Lessons from Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Milestones Birth to Three</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In utero</td>
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<tr>
<td>0-6 months</td>
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<td>4-12 months</td>
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<td>6-15 months</td>
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<td>10–18 months</td>
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<td>15 -24 months</td>
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<td>18-30 months</td>
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“Meaningful Differences”\(^1\) in Early Language Experience

- Babies who hear more words and take more “conversational” turns develop richer language as toddlers.\(^2\)
- Parents who talk more with babies tend to also talk more with toddlers. Habits persist.
- For most children, expressive vocabulary “takes off” between 16 and 24 months. But it takes off much faster for children who have heard more words.
- Hart and Risley discovered a language input gap of 30 million words heard in the first three years between the children in the lowest and highest groups. At 3, children in the highest group had more than twice the vocabulary of children in the lowest.
- “We found that the large differences in the amount of parent talk that infants and toddlers received, particularly the amount of non-business conversation and commentary, was powerfully related to large differences in … toddlers’ vocabulary growth and to … measures of their intellectual achievement at age 3 … and later at age 9 … Parental talkativeness to babies accounted for all the correlation that existed between socio-economic status (SES)—and/or race—and the verbal intellectual accomplishments of these American children.” (Risley & Hart, 2006)\(^3\)
- Non-business talk, or “play talk” (chit-chat, conversation, singing, humor, story-telling, word play) is richer in vocabulary, description, varied verb forms, relatively rare words, open-ended questions, information, and responsiveness to the child

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“Almost all children learn to talk, suggesting that language acquisition is a relatively resilient process, although they do not all learn to talk well, suggesting that language acquisition includes some more fragile elements.” (From Neurons to Neighborhoods,\(^4\) p. 126)

**Toddlers’ language takes off faster when…**
- Parents pair Baby Sign with spoken words\(^5\)
- Family language input is richer – mother’s and father’s both contribute\(^6\)
- Child care quality is higher \(^7\)
- Child is read to more frequently\(^8\)
- Child has more opportunities to participate in back-and-forth conversation\(^9\)
- TV is off most or all of the time – before children have mastered language well enough to use it as their primary means of communication. \(^10\) Background TV distracts from play, interaction, and “play talk.”\(^11\)

**Preschool-aged children build richer vocabulary and language when…**
- Family talk goes beyond the here and now (“decontextualized language”) and includes longer and more complex conversations (“extended discourse”)
- Parents engage children in talking about books, making inferences & connections
- Parents use more sophisticated vocabulary in conversations and play with children
- Parents model and encourage reading and writing
- Teachers use “cognitively engaging talk,” more sophisticated words and complex language, a content-oriented curriculum, and a setting rich in words, books, writing materials, and opportunities to imitate reading and writing\(^12\)

**Vocabulary at kindergarten entry predicts 10\(^{th}\) grade reading comprehension.\(^13\)**

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Two through six year olds build richer vocabulary, storytelling, and reading skills when...

- Adults engage them in “elaborated reminiscing,” adding detail to stories of past events\(^\text{14}\)
- They engage in sophisticated pretend play with peers, with adult support and expansion\(^\text{15}\)
- Early education and care settings emphasize child-initiated exploration and play, small group projects and conversations, and teacher talk that supports learning in extended conversation\(^\text{16}\)
- Children watch age-appropriate, research-informed educational TV shows\(^\text{17}\) or informational or story videos that spark extended conversation with adults

Early vocabulary differences compound because children who understand and use more words and are more effective storytellers and communicators get more opportunities for learning new words in conversation with peers and adults, as well as from books\(^\text{18}\)

“Part of vocabulary acquisition is learning words that are going to be important in school, the words that second-grade teachers think when a child uses them, ‘Oh, wow, that was a good word; that’s a smart kid.’…” The difference between knowing 3,000 words and knowing 15,000 words when you arrive at kindergarten is enormous. The child who knows 3,000 words knows words like *shoes* and *milk* and *jump*. The child who knows 15,000 words knows words like *choice* and *possibility* – words that index a more complex array of possibilities for dealing with the world.”

--Catherine Snow, in *Mind in the Making*,\(^\text{19}\) p. 128

**Children hearing two languages:**

- Go through the same developmental steps in both languages
- Learn the sound and grammatical patterns of each language
- May shift languages in different settings or mix languages, even in the same sentence
- Develop total vocabularies that are just as large as those of children learning only one

Children with delays or disabilities show the same patterns as monolingual speakers, in both languages.\(^\text{20}\)

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**Strengths of Dual language Learners**
- Superior executive function and cognitive flexibility\(^{21}\)
- Connection to family and heritage\(^{22}\)
- Ability to build upon first language conceptual and linguistic knowledge and communication skill to learn a new language\(^{23}\)
- Ability to use print concepts & decoding skills to decode a new language, even if the alphabets are different\(^{24}\)
- Ability to speak and become literate in both languages – as long as learning continues in both

**Benefits of reading with young children** (whether you read all the words, make up the story, or engage the child in interacting with the pictures)
- Children who live in print-rich environments and who are read to during the first years of life are much more likely to learn to read on schedule.
- Reading aloud to young children is not only one of the best activities to stimulate language and cognitive skills; it also builds motivation, curiosity, and memory.
- Early language skills, the foundation for reading ability and school readiness, are based primarily on language exposure - resulting from parents and other adults talking to young children.
- Research shows that the more words parents use when speaking to an 8-month-old infant, the greater the size of their child's vocabulary at age 3. The landmark Hart-Risley study on language development documented that children from low-income families hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers before the age of 4.
- Books contain many words that children are unlikely to encounter frequently in spoken language. Children's books actually contain 50% more rare words than primetime television or even college students’ conversations.
- The nurturing and one-on-one attention from parents during reading aloud encourages children to form a positive association with books and reading later in life.
- Reading aloud is a proven technique to help children cope during times of stress or tragedy.

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A Wealth of Words        Touchpoints Conference 5/4/12 4
Powerful Interactions

*Powerful Interactions: How to Connect with Children and Extend Their Learning*  
by Amy Laura Dombro, Judy Jablon, and Charlotte Stetson. NAEYC, 2011.

**Step One — Be Present**  
When you are “present” you are in the moment and self-aware, and therefore you can be more open to the interesting and significant things that children do. By physically and mentally slowing down for just a few moments, you can pay better attention. This frame of mind allows you to be intentional; that is, before you act, to tune in to what a child is doing at that moment, how you are feeling, and what you want to accomplish. Being intentional in this way means you think about what to say and do in the interaction to be most effective as a teacher for that child.

**Step Two — Connect**  
You acknowledge and validate children by letting them know you see them, are interested in them, and want to spend time with them. Connecting in this way awakens the sense of trust and security that previous positive interactions between you and the child are helping to develop. As your relationships with children grow deeper, children feel more confident and focused, and they are more open to learning from you.

**Step Three — Extend Learning**  
During the fertile minutes of a Powerful Interaction, children are open to your adding to their knowledge, encouraging them to try new things and think in new ways, modeling language, introducing interesting new vocabulary, and other learning possibilities.

-- Excerpted from *Powerful Interactions*, pp 6-7.

Most of your interactions are likely to be routine, rather than Powerful. But every interaction that builds a relationship or teaches you something new about each other sets the stage for future interactions that may be Powerful.

You can have Powerful Interactions with parents as well as with children. A Powerful Interaction with a parent may center around watching a child together and using her behavior as a common language. The **aha! moments** come when parents, see their child become fascinated with a book, toy, or question; re-discover their child’s amazing mind; or recognize their power as their child’s first and most enduring teachers.

**Wait, watch, and wonder – then find a way to enter.**