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Understanding the language gap

By Derrick Z. Jackson | GLOBE COLUMNIST | OCTOBER 26, 2013

TO UNDERSTAND the critical connections children make in language, picture a dog on a sofa.

“If I say to you, ‘The doggie is on the sofa,’ and you know what a dog is, you don’t have to yet know what a sofa is,” said Stanford University psychology professor Anne Fernald. “You can use the familiar word to figure out the meaning of the new word. In a sense, you pick up the sofa in your vocabulary for free.

“If I just say, ‘Look at the dog,’ all you’re going to know about is the dog. But if I instead say, ‘Look, the dog has a big fluffy tail and is chasing the cat,’ you can begin to pick up the meaning of all kinds of other words and actions associated with the dog.”

The urgency of understanding how fast these connections are made grew this year when Fernald and fellow Stanford researchers Adriana Weisleder and Virginia Marchman found the earliest evidence yet of language processing gaps in children. In a study published in the journal *Developmental Science*, they found it took children of lower economic status 24 months to achieve the proficiency achieved in 18 months by children of wealthier families. The children stay on separate trajectories, leading to very different educational outcomes.

“The discouraging news is that the trajectories don’t close,” Fernald said.

It had long been proven that by age 3, children from professional families knew far more words than children in low-income families. But the new confirmation of the gap being evident from birth to age 3 means that interventions may have to occur at an even younger age. Preschool program funding is flat nationally, freezing enrollment at about a quarter of 4-year-olds and just 4 percent of 3-year-olds since 2008, according to Rutgers University’s early education institute.

“It means thinking about going down to 3-year-old programs and 2-year-old programs,” said Harvard University child literacy professor Catherine Snow. “We should really get away from

calling this a vocabulary gap. It's a knowledge gap. It isn't going to be solved with flash cards. It's about exposure. A school could pick a topic, say, coastal ecosystems, and children could learn to identify and pick up words that way."

If funding for preschool is not difficult enough, the role of parents is an even more explosive subject. Everyone believes learning begins at home, but it's difficult to measure how much responsibility or blame to heap on low-income parents.

The good news, Fernald said, is that low-income families can help their children process words on par with wealthier families. In another study this year, she and Weisleder found that Latino caregivers who talked directly to their children, doing simple things like pointing out objects, colors, and creatures, to the tune of thousands of words a day, produced children with larger vocabularies and faster processing. So parent education programs can help.

Fernald said, "We need to get to a place where if you could do just even 10 minutes of book-sharing a day, where a parent just doesn't read to a kid, 'Pigs like corn,' but also asking their child, 'Do you like corn?' it can add up to making a big difference," Fernald said.

Snow said solutions must also consider the challenges posed by growing economic inequality. Snow said low-income families are often exhausted from "scrambling around to find child care, scrambling around for work. When they come home, many of them just want to keep their kids quiet."

"We're not going to solve it with just better pre-K programs or just parent education programs," Snow said. "I'm not saying they're not useful. But if we want to change the shape of the landscape, changing the conditions of their lives is critical." It now seems more critical than ever to change conditions before today's language gap creates an even greater divide.

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