long-term dreams to be realized are partially determined in a child's first five years of life. As a matter of fact, it's been well demonstrated that the most dramatic brain growth happens in these initial years, when over a million new brain connections develop per second (1, 2).

Caregivers and communities can capitalize on this period of rapid brain development to help young child build the critical foundation they will need later in life.

During these early years it's not the number of costly toys or alphabet flashcards a child has that is of utmost importance, but something that is completely free — talking. Language is central to all strands of a child's development — attachment, early literacy, early math, and social emotional development. Of course, words aren't the only way children communicate. Very young children point, use body language, cry, or make eye contact to give us messages. Recognizing and positively reinforcing these precursors to language is essential for more advanced language to come. World renowned pediatrician Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, and child psychologist Dr. Joshua Sparrow have researched and written abundantly about the invaluable nature of bonding between parents and their children (3). The positive relationship that is formed through quality moments cuddling with a caregiver, laughing, or being comforted, increases a baby's brain growth, sense of security and attachment. When language is nurtured out of a secure attachment through loving adult-child exchanges, very young children learn to use early language as a tool to interact with others, practice self-control, and explore their surroundings.

The research is clear, talking is teaching.

Parental responses to infant babbling can influence a child's language development. Infants whose caregivers respond to what they think their babies are saying show an increase in advanced language sounds (4). However, research suggests by the time children are two years old, there is already a six-month gap in language understanding between children from higher-income and lower-income families, and by age four, the average child in a lower-income family might have 30 million fewer words of cumulative experience than the average child in a high-income family (5, 6). Such disparity remains apparent throughout the school years, and is linked with later academic successes (7, 8, 9). Building from this research, more recent evidence has shown "conversational turns" to have more brain-building power than adult words alone, and without income as a predictor (10). Conversational turns are simple back and forth exchanges between a child and an adult, like in a game of tennis or ping pong. Such research provides an encouraging



platform to empower parents and caregivers, especially those with limited resources, to realize how much they have the ability to benefit their child's life by talking, reading, and singing to them every day.

The most powerful types of conversations are those that are playful, engaging, and anchored in responsive interactions that are emotionally satisfying for a child but also for the adult who loves them.

One of the simplest conversation strategies for caregivers is to pretend to be a broadcaster by giving "play-by-plays!" For example, when it's time for a bath, a caregiver can describe and label what they see and what they are doing, "it's time to get cleaned up . . . I'm picking you up . . . we're walking to the tub . . . let's count how many steps . . . the water feels warm . . . let's make some bubbles . . ." They can also describe what children are doing, "you have the red car . . . you're driving it slowly around the chair." Another fun way of encouraging language is to pretend to be forgetful during everyday familiar routines like getting dressed, cleaning up, or while singing songs. Caregivers can be silly by putting their shoes on before their socks or putting a dirty dish in the clean cabinet, providing an opportunity for young children to "catch and correct" the routine. Outside of the home environment, community settings provide meaningful everyday learning opportunities. Grocery stores, car rides, bus stops, libraries, laundromats, and parks are familiar environments for children. Playing a simple game like "I Spy" creates a language-rich opportunity for children to engage by practicing their communication skills.

Community members also have a role to play.

Family friends, neighbors, pediatricians, grocery store clerks, librarians, bus drivers, bank tellers, and faith leaders are valuable assets to a child's language development. These individuals can promote and reinforce language-rich opportunities for positive engagement throughout their community settings frequented by young children and families. These everyday language and learning opportunities are small, but meaningful moments of interaction that have a big impact on a child's life. When young children and families thrive, a community thrives.

Allison Wilson, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education at the University of Montana and a Faculty Affiliate with the Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development.



This article was written as a resource for *Let's Grow Montana*, an effort from the Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development and the Montana Children's Trust Fund.

Let's Grow Montana works to cultivate healthy children by strengthening families and offers free tele-coaching, elearning courses and workshops to all Montanans. To learn more, visit <http://health.umt.edu/lets-grow-montana/>.



health.umt.edu/ccfwd

SOURCES

1. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. 2000. From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development. J. P. Shonkoff and D. A. Phillips, eds. Washington: National Academy Press.
2. Center on the Developing Child (2009). Five Numbers to Remember About Early Childhood Development (Brief). Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.
3. Brazelton, T. Berry, and Joshua D. Sparrow. 2006. Touch- points birth to three: your child emotional and behavioral development. Massachusetts: Da Capo.
4. Gros-Louis, Julie, Meredith J. West, and Andrew P. King. (2014). "Maternal Responsiveness and the Development of Directed Vocalizing in Social Interactions." *Infancy* 19 (4): 385-408.
5. Hart, B., & Risley, T. (2003). The early catastrophe. *American Educator*, 27(4), 6-9.
6. Fernald, A. Marchman, V.A., & Weisleder, A. (2013). SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Developmental Science*, 16(2), 234-238.
7. Dickinson, D. K., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2010). Speaking out for language: Why language is central to reading development. *Educational Researcher*, 39(4), 305-310.
8. Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P. O. (2001). *Beginning literacy with language: Young children learning at home and school*. Paul H Brookes Publishing.
9. Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.) (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
10. Romeo, Rachel & Leonard, Julia & Robinson, Sydney & West, Martin & Mackey, Allyson & Rowe, Meredith & Gabrieli, John. (2017). Beyond the 30-million-word gap: Children's conversational exposure is associated with language-related brain function. *Psychological Science*. 29. 10.1177/0956797617742725.