

The Early Catastrophe

It would take massive intervention to change the lives of disadvantaged children.

By Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley

During the 1960s' War on Poverty, we were among the many researchers, psychologists, and educators who brought our knowledge of child development to the front lines in an optimistic effort to intervene early to forestall the terrible effects that poverty was having on some children's academic growth.

In one planned intervention, we used our experience with clinical language intervention to design a half-day program for a preschool located in an impoverished area. We focused on building the everyday language the children were using, then evaluating the growth of that language. Our study included not just poor children, but also a group of professors' children against whom we could measure the disadvantaged children's progress.

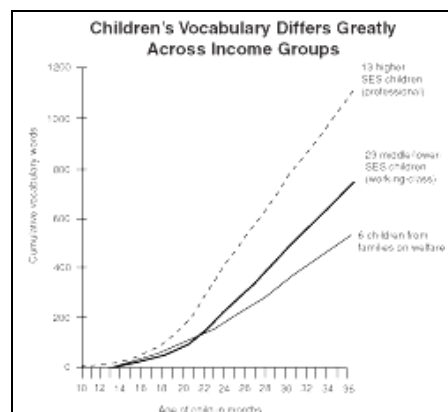
All the children in the program eagerly engaged with the wide variety of new materials and language-intensive activities introduced in the preschool. The spontaneous speech data we collected showed a spurt of new vocabulary words added to the dictionaries of all the children and an abrupt acceleration in their cumulative vocabulary growth curves.

We found that, while we could easily increase the size of the children's vocabularies by teaching them new words, we could not accelerate the rate of vocabulary growth so that it would continue beyond direct teaching; we could not change the developmental trajectory. We saw increasing disparity between the extremes – the fast vocabulary growth of the professors' children and the slow vocabulary growth of the poor children.

Rather than concede to the unmalleable forces of heredity, we decided that we would undertake research that would allow us to understand the disparate developmental trajectories we saw. We realized that we needed to see what was happening to children at home at the beginning of their vocabulary growth.

We undertook 2½ years of observing 42 families for an hour each month to learn about what typically went on in homes with 1- and 2-year-old children learning to talk. The data showed us that ordinary families differ immensely in the amount of experience with language and interaction they regularly provide their children, and that differences in children's experience are strongly linked to children's language accomplishments at age 3.

We observed the 42 children grow more like their parents in stature and activity levels, in vocabulary resources, and in language and interaction styles. Despite the considerable range in vocabulary size among the children, 86% to 98% of the words recorded in each child's vocabulary consisted of words also recorded in their parents' vocabularies.



By the time the children were 3 years old, trends in amount of talk, vocabulary growth, and style of interaction were well-established and clearly suggested widening gaps to come. Even patterns of parenting were already observable among the children. When we listened to the children, we seemed to hear their parents speaking; when we watched the children play at parenting their dolls, we seemed to see the futures of their own children.

We wondered whether the differences we saw at age 3 would be washed out, like the effects of a preschool intervention, as the children's experience broadened to a wider community of competent speakers. Could we predict how a child would do in school from what the parent was doing when the child was 2 years old?

Fortune provided us with Dale Walker, who recruited 29 of the 42 families to participate in a study of their children's school performance in grade 3. We were awestruck at how well our measures of accomplishment at age 3 predicted measures of language skill at age 9-10. Vocabulary use at age 3 was predictive of measures of language skill six years later.

The children's language experience did not differ just in terms of the number and quality of words heard. We can extrapolate similarly the relative differences the data showed in children's hourly experience with parent affirmatives (encouraging words) and prohibitions.

The average child in a professional family was accumulating 32 affirmatives and five prohibitions per hour, a ratio of 6 encouragements to 1 discouragement. The average child in a working-class family was accumulating 12 affirmatives and 7 prohibitions per hour, a ratio of 2 encouragements to 1 discouragement. The average child in a welfare family, though, was accumulating 5 affirmatives and 11 prohibitions per hour, a ratio of 1 encouragement to 2 discouragements.

Once children become independent and can speak for themselves, they gain access to more opportunities for experience. But the amount and diversity of children's past experience influence which new opportunities for experience they notice and choose.

(Adapted with permission from "The Early Catastrophe" in American Educator, Spring 2003)