



BUILDING YOUNG BRAINS THROUGH TALKING, READING, AND SINGING

Too Small to Fail and the Bay Area Council, in partnership with UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland, Kaiser Permanente, the American Academy of Pediatrics, Reach Out and Read, Scholastic, Sesame Workshop, Text4baby and many others, have launched an exciting new community campaign in Oakland. The campaign, titled "Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing" aims to motivate parents and caregivers to talk, read and sing more to their babies and toddlers in order to build vocabulary and reduce the "word gap." A large body of research shows how talking, reading and singing to young children every day helps them learn, and benefits their physical and emotional health.

What the Research Tells Us

After decades of brain research, we know that brains develop most rapidly in the first few years of life, when 700 to 1,000 new neural connections form every second. Infant brains are hard-wired to absorb information about the world around them so that they can build linguistic as well as important cognitive and social skills. But not all children receive the positive stimulation needed to develop their physical, emotional and mental health to their fullest potential:

- **In 1995, researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risley found that by age four, children in high-income families hear up to 30 million more words than children in families living below the poverty level, and acquire double the words.** This is what is referred to as the "word gap".
- **Harvard professor Robert Putnam discovered** that in the 1960s and 1970s parents who had more formal education and those who had less were spending similar amounts of "Goodnight Moon Time"—or time spent in activities like reading to their children. But by 2010, less formally educated parents were spending up to 30 fewer minutes a day on those same activities than more formally educated parents.
- **And in 2013, researcher Anne Fernald of Stanford University found that by the time a child is two years old, there is already a six-month gap in language comprehension between infants from higher-income and lower-income families.** This early learning gap is the strongest predictor of the persistent achievement gap in educational attainment.



The good news is that small and meaningful actions—such as talking, reading, and singing to young children—support early learning and development, and strengthen the parent-child bond. Children who are securely attached to adults show better physical and mental health, including more positive emotions, and have an easier time forming relationships with adults and peers. Additionally, strong parent-child bonds can help prevent many chronic diseases that result from "toxic stress," brought on by repeated negative experiences in early childhood.

Finally, there is evidence to suggest that knowledge about child development—rather than income or education level—is the strongest predictor of the frequency and quality of a mother’s communication with her child. If all parents and caregivers realize how much they can benefit their children’s lives by talking, reading and singing to them every day, this will make a huge difference in our communities here and across the country.



Reaching Parents and Caregivers

As healthcare providers, you are a trusted resource for families and communities. Your encouragement will go a long way to raise awareness about the word gap and provide valuable knowledge to families about ways to support their children’s healthy development. Below are some simple messages and tips for you to share with parents and caregivers on being their child’s first teachers:

- Talking is teaching. When you talk to your baby—even though they can’t use words yet—they are really learning from you and you’re helping them become both smarter and happier.
- During the first year of life, your baby’s language will develop faster than any other time. To make the most of this time, talk to your baby about anything and everything. When they coo, coo back. When they smile, smile back.
- Make routines out of singing during everyday activities like bathing, eating and getting dressed.
- Read a book to your baby every day—in whatever language you feel most comfortable—beginning at birth. And if you don’t feel comfortable reading words, you can point out the pictures in the book and talk with your baby about them.
- You are your child’s first teacher. The more words your baby hears from you, the better prepared she will be to learn.
- Everywhere you go, talk or sing about what you see. Point out the world to your child. A stop sign, a traffic light, or a tree might seem boring to you, but it’s a whole new world for your baby, so teach them about it!
- Singing songs and telling stories to your baby helps him bond with you, and helps his brain develop.
- Babies who hear their families talk, read, and sing to them every day become stronger readers and bond more with their families than babies who don’t have that experience.
- Hugging, laughing, and sharing close moments helps your baby bond with you, and helps her brain develop. The more words she hears from you and other caregivers—and the more positive experiences she has with you—the better prepared she will be to learn.



*Learn more about our campaign at www.talkingisteaching.org,
and about Too Small to Fail at www.toosmall.org.*

