

Talking to Children

Why Some Mothers Do It More

How a mother cares for her baby may determine her child's future vocabulary and language abilities, regardless of a family's economic status

JUST AS EXPOSING CHILDREN TO BOOKS helps develop their interest in reading; talking to children helps develop their language abilities. Research shows that from a very young age, children are influenced by the manner in which their mothers verbally interact with them. An FPG study published in the May/June 2008 issue of *The Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, examines how mother and child characteristics might influence the way mothers talk to their infants.

Because language skills play a critical role in children's academic success, researchers have paid particular attention to this aspect of development, particularly for at-risk children. Children from families with a lower socio-economic status, including lower levels of parental education and family income, have a smaller vocabulary, are less likely to be able to answer complex questions; and speak less frequently to others. Poor rural children are particularly vulnerable. One study found that children from low-income rural families were at higher risk for language delays.

Previous research provides some insights. Studies suggest that mothers with lower incomes speak to their children less and use a less rich vocabulary and this in turn plays a role in their children's lower language skills. Less is known about specific mother and child characteristics that might influence the way mothers talk to their children. No studies have examined the relationship between child temperament and maternal language.

This study looked at whether child and maternal characteristics were important in predicting how mothers speak to their children. It also considered if family dynamics might be causing the link between poverty and maternal language.



Methodology

The study is part of FPG's Family Life Project (FLP), a comprehensive, longitudinal study examining how differences in rural children's development are linked to variations in temperament, family experience, community structure, economic circumstances, and ethnicity. FLP launched in 2002 with a \$16.5 million grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). In 2007, it received a second grant for \$13 million to follow these same children into school.

FLP studies families living in two of the four major geographical areas of high child rural poverty—the African American South and Appalachia. Participants were recruited from three counties in Eastern North Carolina and three counties in Central Pennsylvania. The study includes 1157 mothers.

- 40% are African Americans.
- 81% have a minimum education of a high school degree.
- 14% have a 4-year college degree.
- 48% are married.

Children were a representative sample of all babies born to mothers who resided in the 6 counties from 2003 to 2004, oversampling for poverty and African American.

This study used data collected when the children were between 6 and 8 months of age. Two home visitors conducted interviews, had mothers complete questionnaires, observed mother and child interactions, and observed child-based tasks. In one task, mothers were asked to go through a wordless, picture book (*Baby Faces*) with their child. Mothers signaled researchers when they were done. The interaction was videotaped. Another task placed mothers and babies on a blanket with a set of toys. Mothers were told to interact with their child as they normally would for a period of ten minutes. This too was videotaped.

Findings

The study replicated others in that it found that mothers with lower education spoke to their children less frequently, used smaller vocabularies, and used less complex language in talking with their children. However, the mother's parenting style was more significant.

Mothers who had knowledge of child development, regardless of their income or education level, spoke more frequently and complexly to their children. These mothers were responsive and supportive when engaging their children. Teaching mothers about child development may be an important way ultimately to improve children's language development.

The study also found that child characteristics were a significant predictor of maternal language. Mothers, who rated their children as more distressed, spoke less to their children and used less complex language, suggesting that child temperament might partially explain mothers' language with their children. Meaning mothers may talk differently to a child who cries frequently than they do to a child who smiles and laughs more.

The way in which mothers interacted with their children during the play session provided the most insight into understanding of mothers' language. Although poverty and its associated risks predicted how mothers speak to their children, mothers who interacted with their children in a stimulating and positive way appeared to diminish these effects.

The study demonstrates that mothers can help children overcome some of the risks to language development associated with poverty. ■



To Learn More

Vernon-Feagans, L., Pancsofar, N., Willoughby, M., Odom, E., Quade, A., & Cox, M. (2008). Predictors of maternal language to infants during a picture book task in the home: Family SES, child characteristics and the parenting environment. *The Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29(3), 213-226.