

# SUPPORTING SCHOOL READINESS BY BUILDING A COMMUNICATION FOUNDATION

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# A Growing Focus



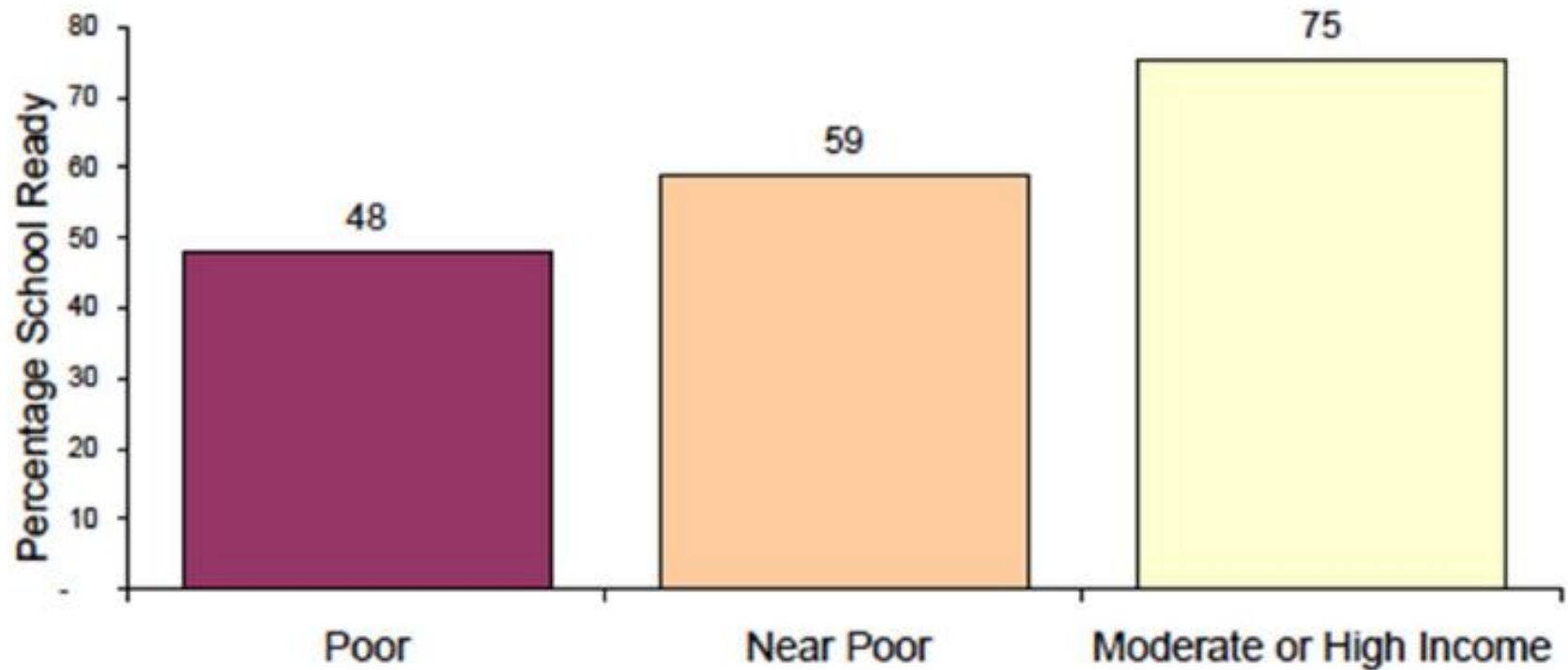
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## Learning While They're Little

THINK *December 4, 2014*

Today and Friday, Fort Worth is hosting a [statewide summit on early learning](#). This hour, we'll talk about how early childhood programs and elementary educators can better prepare kids for academic success with a panel of experts taking part in the summit.

Figure 1: Likelihood of Being Ready for School at Age Five, by Poverty Status at Birth



Source and Notes: Brookings tabulations of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). Near poor is defined as household income between 100 and 185 percent of poverty and moderate or high income is defined as household income above 185 percent of poverty.

# Why are so many children not ready for school?

- Children are born ready to learn, but how and what they learn is critical in predicting their success in school. Too many don't receive what they need.
- Children learn best from real-life interactions with the adults in their lives, and the development of their communication skills starts early.
- *By 18 months scientists can detect SES-related disparities in infants' language processing skill\**

\*Fernald, A., Marchman, V. A., & Weisleder, A. (2013). SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Developmental Science*, 16, 234–248.



# Early Language May be the Single Best Predictor of Later Success in School

Vocabulary size at 36 mos. predicts reading and spelling skills in kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup>, holding SES constant.

- Walker et al. (1994). *Child Development*.

Children's oral language skill at kindergarten entry explains most of the effect of SES on elementary school performance.

- Durham et al. (2007). *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*.

Evidence that early language skill directly influences later reading skill found in a longitudinal study of 7,179 twin pairs.

- Harlaar et al. (2008). *J. of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*.

What predicts high school graduation?

- 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level

What predicts 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level?

- Children's vocabulary at age 3

What predicts vocabulary at age 3?

- **The path towards language begins very early, well before the first word**

# From Interactions to Conversations

- What do children need?



Adamson, L., Bakeman, R., Deckner, D., & Nelson, P. (2014) From interactions to conversations: The development of joint engagement during early childhood. *Child Development*, 85, 941-955.

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# Meaningful Differences

in the Everyday Experience of  
Young American Children



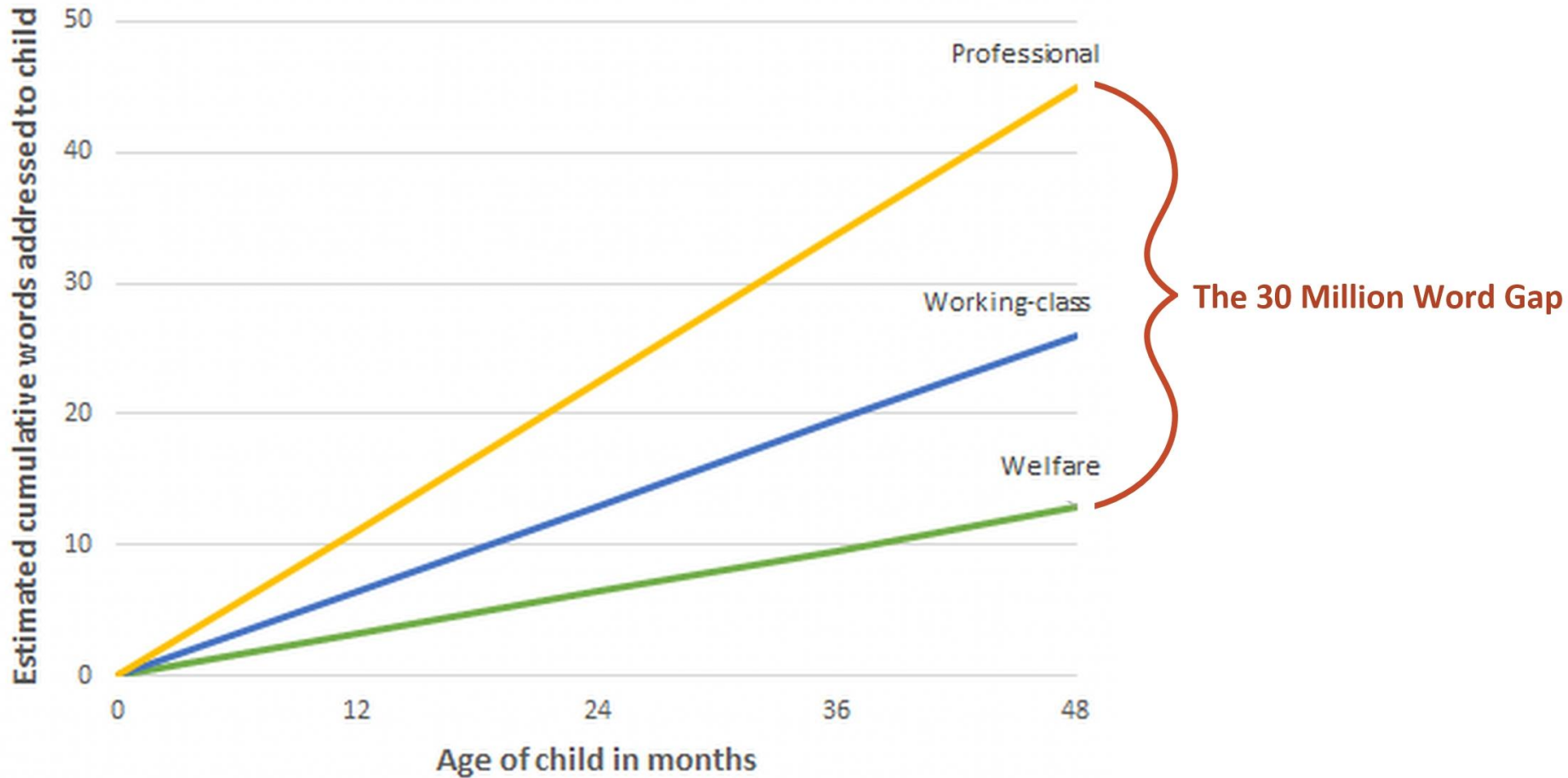
**Betty Hart & Todd R. Risley**

*Foreword by Lois Bloom*

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# Number of Words Heard by Children Differs Across Income Groups



Hart & Risley, 1995

As a group, children in families of lower socioeconomic means have fewer language skills and know far fewer words than their more privileged peers. And this starts early.

- Hart & Risley (1995) *Meaningful Differences*
- Hoff (2003) Socioeconomic status affects early vocabulary development via maternal speech. *Child Development*
- Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder (2013) SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Developmental Science*
- Huttenlocher et al. (2010)

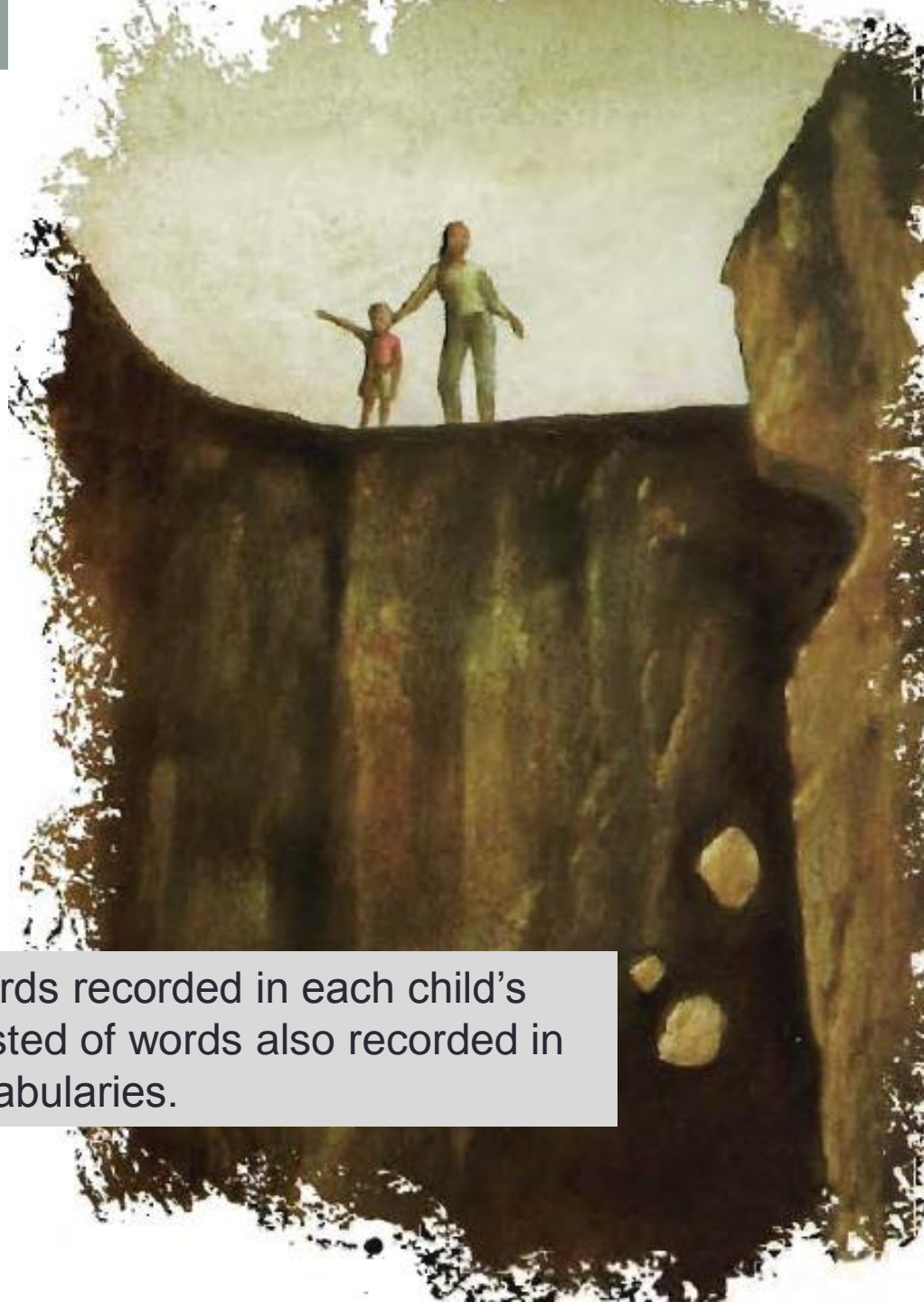
# This difference in vocabulary and language skills remains stable and persistent

- A disparity that translates into achievement gaps in education and social opportunity.
  - Ginsborg, J. (2006). The effects of socio-economic status on children's language acquisition and use. *Language and Social Disadvantage: Theory into Practice*, 9-27.
  - Kieffer, M. J. (2008). Catching up or falling behind? Initial English proficiency, concentrated poverty, and the reading growth of language minority learners in the United States. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 100(4), 851.

# The “Word Gap”

- **The “Word Gap”** has come to symbolize the gulf that can separate very young children who have rich opportunities for positive early learning experiences from those who do not.





86-98% of the words recorded in each child's vocabulary consisted of words also recorded in their parents' vocabularies.

# Push to intervene!

Mounting  
Scientific  
Evidence



A national discussion:  
*How can we increase the  
quantity of early language  
to young children?*

40-65% of  
Children  
are Not  
Kindergarten  
Ready



# Fill the Word Gap!

- But, Hart & Risley also described “the dance” between conversational partners, parent and child.
- “The dance” seems to be put aside.
- Are we missing something crucial?





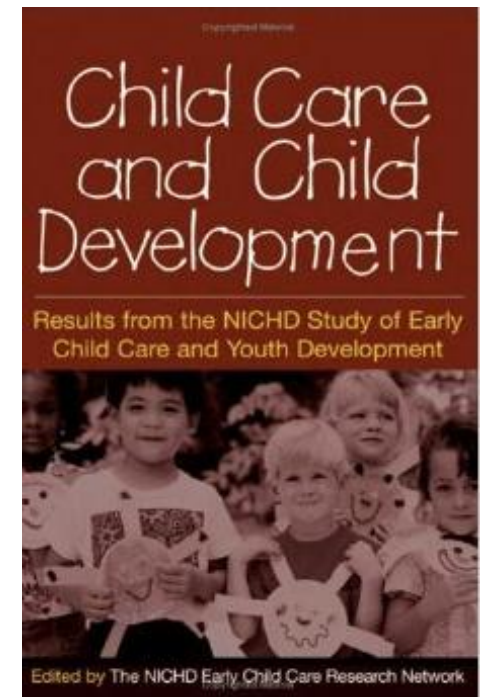
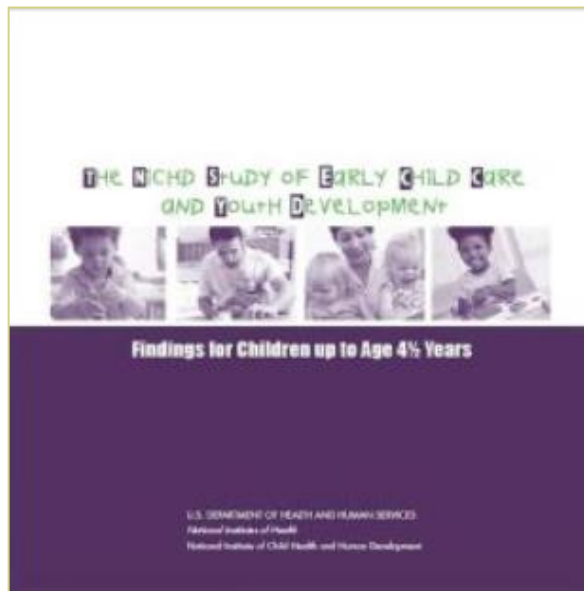
October 16, 2014, the Obama Administration, in partnership with the Clinton initiative [Too Small to Fail](#) and the Urban Institute, hosted a day-long workshop ***Federal, State and Local Efforts to Bridge the Word Gap: Sharing best practices and lessons learned with the broader community.***



at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in Washington, DC.

# An Insight and a New Study

- Is “filling the gap” the solution?
- Testing the notion with a new look at low-income children studied from birth through adolescence in the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development



# Beyond the 30-million Word Gap: *Building a Foundation for Communication is Essential for Early Language*

## Two Metaphors for Language Learning

*“filling the gap”*



*“building a foundation”*



# Examining the Quality of a Foundation for Communication



**Quality =**

- 1) Symbol infused joint engagement (gesture and words)**
- 2) Fluid and connected exchanges**
- 3) Playful routines and rituals**

**Quantity = number of mother's words per minute**

High language scores

Mid language scores

Struggling language scores

**N = 60 low-income children**



**2-year olds**

**3-year olds**

# Qualities of Joint Engagement Building a Foundation of Communication

- Joint Engagement With Symbols and Objects
  - How much were they in joint engagement?
- Shared Routines and Rituals
  - A sense these have been done together before.
- Fluid and Connected Conversations
  - Both verbal and nonverbal exchanges.
  - A balance between parent and child.
  - Not just feeding the child language.

**Learning to Communicate is a shared endeavor.**

# Joint Engagement with Symbols and Objects



# Shared Routines and Rituals



# Shared Routines and Rituals





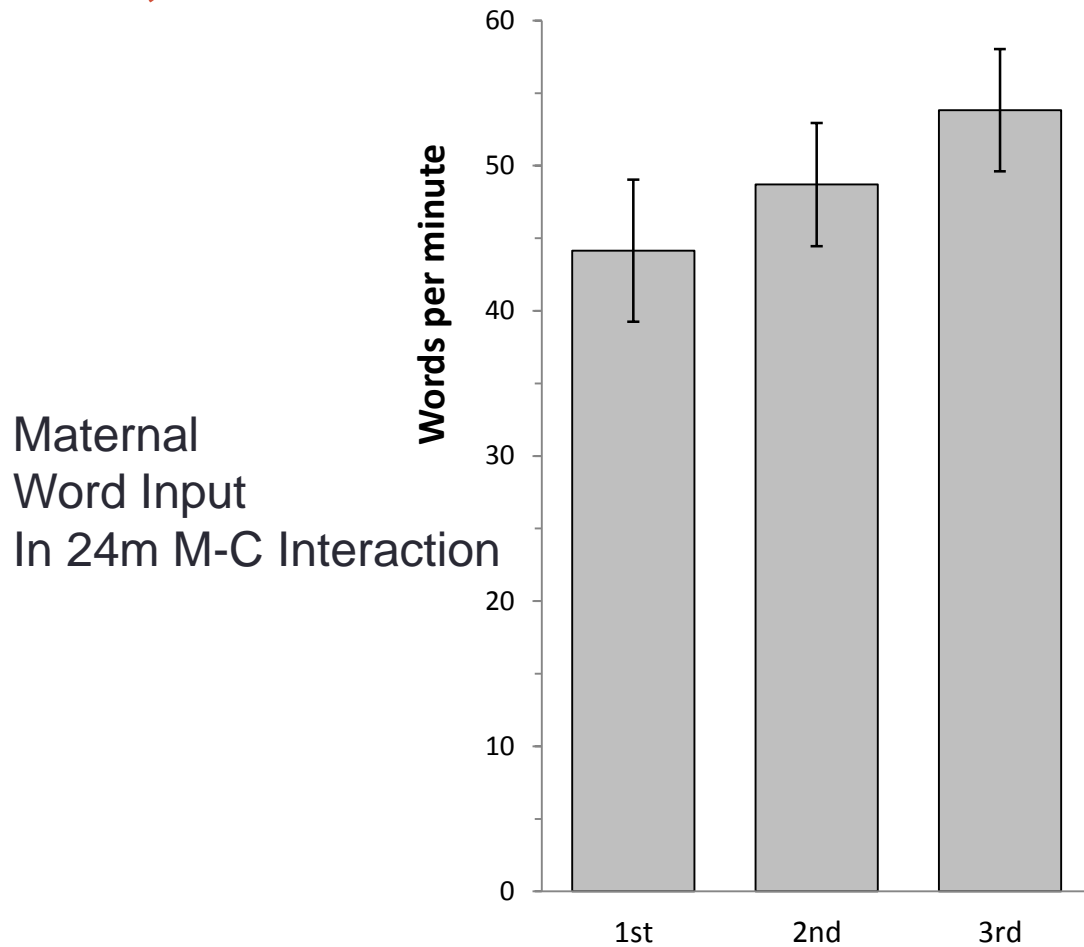
# Fluid and Connected Conversations



# Quantity of Words + Qualities of Communication

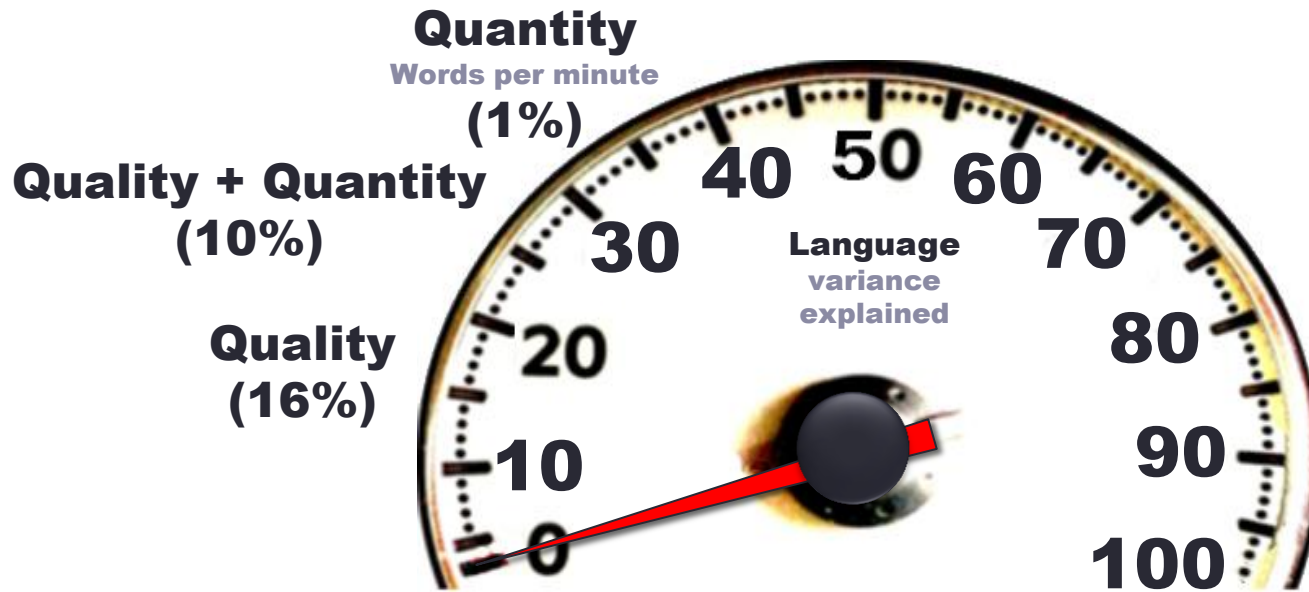


# Yes, Number of Words Matter



Expressive Language at Age 3: bottom third, middle third, top third

# Findings and Implications



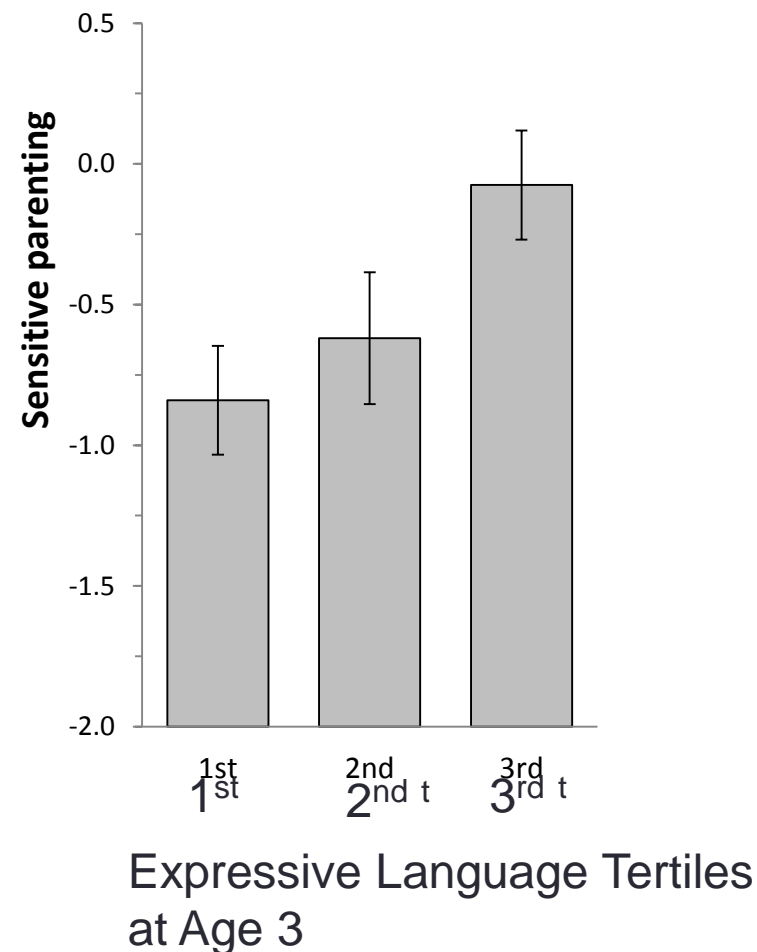
1. Quantity of input (amount) and Quality of Foundation for Communication are both important for language growth, BUT this “communication foundation” matters more.
2. Fluid and connected conversations – “Conversational duets” require serve and return, and return and return and return. ...it can't be a solo performance.
3. It's “filling the gap” + “building the foundation” – a new metaphor for intervention

# What about “sensitive parenting”?

- More sensitive, responsive caregiving promotes positive child outcomes, including better vocabulary, greater language skills, and more academic success.
  - Sensitive, responsive, stimulating mothering
  - Sensitive, responsive, stimulating fathering
  - Sensitive, responsive, stimulating caregiving

# Did Sensitive Parenting Matter?

- Yes! Successful language learners had more sensitive mothers.
- But, “communication foundation” elements tell us more about *the dance* that takes a child from interactions to conversations & successful language learning.



# the “Word Gap”

- Yes, a word gap exists between children living in poverty and their more affluent peers.
- “Filling the Gap” with more words alone, won’t be enough.
- Building a stronger foundation for communication is needed
  - and this is true for all children across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Developing language and literacy skills is about more than just hearing and learning words.

Developing language and foundations for school success are about the back-and-forth communication that takes place through everyday interactions with parents, families, and caregivers.

- Engage in back-and-forth communication, both verbally and non-verbally, as you play together and go through daily routines.
- “serve & return...& return & return & return



# Some Basic Principles

to help children develop crucial language skills before they enter school

1. Children learn what they hear most – frequency matters.
2. Children learn words for things and events that interest them.
3. Children learn best in meaningful contexts.  
In an activity they enjoy, because they are most likely to engage in communicating when they're doing something they enjoy.

# What it boils down to...

- Children need to be talked to often, in meaningful ways by the adults in their lives.
- Just talk about what you're doing and what your child is doing!
- Engage your child in what your child is engaged in!

**It's not just the quantity of words children hear, that makes a difference, but “the dance”—the quality of the interaction—that lays a foundation for communication.**

***Providence Talks*** – a city-wide initiative to close the word gap.

- Emphasis given to the number of words from parent to child
- Feedback given to help increase the # and “fill the gap”. *-will this help?*

# 1. Look



Make eye contact so you and your child are looking at each other.

# 2. Chat



Talk about the things you see, hear and do together, and explain what's happening around you.

# 3. Follow



Take your child's lead by responding to their sounds and actions, even before they are old enough to talk. When they do start talking, ask follow up questions like "What do you think...?" or "Why did you like that?"

## 4. Stretch



Make each moment longer by building upon what your child does and says.

## 5. Take Turns



With sounds, words, faces and actions, go back and forth to create a conversation or a game.

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## What really matters:

- Tuning in to children—What interests them? What excites them? Engage with them & help them learn more.
- Reading and responding sensitively to their cues—both verbal and non-verbal.
- Engaging in back-and-forth play and interaction: routines & rituals!
- Incorporating lots of rich language into everyday moments.

**That's what connecting—and communicating—is all about.**

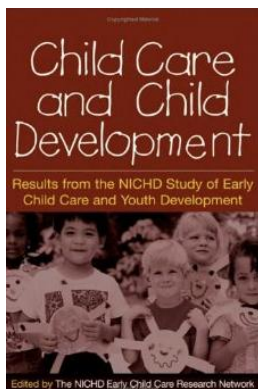


# *Many Thanks!*

- Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, PhD – Temple University
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- Roberta Golinkoff, PhD – University of Delaware



- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development





*Build* a foundation for successful language learning by engaging in “conversational duets”



# Numerous initiatives announced in October's Bridging the Word Gap Workshop in Washington:

- The \$300,000 **Bridging the Word Gap Incentive Prize**, to develop “low-cost, scalable, interventions that drive parents and caregivers to engage in more back-and-forth interactions with their young children”
- The 2-year **Bridging the Word Gap Research Network**
- Support for new efforts in the 20 states engaging in the **Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge**
- The **Word Gap Toolkit**, a set of early language development resources for caregivers and teachers
- Specific resources to support the particular needs of young English learners and dual-language learners.