



## **Fact Sheet: The Importance of Language and Vocabulary**

- Researchers have not been able to isolate the specific reasons for the evidence that poorer children (usually black/brown) fall behind rich and middle-class children early and stay behind.
- Do the richer parents value education more? Do they buy more books and educational toys for their children? Are they more likely to stay married longer? Do rich parents have better genes? Do rich children eat more nutritious food? Move less often? Watch less TV? Get more sleep? Is systemic racism to blame? They have not been able to identify which of these or other important factors make the biggest difference. So, there has been no real way to find an indisputable strategy to shrink the learning gap between the socio-economic classes of students.
- Two researchers (Hart & Risley) emerged with a specific culprit through studies of the close interactions between parents and children. They found first that vocabulary growth differed sharply by class and the gap between the classes open early. By age 3, children whose parents were professionals with higher incomes had vocabularies of about 1,100 words compared to children of lower-income parents whose vocabularies were about 525 words. The children's I.Q.s correlated closely to their vocabularies, i.e., 117 vs 79 (independent of race or ethnicity).
- The size of the vocabulary correlated most closely with one simple factor: the number of words parents spoke to the child. In professional homes there was an average of 487 “utterances”—anything from a one-word command to a full soliloquy – per hour compared to 179 utterances an hour directed at poorer children. What's more, the kinds of words and statements that children heard were quite different. The basic difference was the number of “discouragements” a child heard – prohibitions and words of disapproval – compared with the number of words of encouragement or words of praise and approval. By the age of 3, the average child of a professional home heard about 500,000 encouragements and 80,000 discouragements. For the poorer child it was the reverse: they heard about 75,000 encouragement and 200,000 discouragements.
- Hart and Risley showed that language exposure in early childhood correlated strongly with I.Q. Hearing lots of words and more affirmations and complex sentences had a positive effect on I.Q. The professional parents were giving their children an advantage with every word they spoke, and the advantage kept building up.
- Another researcher named Lareau found that the wealthier or middle-class families she studied engaged their children in conversation more as equals, treating them like apprentice adults and encouraged them to ask questions, challenge assumptions and negotiate rules in some cases. They planned and scheduled countless activities to enhance their children's development – piano lessons, soccer games, trips to the museum.

- The poorer or working class families did things differently. In fact, they raised their children the way most parents (even middle-class parents) did a generation or two ago. They allowed their children much more freedom to fill in their afternoons and weekends as they chose—playing with friends, video games, riding bikes/skateboards – but much less freedom to talk back, question authority or hassle over rules and consequences. Children in these families were instructed to defer to adults and “treat them with respect”.
  - The poorer, working-class approach had some advantages because the approach of the more professional, middle-class parents places intense labor demands on busy parents. The children of professional parent were actually allowed to “argue” and complain about decisions. The working class children, by contrast, learned more easily how to be members of informal peer groups. They learned how to manage their own time and how to strategize. But outside the family unit, the advantages gained by the poorer, working-class children disappeared.
  - In public life, the qualities developed by the children of more middle-class, professional families were more consistently valued over the ones that the poorer, working-class children developed. Middle-class children become used to adults taking their concerns seriously and so they grow up with a stronger sense of confidence in the classroom and elsewhere, that less-wealthy children lack. The cultural differences translate into a distinct advantage for middle-class children in school, on standardized achievement tests and later in life, in the workplace.
  - As Lareau puts it, kids from poorer families might actually be nicer, they might even be happier sometimes and more polite – but in many ways, the manner in which they are raised puts them at a disadvantage in contemporary American society.
  - It is also stated in this article that non-cognitive abilities like self-control, adaptability, patience and openness have a huge and measurable impact on a child’s future success. These qualities are passed on to children everyday in all kinds of subtle and indirect ways, especially by parents.
  - One group of educators teaching in poorer, urban school environments drilled their students on the **SLANT** method of learning in the classroom – **Sit** up, **Listen**, **Ask** questions, **Nod** with attentiveness and **Track** the speaker with your eyes.
  - These instructors were adamant about having to teach work ethics such as good behavior, hard work and respectfulness not just because it’s a good way to live, but the evidence is clear that people who act that way get higher marks in school and better jobs after school. They believe in teaching these ethics to students the same way they taught adding fractions with unlike denominators – step by step and methodically. Once students get the work ethics and commitment to others and education down, it’s actually pretty easy to teach them the cognitive skills.
  - Serious time, thought and wisdom need to be exerted in raising children, particularly during the early childhood years to give them the values and skills they will need for their future accomplishments. There is clearly a need to examine every method we use and weigh it by
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the overall goals and desires for success we have for them in every area of their lives – spiritual, mental, physical, emotional, professional and financial.

- What children learn in their early development years will be hard to unlearn as they get older. New values and skills can be added and replaced, but it is far more difficult to do it later. For many of our children, what they have to be able to count on is us helping them find ways to make the necessary corrections and continue to build from that point to hopefully turn things around and get them going in the right direction.
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