

Early Language Development

To encourage language development:

- Talk, sing, tell stories, and read to your children, starting in *the first year of life*. More language exposure leads to better vocabulary.
- Provide more children’s books in the home. Children surrounded by attractive books are more likely to develop language skills.
- Limit television viewing and turn on educational programs when children do watch. However, television may be beneficial in families with limited English skills.
- High quality child care may be helpful, particularly for children whose parents are less proficient in English.
- Help Spanish-speaking mothers learn English so they can access services and support children’s language skills.

Preschoolers’ language skills are poor

The language skills of preschoolers born in Newark are far below national norms. On a standard test of English vocabulary, 88 percent scored *below average* and 62 percent of these children received scores below the 15th percentile.

Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—Revised		
<i>Population</i>	Mean score	Below average
Newark sample	78	88%
National norms	100	50%

We wanted to know what parents can *do* to help children develop language. Both research and common sense suggest that children in language-rich environments have better language skills. Children with good vocabularies are likely to have parents and teachers who talk with them and read to them, using complex vocabulary and language. Educational television may be helpful, but too much time spent watching television may reduce conversation and thus interfere with language learning. Child care may help if it exposes children to more language than the home does, or it may hurt if it is of poor quality and provides a poor language environment.

Which factors are most important for the children born in Newark? Mothers’ reading, singing, telling stories, and talking with children each made a difference, and having children’s books in the home and using child care (especially center care) were helpful as well. Television watching had a negative effect in Black families but not in Hispanic homes. Finally, children of Spanish-speaking mothers generally had poorer English vocabularies.

As part of a national study of births in 20 large U.S. cities, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study identified consecutive births in Newark hospitals in the summer of 1999. These mothers and fathers were surveyed at the time of the birth and followed through their child’s fifth birthday. This brief was prepared by Michelle DeKlyen, Ph.D., with support from the Fund for New Jersey, the Health-care Foundation of New Jersey, and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey. To learn more about the national study, see www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/index.asp. For information on Fragile Families in Urban Essex, see www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/newark.asp.