

Talk Early, Talk Often

What can you as a parent do to help your children develop their language skills?

Workbooks? Flash cards? No, my advice is much simpler. Talk to them. Talk early. Talk often. Talk about all the interesting aspects of your life together.

My fans may remember the 30 million word research. Today, I discovered an extensive interview with one of the authors, Dr. Todd Risley. It's long, but well worth reading or listening to the end.

Doctors Hart and Risley observed very young children – 0 to three years of age – trying to find out why some have rich vocabularies in the preschool years, and discovered something unexpected. Children hear on average 1500 words per hour, but some hear as few as 600 per hour, and some 2100 words per hour. The children whose parents or caregivers talk a lot, come away with richer vocabularies than those with taciturn caregivers.

It's not just quantity. Every child hears a certain amount of "business talk" – do this, come here, stop that. These directives tend to be simple and repetitive. The additional talk is varied, complex, interesting, and vocabulary-rich. It entices the child with pictures and rhythm and back-and-forth engagement. It helps to develop important centers of the child's brain.

You'll find that the correlation between this sort of speech and measures of children's reading, IQ at age 3, and academic success is strong. And it does not matter what the socio-economic status is. A poor minority parent who engages with her child – or is able to place her child with such a caregiver at an early age – will impart a great gift to her child; the gift of a rich vocabulary, learned during the crucial early years of the child's life.

I stress again – this is early development, the development of babies and toddlers. Conversation, back and forth, as you change the baby's diaper or nurse her or clothe her or take her shopping. You needn't spend money; you needn't do any more than converse with your little children. Early and often.