

The Power of Conversation with Kids

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In a recently released article in *Pediatrics*, Dr. Jill Gilkerson and colleagues ([10.1542/peds.2017-4276](#)) examine the relationship of language interactions of 18-24 month old children to their subsequent intelligence and language skills a decade later. The authors found that "conversational turn count", a measure of child-adult verbal interaction that literally counts the turns taken in speaking to one another, is positively associated with school-age cognitive and verbal outcomes. In an accompanying commentary Drs. Alan Mendelsohn and Perri Klass discuss the clinical practice and AAP Policy implications of these fascinating findings. Dr. Jill Gilkerson and colleagues' work extends earlier studies showing that (1) the length of children's statements and their word complexity at ages 10-36 months predicted third grade academic achievement,¹ and (2) the quality of adult words, rather than just the quantity, were important.² It is remarkable that shared words and conversations between toddlers and their adults have such a meaningful impact that reaches far into the child's future.

One can only imagine how challenging it would be to try to hand record child-parent conversations for even a single day, and certainly even an unobtrusive observer would impact interactions. The authors used a unique methodology for recording conversations: they audiotaped parents and children ages 2 to 25+ months for 12 hours daily and analyzed the recordings with a software called LENA (Language ENvironment Analysis) that uses automated analysis to quantify words, vocalizations and interactions. Study participants who had been audiotaped as toddlers then underwent educational testing at age 9-14 years with the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children Fifth Edition (WISC-V), the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, and the Expressive Vocabulary Test. Verbal interactions as measured by "conversational turn count" were positively associated with these outcomes for those taped at 18-24 months. It was curious that this same relationship of "conversational turn count" to cognitive outcomes was not detected for those taped at 2-17 months or at 25+ months, and the authors discuss this conundrum.

Interestingly, the association between "conversational turn count" and child outcomes remained significant after controlling for maternal attained education. I interpret this to mean that even among parents whose literacy may be limited, it is the interaction that counts. Beyond more directive interactions (for example, "Let go of your brother!"), conversation is about sharing experiences and expressing feelings, and a meaningful conversation requires the parent to be "tuned in" to the child more than anything else. In their commentary, Mendelsohn and Klass ([10.1542/peds.2018-2234](#)) appropriately emphasize the potential role of Reach Out and Read in promoting verbal exchanges.³ And even in the face of widespread low parental literacy (14% of Americans cannot read, and almost 1 out of 3 [29%] read below a fifth grade level)⁴ we can emphasize that talking about pictures and making up your own story are ways for toddlers to truly enjoy a book with their parent, and reap later benefits at school age too. A book invites a conversation, while an electronic screen is socially isolating - we now have one more good reason to turn off digital devices!

1. Hart B and Risley TR. *Meaningful differences in everyday parenting and intellectual development in young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes, 1995.

2. Rindermann H and Baumeister AEE. Parents' SES vs. parental educational behavior and children's development: A reanalysis of the Hart and Risley study. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 2015; 37, 133-138.

3. Reach Out and Read. reachoutandread.org. (accessed 8/28/2018).

4. Quora: What is the Literacy Rate in the United States? [quora.com/What-is-the-literacy-rate-in-America](https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-literacy-rate-in-America) (accessed 8/28/2018).

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