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## Words, Words, Words Are Preschool Priority

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November 8 2004

Carmen Marquez had her preschoolers at Parkville Community School gathered around on a recent fall day for a lesson about letters and the sounds they make. `A' as in `apple' was the letter of the day.

But constructing sentences was this lesson's purpose. That's because many 4-year-old preschoolers in Hartford started the school year speaking in a lot of single-word commands: Come. Play. Sit. Read.

The undeveloped verbal skills stem from poor prenatal care, malnutrition and the way parents are speaking to their children, among other problems, according to educators in Hartford and other cities who are doubling their efforts to improve language skills because research shows it is paramount for learning to read.

So in the lesson featuring the letter `A,' Marquez asks, "What color is this apple? Use complete sentences. This apple is ..."

Then, "What can we find inside the apple? Complete sentences. Inside the apple, we can find seeds," she says, the children joining her mid-sentence.

Again and again and again, Marquez repeats her question to individual students. Her chatter is constant.

"We need to remind them to speak in complete sentences. If you don't remind them, they are not going to do it," Marquez said. "At home, they are used to pointing at things."

The body of research showing the link between language and reading has been growing for years, but the recent pressure to increase literacy brought by the federal No Child Left Behind Act is bringing the emphasis on language to the fore, said Carl Gross, speech and language coordinator in New Britain.

That lack of exposure to a rich use of language leads to limited vocabularies, and that is a major hindrance in sentence construction. Beth Bye, director of early childhood education for the Capitol Region Education Council, said research shows that "by the time a low-income kid is 4, they've heard 13 million fewer words than upper middle class suburban kids. It's amazing. Not only do they hear fewer words, it's the types of words. ... We call it the `word gap.' You cannot make up for that 13 million fewer words."

The focus on the need for early language development is fueling the call for universal preschool and for

more training for teachers.

In Bridgeport, early childhood and speech teachers "are so concerned about [language development] that we have made language a focus of all of our professional development," said Deborah Watson, director of early childhood education.

Sometime around the spring, "We had that `ah-ha' moment when we realized that reading to kids isn't the ground floor, talking to kids is the ground floor," said Lee Helmerich, school readiness coordinator for the Bridgeport schools.

The Bridgeport school district recently hosted a conference for parents and teachers featuring workshops on how to develop children's oral skills. One workshop taught parents to help their children prepare scrapbooks and to use them as a focus for conversations. Another workshop encouraged parents to tell their children the oral histories of their families.

"All families have a story to tell," Watson said. "Not all parents are literate, but there are things they can do to enhance language."

There are children in affluent areas who are slow to develop language skills, Gross said, but affluent parents are more likely to seek help when their youngsters are as young as 2, while more low-income parents will let the problem continue longer. .

"And in urban centers, the exposure to language and literacy is not where we would want it to be compared to outlying areas," said Glynis King Harrell, New Haven's supervisor for speech and language. "It really is a focus of the cities."

Maria Morrero, a child development associate who assists in Marquez's class at Parkville Community School, said she is often surprised to realize that her students don't know the words for basic objects. When she teaches a new letter, she said, she pulls out a small bucket filled with objects whose names start with that letter.

In the letter `A' bucket, for example, her 4-year-olds did not know the words for angel, anchor, apron or ax. For the letter `S,' just one student could identify a seashell, she said, and last year, most of her students could not identify a pickle.

Some of that may be attributed to a different language being spoken at home, but educators say that many low-income native speakers show similar deficits in vocabulary.

"Vocabulary is developed through experiences, so their experiences put them at a deficit," said Parkville Principal Elizabeth Michaelis.

The school district takes students on field trips in part to develop vocabulary, but those trips are too few educators say.

"It never ceases to amaze me when we take our children on field trips and we go over the Connecticut River on a bridge. Their eyes bug out. Their experience is their neighborhood," said Audrey Yellen Quinlan, Parkville's speech pathologist. "If parents aren't taking children to the pumpkin patch, to the orchard and to the museums, we should do that because that's how they learn new words like `vine' and `stem,' and when it comes time to read the word `pumpkin,' they know the sounds of the word."

A large body of research on the subject of word gaps and poor sentence construction has accrued over the

years. Boston College Professor David Dickinson, who teaches literacy development, has studied the issue for nearly two decades and says he has found that the quality of a child's language development in preschool years strongly determines later reading ability.

Language skills also have important social implications, Dickinson said.

"The vocabulary that 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds develop has important implications for their ability to form friendships and to relate to each other," he said.

And the ability to express their thoughts plays a role in students' behavior and their ability to regulate their feelings and to explain why they do certain things, Dickinson said. "Preschool teachers are always reminding students to use their words and to resolve their conflicts with words."

There's a multitude of reasons why students coming from poorer families learn fewer words than their wealthier peers and why their ability to form complete sentences and complex thoughts is also less developed. But Dickinson and others said depression and stress - and poverty is a major cause of stress - exhaust parents. "They don't have the energy to relate to their children," he said.

Experts said parents who are more stressed are more apt to speak in commands, such as "No. Get down. Stop." But parents who are more relaxed have more discourse with their children. They speak in sentences even when the children are babies, experts say, by asking and answering questions such as: Are you hungry? Would you like to eat now? Yes, you are hungry and you do want to eat now.

To improve children's vocabulary and language development, educators encourage parents to engage children in conversations about pictures they draw, puzzles they assemble or activities that fill their days. Ask a lot of questions, they suggest, and request answers in complete sentences.

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