by Dale Walker, Associate Research Professor and Scientist, Juniper Gardens Children's Project

A number of years ago, a landmark study conducted in Kansas captured the attention of early interventionists and researchers across the nation, showing how important early experience with language is for children’s language and early literacy development. Year after year, Drs. Hart and Risley from the University of Kansas, Life Span Studies Institute noticed differences in the vocabulary size of the children attending their preschools. This moved Drs. Hart and Risley to speculate that those differences began much earlier in a child’s life - before preschool. To answer their question, they began what would later become a landmark study described in Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Lives of American Children (1995).

The Background Story on the ‘Word Gap’
Over their 3 year study, Drs. Hart & Risley observed monthly in the homes of infants and toddlers throughout Kansas City to find out what young children were experiencing in terms of language in their homes. Differences in children’s daily experiences with language made for staggering differences in the cumulative amount of talk children heard before age 3 - and this was most pronounced for children growing up in poverty. They estimated that by the time children were reaching preschool, there was a gap of over 30-million words in some children’s experience with language. In general, children from the most disadvantaged homes were hearing far fewer words than children from more advantaged backgrounds (Hart & Risley, 2003). Therefore, the ‘Word Gap’ refers to the deficit in language exposure that some children experienced.

The Impact on School Performance
Following up on children from the original Hart & Risley sample, we documented that those early differences in children’s experience with language persisted through elementary school (Walker, Greenwood, Hart & Carta, 1994). Children who heard less language in their homes when they were babies were more likely to have poor school readiness skills in terms of language and reading compared to the children who heard more language in their homes (Walker et al., 1994). The implications of early language deficits are serious. Children who enter school at a disadvantage may continue to perform below their peers and to be at risk for later language and literacy delays among other negative outcomes including behavior problems, social isolation and the skills necessary to be successfully employed later in life (Warren & Walker, 2005).

Translating Research to Practice
Given the connections between early language exposure, language development, school readiness, early literacy, and social competency, there is a need to translate language intervention research into practice. While key interventions have been found to increase language and early literacy skills, they are not always used in practice by parents, home visitors, teachers or others who spend time with young children. Our language intervention research group at the Juniper Gardens Children’s Project (JGCP) worked to develop and test a model for language intervention that builds the capacity of adults to communicate and talk more with infants and young children across daily activities at home and child care. Extending on those early findings and research conducted by others to improve language outcomes, we partnered with community early child education and home visiting programs on a series of projects to describe and improve children’s language learning opportunities. Across these studies, we have found child talk and performance on standardized measures of language to be closely associated to adult caregivers’
use of language strategies. To facilitate the use of strategies for promoting children’s communication we developed a manualized set of the naturalistic strategies and support materials (www.talk.ku.edu) and tested whether using those intervention strategies results in increased language exposure in homes and in child care.

We have documented that adult strategy use is predictive of more frequent child communication and talk at 36 months. For example, in a recently completed Model Demonstration Center with infants and toddlers with identified disabilities, we found that children whose parents used the Promoting Communication Strategies intervention more often were more likely to have increased scores on standardized tests of language while scores for those who heard less talk in their homes were more likely to remain low or even decline.

These, and other studies provide compelling evidence that before children start preschool, their early language experiences can shape their future in ways that can have a profound impact.

Promoting Communication Strategies

The strategies are outlined in a manual for early educators, interventionists and parents and organized by these specific language promoting strategies:

- Arranging the Environment: Designing an area to promote interaction and communication
- Following a Child’s Lead: Talking about the child’s interests, activities, or materials
- Commenting and Labeling: Describing child’s or the adults’ actions or activities
- Imitating and Expanding: Repeating a child’s vocalizations and/or adding new information
- Asking Open-Ended Questions: Asking who, what, when, where, why, and how questions
- Time Delay/Fill in the Blank: Giving the chance to fill in content after pausing
- Positive Attention and Praise: Providing positive feedback about communication and behavior
- Providing Choices: Giving the child a chance to say what he or she wants


Examples of how the strategies can be used by adults across home and early education settings and across multiple routines (meals, play, book-reading) are provided to increase the language learning opportunities for young children and to build upon child communication as a way to make language goals more intentional. Materials to support intervention delivery include a DVD with examples of the strategies, a poster, activity cards, and self-check forms to document strategy use. As part of the intervention, measures of implementation and intervention fidelity are collected to document delivery. Graphs generated from 30-minute observations of adult-child interactions are also used to provide valuable performance information and to illustrate the overlap between intervention use and child communication. The Promoting Communication Intervention is designed for maximal flexibility and sustainability and may be individualized to accommodate diverse needs, teaching styles, and child developmental levels.

Addressing the ‘Word Gap’

The groundbreaking work of Drs. Hart and Risley not only inspired our work at JGCP, but it has inspired other researchers, practitioners, administrators, and community leaders nationally and internationally to address the gap in experience with language that some of our youngest, most vulnerable children experience. The research conducted in Kansas helped to underscore the importance of the earliest years for children’s later development and the potential for making a difference for children. The importance of engaging with very young children to provide them with rich language-learning opportunities is now embraced in community-wide messaging campaigns in Kansas City, Tulsa, Chicago, Providence, Boston, as well as in other communities nationwide. The concept of bridging the ‘Word Gap’ has renewed efforts by community leaders, policymakers, and organizations to address the challenges of growing up in poverty. This research has also inspired new and innovative technology designed to document intervention delivery in a way that informs practice. Each one of us can also make a big difference by spreading the word about the importance of talk and positive engagement with children when they are very small.

Dr. Dale Walker is an Associate Research Professor and Scientist at the Juniper Gardens Children’s Project, Institute for Life Span Studies at the University of Kansas. Her research has concentrated on finding effective interventions and assessment procedures that improve outcomes for infants and young children. She has directed a number of research projects with her colleagues at JGCP and presently co-directs the Bridging the Word Gap Research Network http://www.bwgresnet.res.ku.edu/ funded by HRSA/HHS, as well as other projects related to early language intervention http://www.talk.ku.edu/; http://projectengage.jgcp.org/; http://www.igdi.ku.edu/ . She was part of the development team for Talk Read Play at the Children’s Campus of Kansas City https://www.thefamilyconservancy.org/parenting-resources/talk-read-play . Dr. Walker may be contacted by email at the Juniper Gardens Children’s Project, Children’s Campus of Kansas City, 444 Minnesota Ave. Suite 300, Kansas City, KS, 66101. Email: walkerd@ku.edu.
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