**Closing the Word Gap: Why Baby Talk Matters**

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**By Renate Zangl, PhD**

Talking with infants has been a hot topic in the news recently. Why? Isn’t it obvious that children need to hear people talking to them in order to learn? Yes, but what is less obvious is how much talking and engaging with infants and toddlers matters.

Parents tend to overestimate how much they talk. The good news is that when parents are invited to talk and engage more, they do so. However, many children do not get enough experiences with language in those very early months and years when the foundation for language and learning is laid. This leads to what researchers call word and language gaps.

**What is the word gap and when does it show up?**

In a headline-making 1995 study, language researchers Hart & Risley estimated that by age 4, children from low-income families have heard about 30 million fewer words than children in higher-income families. These families tended to talk to their children in more negative, prohibitive tones, where as the higher-educated and high-income families talked to their babies in praising and encouraging messages. Sadly, limited and negative talk stifles the back and forth communication, dampening a child’s curiosity and chattiness over time.

Thirty million words is an enormous gap! For this number to get so big, these children must have heard several thousand fewer words every single day compared to their peers from more high-income, talkative parents.

This word gap in parent talk sets young children back early on, and they stay behind. These children end up less prepared for school, lagging behind in language and cognitive tasks versus their peers.

A 2013 study at Stanford University revealed that the word gap actually starts much earlier than we thought: By the tiny age of 18 months, children from low socioeconomic status are already 6 months behind the others. By the age of 2, these children have a gap in both understanding and saying words.

Word gaps at this young age mean that, at a time when toddlers are just starting out learning language, they are already behind some peers by a quarter of their lifetime.

This leads us to a critical point: More words early on give children more knowledge, more opportunities to learn new words, to do better in kindergarten and school, to make friends and even handle frustrating situations more effectively.

**How can you help babies build strong language skills and avoid early word gaps?**

By feeding babies lots of words - through talking, reading, and singing in baby talk style - loving responses, listening and face-to-face chats are powerful ways to do so.

My recent book, [*Raising a Talker: Easy Activities from Birth to Age 3*](https://www.gryphonhouse.com/books/details/raising_a_talker), offers parents and caregivers a powerful toolkit to boost language and learning with easy-to-do play activities that are filled with science-based tips and strategies. Using language and nonverbal communication in new, innovative ways, *Raising a Talker* allows parents to tune in to their babies’ needs more closely and transform everyday play into memorable language and learning experiences. Developmental overviews, developmental checklists, communication tips and observation guides give parents the know-how to become strong partners for their child to build a promising path for the future together.

A baby who is talked to, and responded to, is a learning baby. Let’s start talking.

*(This is the first part in a series from guest blogger/Gryphon House author Renate Zangl, PhD. For more information, visit*[*RaisingATalker.com*](http://raisingatalker.com/)*).*

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