

Talk, Sing, Read, Write and Play Together

"What can be done to give children a strong foundation in the earliest years of life, upon which everything else will be built?" This is a question that has been occupying many people and organizations.

A study from 1995 by Betty Hart and Todd Risley concluded that children's vocabulary skills are linked to their economic status. Researchers recorded interactions for 2 ½ years in homes of families from all economic levels. Children from high income homes heard an average of 45 million words, children from working class homes heard 26 million words, and children from families living at or near the poverty level only heard 13 million words. The gaps in word knowledge were already apparent by the time a child was 18 months old.

Research has shown that children who enter kindergarten with large vocabularies do better in school than children with limited vocabularies. Children who enter kindergarten "ready to learn" have higher rates of graduation from high school, get better jobs with higher salaries, have more success with long-term relationships, and have lower rates of incarceration.

A more recent study done at Stanford University measured the language processing skills of 18- and 24- month old toddlers. These children were placed on their parents' laps, facing a screen with two photographs projected onto it, for instance, one photo of a dog, the other of a baby. A voice questions, "Where is the baby? Can you see it?" The child's eye movements are tracked to see whether or not



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the child looks at the baby. The time it takes for the child to move his or her eyes towards the baby's photo once the question has been asked is also measured.

The results from this study reinforced Hart and Risley's findings that children from lower income homes lagged behind children from higher economic backgrounds in vocabulary development. Since research has proven that vocabulary development in the early years of life affects reading skills and general success in school, the playing field can be leveled if we work on building the vocabularies of all children.

The good news is that the problem of inequality of words can be remedied! No matter what the economic status, the native language, or the education level of parents, there are five things parents can do with their children to help prepare them for school and increase their vocabulary. These five practices, highlighted

through the [Every Child Ready to Read® program](#), are: **Talk, Sing, Read, Write, and Play**, adapted to fit the ages of the children.

Although computer games and toys may claim to be educational, children's brains respond best to interaction with another human being. By **talking** to their children in whatever language is easiest, parents build their child's vocabulary. Because of this, many literacy organizations have begun telling parents to talk to their children. Since songs often include descriptive words that might not be used in ordinary speech, **singing together** is another way to build vocabulary.

Although most children under age five cannot yet read, they are able to look at illustrations in books and answer questions like, "What sound does the cow make?" Younger children who cannot yet speak can often point to the kitty when asked, "Where is the kitty?" Toddlers may not

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have the attention span to sit through an entire book being read aloud, but they may enjoy hearing the first few pages of a story. Sharing books together whether by reading aloud, describing pictures, asking questions, or telling a story while looking at the illustrations is a great way to introduce children to books while building vocabulary. These are all good ways to **read** to young children. And if families do not have books in their homes, by visiting the local public library they can attend free story times, look at books, play with toys (yes, most public libraries now have early literacy corners with toys and games!), and borrow books for free!

Fine motor skills are not developed enough for infants and most toddlers to be able to write letters and words. However, exercising the fingers that will be holding pens and pencils in later years helps children develop the motor skills needed for learning how to write. Doing fingerplays, such as "The Itsy Bitsy Spider", are perfect for helping very young children build their **writing** skills. Playing percussion instruments and grasping flannel board pieces are also ways to build fine motor skills.

Play is the work of childhood. Through play, children explore the universe; they learn to express themselves, learn to share, to communicate, to solve problems, and to try new things. In play, it is impossible to make a mistake. And, during play, vocabulary words are used in a wide variety of ways.

When Dr. Stuart Brown, a psychiatrist from Texas, began working with imprisoned mass-murders, he discovered that they all had one thing in common: a

Lovely, downloadable posters promoting the five practices (talk, sing, read, write, play) in English and Spanish, produced by the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) can be found at: <http://www.ala.org/alsc/babiesneedwords>

lifelong lack of play! Further study showed that play leads to positive socialization; during play children learn how to cope in difficult situations without violence, and they learn how to "say it with words, not with fists." Play enables children to test alternatives and experience joy. After more research, Dr. Brown concluded that joyful play experiences in childhood can reduce violent acts as an adult.

If we want our society to be a place where all children have the ability to do well in school and be successful in life, we can share these practices with all parents. . . TALK, SING, READ, WRITE and PLAY with your child. That is all it takes! No fancy toys, flash cards, or workbooks are needed.

The most important factor, however, is the interaction between the child and the important adult in that child's life. Talking, singing, and looking at books alone does not have near as much value as interaction with a loved adult. And it is never too late to talk, sing, read, write, and play with your child, even if he or she is well beyond kindergarten.

One word of caution, however. Talking at a child is not the same as talking with a child. Children engage in conversation if it is about something that is

interesting and meaningful to them. It is not just about saying words, it is also about having a relationship and exchanging words.

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OPAT (Oklahoma Parents as Teachers) is a free home visitation program for parents and children who live in Putnam City. Through it, MGOL is being offered at more than 50 elementary schools in Oklahoma City, and parents with children from birth to age 5 are being served.



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