

Early childhood educators hold the key to children's communication skills

November 6 2013



Research reveals that high-quality interactions support the development of language and communication in infants and toddlers. Credit: Copyright FPG Child Development Institute

Researchers at UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute have completed a new examination of peer-reviewed science that reveals how early childhood educators can ignite the growth of language and communication skills in infants and toddlers. Earlier today, Nicole Gardner-Neblett and Kathleen Cranley Gallagher published the FPG team's research-based recommendations online.

"Early [language](#) and [communication skills](#) are crucial for children's success in school and beyond," said Gardner-Neblett, principal investigator for the FPG study. "Children who develop strong language and communication skills are more likely to arrive at school ready to learn and are more likely to have [higher levels](#) of achievement."

According to Gardner-Neblett, during the first years of life, children's brains are developing rapidly, laying the foundation for learning. The interactions children have with adults influence early brain growth and learning, giving early childhood educators a crucial opportunity to provide children with interactions that can support language and communication.

Language and communication skills include a child's ability to express himself or herself through words, gestures, or facial expressions, as well as the capacity to understand others.

Co-principal investigator Kathleen Gallagher said that when teachers provide children with higher levels of language stimulation during the first years of life, children in turn have better language skills. "When teachers ask children questions, respond to their vocalizations, and engage in other positive talk, children learn and use more words," said Gallagher.

The FPG researchers said that many early child care educators can do more to actively engage children and facilitate the development of

language and communication. "More high-quality language interactions between children and adults will provide children with the kinds of experiences that can foster their growth," said Gardner-Neblett.

With a grant from the PNC Foundation, Gardner-Neblett and Gallagher reviewed the current science and then streamlined their findings into ten recommended practices. *More Than Baby Talk: 10 Ways to Promote the Language and Communication Skills of Infants and Toddlers* recommends one-on-one and small-group interactions that are tried and tested to support the development of language and communication in infants and toddlers from a variety of backgrounds.

Among the FPG team's recommended interactions are responding to children's vocalizations and speech, eliciting conversations, and using complex grammar and a rich vocabulary. Each practice includes the science that supports it and examples of how to use it.

The "[Get Chatty](#)" recommendation, for instance, suggests commenting on routines like hand-washing, as they occur: "We are washing our hands. We are making lots of big bubbles." Educators also can use longer sentences, draw connections between children's lives and books, and use songs to tell stories.

Gardner-Neblett and Gallagher said that many of the practices work well in combination with one another. They added that [early childhood](#) educators should keep in mind children develop differently and at varying rates.

In addition, while educators play key roles, they are not the only group that can make a marked difference for infants and toddlers.

"We think parents could use these same practices with their young children," said Gardner-Neblett. "By using these strategies at home,

parents can provide [children](#) with the rich language exposure and opportunities they need to enhance their language and communication, helping them to achieve in preschool and beyond."

More information: Gardner-Neblett, N., & Gallagher, K. C. (2013). More than baby talk: 10 ways to promote the language and communication skills of infants and toddlers. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. (mtbt.fpg.unc.edu)

Provided by Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

Citation: Early childhood educators hold the key to children's communication skills (2013, November 6) retrieved 19 April 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-11-early-childhood-key-children-skills.html>

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