

Discussant Comments: EFFECTIVE PROMOTION OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

How many of you work in infant-toddler programs like Early Head Start or other programs for infants and toddlers in poverty?

Then I don't have to tell you that by too many children who even by the time they are 3 years have language skills that is much less developed than where they should be.

Oftentimes, by 3 years, children from higher income families have more than twice the vocabulary size of children in poverty.

And if you follow these children up, the gap only grows wider by the time they reach kindergarten (without intervention). This sets them up for a trajectory that results not only in lower vocabulary and language so that by the time they are in 3rd and 4th grade, they are struggling readers and have much higher probabilities of dropping out.

And what's troubling is that we have known this fact for at least 25 years, but we haven't been able to move the needle and change very much about this disparity in language development between children and poverty and higher income children.

What can we do about this? Can we get smarter about developing ways to support parents and caregivers and teachers in providing stronger language learning environments for infants and toddlers?

Our 2 scholars have provided us with new knowledge that give us some important issues to consider as we develop new interventions that will enhance children's language-learning environments in these critical first years of life.

What I'd like to do today is to:

- --share some reflections about these two papers and offer some ideas about how their findings can provide some guidance for those of us who are trying to find ways to reduce the gap
- --ask some questions about the presentations --that I'm hoping will provoke some discussion
- --tell you about the Bridging the Word Gap Research Network and describe some of the intervention work being done around the country and give you a link to find out more information

Meredith Rowe's paper

--Gives us a lens on how variable language development is and after SHOWING us the incredible variability that exists, then helps us learn

--**why variability matters**—because it helps us forecast the future and point to those early areas of development that link to later outcomes like LEARNING TO READ AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

--**what aspects of variability are important** because they help us predict future development and later achievement

And then helps us understand: **WHERE DOES THIS VARIABILITY COME FROM?**
WHAT IS ITS GENESIS?

- For those of us who do intervention work, this is a very important question because its answer helps us know what is **alterable** here in children's development? These are the areas in which we have some potential to make changes that may ultimately affect children's later language outcomes.
- Meredith points out that the variability in children's vocabulary can be traced to parent and caregiver talk and interaction—Terry Paul, the inventor of the LENA, used to call parent/caregiver talk the SECRET SAUCE of language development. The serve and return, that intricate dance of attending to child, responding to child

So what's in the Secret Sauce?

- Not all parents, caregivers know about these effective ways of interacting with children that most promotes language. Perhaps we as individuals who work with parents/caregivers in homes and center-based programs can help teach those that interact with children what's in the secret sauce.

Meredith's paper gives us some clues and helps us learn that not only are specific **features of interaction** that help promote strong language learning environments for young children. But there are **times in development** when these features are especially potent.

But first, WHAT ARE THE INGREDIENTS THAT PROMOTE VOCABULARY, language and comprehension

--Quantity is important—More talk and interaction is better: getting caregivers to talk and interact is important but it's not the whole story.

--Certain features of interaction are more important than others; Some ways of interacting are most important at specific ages

--**Early (before age 2):** repeating words, gesturing, joint attention

--**After age 2** (Asking challenging questions, providing rich vocabulary;

(in **preschool years**)--providing explanations, discussing more abstract topics, using more complex syntax

Message to Programs is : IF WE WANT TO PROMOTE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT—we need to focus like a laser beam on helping parents and teachers/caregivers on talking more with children and learning about the responsive style of interaction that will foster language development—but we have to do it in **ways** that are easy for parents to understand and do and incorporate into the routines of families and classrooms and centers.

But **one final takeaway** from Meredith's presentation with important implications for intervention was some analysis of the possible **reasons why language input** differs by SES

- So why do parents and caregivers differ in how they talk to children?
 - They don't have the same **beliefs about their role** in promoting children's development
 - They don't have the **knowledge**—never learned or were exposed to that style of interaction
- Interventions might need to address both **knowledge and beliefs**—different types of intervention needed if you are engaging parents/caregivers who have different beliefs about what their role should be compared to parents who don't know HOW

I'd like you to think about how you might intervene differently if the issue was knowledge or beliefs about interaction that deterred parents or caregivers from talking more and interacting with their children. (and would like to hear whether you focus on knowledge, beliefs or something else in your intervention.

Shifting to Cathie: Cathie's presentation on culture gives us insights on how that secret sauce, the way parents engage their children in interactions might be different for families coming from different cultures; this might be helpful as we strive to design more effective ways to engage parents and caregivers from a variety of cultures –as we consider building on cultural strengths in promoting children's development.

- Cathie pointed to the different types of communication that parents engage in with their children:
 - **Regulatory (what to do or how to act)** compared to **referential** (describes the world around them). Parents used regulatory more when they were telling their child to string beads than when they sharing a book. **This was true across cultures.**
- Cathie's research uncovered some interesting **ethnic differences in types of communication** with Mexican mothers using more gestures leading to superior infant fine motor skills and proportionally more REGULATORY language than African-American mothers. So how do we interpret these cultural differences? What explains the cultural differences? **Did African-American groups engage more frequently in referential talk because they motivated by different cultural beliefs about how parents should be interacting OR were they just engaged more frequently in talking and interacting in a way learned from their parents?**

--We might proceed differently in an intervention with parents of a given cultural background, if it is beliefs vs. knowledge.

--And it's not always clear how far as interventionists should go in changing beliefs about child raising? **How do we think about that and how often is cultural beliefs something we are considering in our intervention programs?**

--However, oftentimes it may not be cultural beliefs that account for different style of interaction but lack of knowledge about the role that parents/caregivers play in creating that strong language-learning foundation for children. **We need to help address that knowledge gap.**

--But one important takeaway from Cathie's presentation was that parent **responsiveness and referential talk** promoted infants' vocalizations across **all ethnic** groups. This underscores that in our interventions, we should be helping parents/caregivers **understand the importance of responsiveness and referential talk**—increasing their knowledge but also their skill in doing these behaviors.

--One final reflection from Cathie's presentation was the fact that certain **situations** lent themselves more to regulatory talk. Cathie pointed out that when parents are in situations in which they are telling children what to do, (engaging in regulatory talk), those situations are vocalization suppressors—not usually ones that promote language. “Pull up your pants, eat your bananas, put down the remote”.

For many parents/caregivers, life is one endless string of those contexts that set the occasion for regulatory talk. Dressing, eating, even family time are filled with directions telling the child what to do and not do and oftentimes NOT engaged in referential talk—focusing on what's interesting to the child, using new vocabulary words to talk about it, expanding on what the child is saying. However, What interventionists can do is to show parents that these **routines of daily living** can be rich opportunities for embedding language learning.

- Going to the supermarket can be times to learn the labels for new items: labeling items going into the shopping cart, describing fruits and vegetables.
- Going on the bus to Grandma's can be opportunities to look out the window and label vehicles,
- Getting dressed after a diaper change can be a time to talk about body parts. That doesn't mean that every context of every day will be wonderful moments of language enrichment but programs can show and teach parents how to increase the possibilities for doing this. Some parents/caregiver do this naturally. Some need some direct teaching—using modeling and feedback to do this so it BECOMES natural for them.

But we need to get better and helping parents and caregivers understand the importance of engaging in more responsive interaction during as many activities as they can, and understanding the crucial role they play in fostering children's language, and how to do it—how to make it a part of the very fabric of their everyday lives.

Learning how best to help parents and caregivers provide more supportive language learning environments for infants and toddlers is the mission of the Bridging the Word Gap Research Network.

And so I want to tell you briefly about what we're doing and some of the exciting work we're trying to foster:

The Bridging the Word Gap Research Network, funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration is a group of 140 researchers, practitioners, civic leaders, policymakers, members of the funding community to promote new knowledge and research to reduce the word gap.

We're doing a number of things:

Very briefly,

- Creating a national research agenda by identifying what 1000 diverse stakeholder said were the most important areas of research to bridge the gap—here's where to place your bets.
- We're synthesizing research across 6 areas related to intervention so we can identify what interventions are most effective, for which populations of parents and caregivers, where do we know a lot—where do we have gaps in research?
- We've created a collaboration of research-program partnerships across the country that are learning from each other about what is working in their programs and their communities
- We're learning about the different levels of intervention each of which is important to consider if we are going necessary to have a population-level impact on the word gap. And all 3 levels are important to have an impact of knowledge, beliefs, and skills of parents/caregivers.

What do I mean by different levels?

- individual-level interventions—aimed at parents to be implemented in home visiting programs or one-one interventions that have coaches working with individual teachers or care providers—we have a number of interventions that do this: Dana Suskind—30 million Words, Dale Walker—TALK program; --focused on knowledge and skills
- Community-level interventions—At this level, community agencies are the providers of intervention:
 - Libraries, churches having group sessions to give parents new knowledge. Like the statewide program of Talk with Me, Baby being implemented in which public health settings in which pediatric public health nurses begin talking with new parents about how babies need “language nutrition” right from birth;
 - Talk, Read, and Play—where agencies across Kansas City are giving parents the message and strategies for how to do this with children at different ages
 - City's First Readers—in NYC—organized by Adriana Weisleder and Alan Mendelsohn and colleagues who bringing together 9 programs across the city with the shared goal of improving language and early literacy outcomes for a coordinated attack on the word gap and language promotion—each reinforcing each other's message to parents about the importance of parent talk-- increase knowledge and change beliefs
- Population-Level Efforts—creating city-wide public awareness about the importance of parent talk. Through billboards, TV messages, embedding

messages in TV shows—trying to change beliefs—create a culture shift in the common perception of the importance of parent talk.

Given all 3 levels, we as a network are trying to learn about new approaches in each of these levels, seeing what research can tell us at this point about what works, what works for whom, sharing that information in **usable forms** with practitioners and policymakers. Our goal is not only to learn about evidence-based practice but to create new PRACTICE-based evidence through this network—so stay tuned and visit our website and social media for latest on the word gap and language promoting interventions for infants and toddlers.

We're hoping that policymakers understand how important this language gap is and how critical it is that programs get the support to train staff in the strategies that are most effective in improving language-learning environments for children they serve.