LuCiD evidence briefing: How can parents influence their children’s language development?

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Here at the LuCiD Centre we are often asked to recommend good quality research papers on the role that parents have in their children's language development. This is an important topic since there is ample evidence that parents have a huge impact on how well their children learn to communicate, and how quickly they learn language. So we have compiled a list of some of the most influential research papers below.

If you find it hard to get hold of these papers, try emailing the corresponding author to ask for a copy. Most researchers are only too keen to send out their papers!

First, we recommend two review articles which summarise some of the more important results, including summaries of how parents talk to children in different cultures and societies around the world (see Hoff, 2006, page 58+), and of how parents differ who come from different socio-economic backgrounds (see Hoff, 2006, page 60+):


We also recommend the following research papers that focus on differences across families from more affluent and disadvantaged backgrounds. Some of these paper detail differences in the language ability of children:


Other papers detail differences across parents:


These papers show that children from different backgrounds can experience very different home-life environments, especially in terms of the type of language input they receive. The Hoff (2003) paper above, in particular, shows how important this difference can be; Hoff reports that differences
between affluent and disadvantaged children’s language ability at two years of age can be explained almost entirely in terms of differences in the complexity and diversity of the speech these children hear from their mothers.

In fact, the complexity and diversity of the speech that children hear seems to have a particularly strong effect on how easily children learn language. The three papers below all detail the benefits of having caregivers who model a variety of words, and who use a range of quite complex sentence structures:


However, other strategies are equally advantageous. Here are four papers that detail the benefits of caregivers noticing what children are paying attention to, and talking about those things that children are interested in. These all suggest that talking about the child’s current focus of attention promotes vocabulary growth:


Finally, there are quite a few papers that demonstrate the benefits of two specific strategies for responding to children’s own attempts at communication - expansions and recasts. Confusingly, these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, but in essence both refer to utterances that model adultlike way of conveying information; the adult takes something the child has just said and either expands on it by provide additional information (e.g. if the child has just said “the dog”, the adult may say “yes, the dog is barking”) or recasting it in a more adultlike way (e.g. if the child has just said “trucks big” the adult may say “yes, the trucks are big”). Here are four papers on the benefits of recasts and expansions. The Cleave et al. (2015) paper is particularly interesting because it describes a recent meta-analysis that focuses on the benefits of using expansions in interventions for children with language impairments:


