

# UNDERSTANDING THE 30 MILLION WORD GAP

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## THE HISTORY OF THE LANDMARK STUDY

In 1965, during the War on Poverty, Betty Hart and Todd Risley, Child Psychologists at the University of Kansas, wanted to identify how to improve the poor academic achievement of low-income children. They challenged the conventional wisdom of the time that if you do well in school it's because you are smart, if you don't, it is because you are not.

Hart and Risley designed a prevention model, a half day program for the Turner House Preschool, located in an impoverished neighborhood in Kansas City, Kansas. This model focused on building the everyday vocabulary children were using and evaluating the growth of that vocabulary. The Turner House children experienced a spurt of new vocabulary, but the language enrichment did not accelerate new vocabulary usage beyond direct teaching of new words. The developmental trajectory of the Turner House students did not change.

## THE STUDY PRODUCING FINDINGS OF A 30 MILLION WORD GAP BY AGE THREE

Thankfully, Betty Hart and Todd Risley did not give up! They insisted on finding out why their 1965 project failed. In 1982 they initiated a study to see what was happening to children in their homes at the very beginning of their vocabulary development. Families entered the study when their children were seven to nine months old and stayed until their children were three years old. Betty Hart, Todd Risley and their research team spent two and a half years observing 42 families from all socioeconomic strata for an hour each month to learn what went on in homes with babies and toddlers as they were learning to talk. The researchers

observed, recorded and analyzed over 1300 hours of casual interactions between parents and their language-learning children. Analyzing this data in multifaceted ways in order to provide as much information as possible took an additional three years.

## THE RESULTS

The researchers expected to find differences but also found important similarities among families from all socioeconomic levels.

“Our surprise was... how naturally skillful all the parents were and the regularity with which we saw optimum conditions for language learning.”

The data also showed striking differences in not only how many words children heard, but the types of words and the amount of responses parents gave to their children.

## IN ONE HOUR:



The highest SES children heard an average of 2,000 words while children in the lowest SES families heard 600 words.



Highest SES parents responded to their children about 250 times, lowest SES parents responded less than 50 times.



Children in the highest SES heard about 40 expressions of verbal approval per hour. Children in the lowest SES homes, about four.

The cumulative effect of these hourly numbers showed an ever widening gap. Follow up studies show that these differences had lasting effects on a child's performance later in life. The word gap became the achievement gap. However; parental knowledge about child development and the importance of talking with children can positively impact this gap!



## MORE ABOUT THE RESULTS

The study followed children to age three, but the data has been extrapolated to estimate the amount of early experience children of different SES groups might bring to preschool at age four. The researchers estimated that by age four, children in a professional family would have accumulated experience with almost 45 million words, children in a working class family, would have accumulated experience with 26 million words and children in a poor family would have accumulated experience with 13 million words. This extrapolation indicates a word gap of 32 million words between the highest and lowest SES by age four.

The word count is the total number of words, not the number of different words.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

“The data revealed that the most important aspect of children’s language experience is its amount... there is less need for programs to try to teach parents to talk differently to their children or to change parent styles of interacting and more need for programs to help parents learn to talk more to their children.

- Betty Hart, Todd Risley”

**PROFESSIONAL FAMILY  
45 MILLION WORDS**



**WORKING CLASS FAMILY  
26 MILLION WORDS**



**LOWEST INCOME FAMILY  
13 MILLION WORDS**



**32 MILLION WORD GAP**

“Hart and Risley’s groundbreaking study showed with statistical force that the preliminary factor in what would eventually become known as the achievement gap was the difference in early language exposure. And while at first glance their data seemed to relate this to socioeconomic status, careful analysis linked it solidly to a child’s early language experience, which was often, but not always linked to socioeconomic status.

- Dana Suskind, MD”

## SO...

With ongoing assistance, support and guidance from Too Small to Fail’s national “Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing” campaign staff, and knowledge gained from Dana Suskind MD’s “Thirty Million Words Initiative,” Great Start Collaborative-Wayne has developed our local Detroit/Wayne County “Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing!” Community Campaign.

Our goal is to provide community wide knowledge, support and esteem to families for what they are already doing by talking, reading and singing with their children and to also offer ideas and strategies to do more to reduce the gap. **TALKING IS TEACHING!**

## CITATIONS

Hart, Betty, and Todd R. Risley. 1995. “The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3”

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TALKING IS  
TEACHING.

TALK  
READ  
SING