

# Fathers Play Significant Role in Language Development of Young Children

**I**N FAMILIES WITH TWO WORKING PARENTS, fathers make important contributions to children's early language skills. Results from a new study by FPG Child Development Institute show that children whose fathers' vocabulary was more varied when they were two, had greater language skills at age three. Mother's vocabulary was not found to have a significant impact on children's language skills. The findings are published in the November/December 2006 issue of the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*.

Most previous studies on early language development focused on mothers. However, with more women in the workforce and the changing role of men in families, children have greater interactions with their fathers and others in the community. The study is the first to consider the father's role to better predict children's expressive language development at 36 months of age. In addition to parent language interactions, the study considered parent education and child care quality.

## Parent Language Interactions

Mothers and fathers interact differently with their children. For example, studies show that fathers tend to spend more time playing and being physical with their children, while mothers tend to spend more time talking and giving directions. Little research exists, however, comparing how mothers and fathers talk to their children and what that might mean for the child's language development.

Researchers examined language from the following perspectives:

- **Output: How much did each parent speak to the child?**

When studying only mothers, research shows that the amount a mother talked to her child was associated with their child's gains in linguistic abilities. Many studies have found that fathers do not talk as much to their children as mothers, particularly when the child interaction included both parents. Similarly, fathers in the current study spoke less overall than did mothers.

- **Vocabulary: How many different words were uttered by each parent?**

Studies of mothers alone have found that the diversity of a mother's vocabulary is a strong predictor of a child's language development. The two existing studies comparing parents' vocabulary found no significant differences between mothers and fathers. In this study, mothers used more total different words than fathers.



- **Complexity: How long were the sentences?**

Previous studies of language complexity comparisons resulted in little consensus. This study found no differences between mothers and fathers.

- **Questions: How many questions and what types of questions (e.g., open-ended) were asked?**

Studies of just mothers show that the more questions asked, the greater the impact on language development. Some previous research has suggested that fathers ask fewer questions of their children than mothers, but ask more open-ended ones. This study, however, found no significant differences in proportion or types of questions asked.

- **Pragmatics: How often did the parent take turns with a child during a conversation?**

Again, the findings on how parents carry on conversations with their children have been inconsistent. In this study, fathers took fewer conversational turns.

## Parent Education

Most studies have not considered the impact of fathers' level of education on how fathers communicate with their children. This study examined how parental communication affects language development and controlled for education levels of both parents. Consistent with previous research, this study found that parents' levels of education had a significant impact on children's language abilities. Other studies considered the contributions of child care and family language above and beyond the impact of parent education.

## Child Care Quality

Previous studies have established that the quality of child care is associated with children's language development. In fact several studies show that children in higher quality child care have stronger expressive and receptive language skills. However, while child care may account for significant variance, most studies show that family factors have far greater impact. That was the case in this study. High quality child care accounted for an additional eight percent in the variance, but accounted for less variance than family language. ■

## Findings

- Children whose fathers used more varied vocabulary at 24 months had better scores on an expressive language test at 36 months.
- Fathers' vocabulary accounted for 9 percent of the variance above and beyond education level and quality of care.
- A father's vocabulary when the child was 24 months was the only parental language variable to make a significant independent prediction to later child expressive language development. The mother's vocabulary did not make a significant contribution to children's later expressive language development.
- Fathers spoke less frequently to the children in the videotaped play session and used fewer words. They also took fewer total conversational turns. Parents asked the same proportion of questions and question types.
- A secondary finding of this study was that high quality child care during the first three years of life was associated with higher scores at 36 months on a test of expressive language development.

## Participants

Families were recruited from the Penn State Health and Development Project. When children were 24 months of age, researchers conducted home visits, interviewing the parents and videotaping free play sessions with both parents for later transcription. Parents also completed several questionnaires. At 36 months, researchers evaluated each child's language development. Ninety-two families participated at the 24-month stage and 62 families remained at the 36-month stage. The families were fairly homogenous:

- Families were two-parent and middle social economic status.
- Children were in enrolled in full-day child care.
- All spoke English in the home.
- All attended a child care center at least 15 hours per week.
- Average age of the mother was 35 years.
- Average age of the father was 36 years.
- Children had been in child care since, on average, three months of age.
- Most parents had college or advanced degrees.

## To Learn More

"Mother and father language input to young children: Contributions to later language development?" appears in the November/December 2006 issue of the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. Authors are Nadya Pancsofar and Lynne Vernon-Feagans from FPG Child Development Institute.