

Parents should keep talking to boost infant language development

Children from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds tend to have poorer language skills when starting school than those from higher SES backgrounds. Now, data shows that increasing the amount of “contingent talk”— whereby a caregiver talks about objects that an infant is directly focusing on — within an infant’s first year of life promotes a wide vocabulary later in infancy.

This randomised controlled trial enrolled 142, 11-month-old infants and their caregivers from across the SES spectrum. The participants were randomly assigned to either a language intervention group, which consisted of a video about contingent talk and active practise of the technique for 15 min per day for a month, or a control intervention. At baseline, caregivers of lower SES typically engaged in less contingent talk with their 11-month olds than those of a higher SES. All caregivers in the intervention group significantly increased the amount of contingent talk they engaged in, regardless of SES, and this resulted in reported short-term language learning improvements specifically in infants of a low SES. As the effects of the intervention were visible at 15 and 18 months but not at 24 months, the researchers propose that follow-up interventions are needed to promote vocabulary growth later in early childhood.

McGillion, M., Pine, J.M., Herbert, J.S. & Matthews, D. (2017), A randomised controlled trial to test the effect of promoting caregiver contingent talk on language development in infants from diverse socioeconomic status background. J Child Psychol Psychiatr, 58:1122-1131. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12725

Glossary

Contingent talk: a specific form of communication whereby a caregiver talks to an infant about the objects that the infant is directly focusing on

Randomised controlled trial: an experimental setup whereby participants are randomly allocated to an intervention/treatment group or a control/placebo group; randomization of participants occurs after assessments for eligibility, and is used to minimize selection bias

Socioeconomic status: a combined measure of an individual’s income, educational attainment and social position in relation to others