

Lessons from the Pandemic: What Lockdowns Can Teach Us about Children’s Vocabulary

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The COVID-19 pandemic presented many changes to daily life, especially during periods of lockdown. The closure of workplaces, childcare centres, drop-in programs, and other programs for young children meant that parents were spending more time at home with their child. It also meant that parents were their child’s main source for learning about language during this period. This provided a unique opportunity to study how parent-child interactions influence children’s vocabulary development. Below, we summarize two studies looking at this relationship, and provide tips based on this information to help you build your child’s vocabulary.

Sensitive interactions and children’s vocabulary

Researchers in the UK used pandemic lockdowns to study whether the types of interactions parents were having with their young child were related to the size of their vocabulary [1]. Specifically, they wondered if “sensitive interactions” were helpful.

What is a “sensitive interaction”?

Sensitive interactions involve noticing a child’s signals, figuring out what these signals mean, and then responding in the moment in a way that matches the child’s signals [1, 2].

Responding this way and providing language that matches the child’s focus helps children learn the words that describe their interests [1].

This study included 100 families with children between 8- and 36-months of age. The researchers collected home videos from parents during three lockdowns (Spring & Winter 2020, and Spring 2021). They looked at how sensitively parents responded to their child by analyzing the home videos of play or daily routines. They also asked parents to complete a vocabulary checklist during the three lockdowns. The checklist included 564 words, and parents recorded which ones their child either understood or understood and said.

The researchers found that:

- Children who experienced interactions that were more sensitive had larger vocabularies.
- Children who experienced more sensitive interactions during the first lockdown had more growth in their expressive vocabularies 6 months later.

The researchers concluded that sensitive interactions are related to children’s language skills, and that they were helpful during a time when other positive influences on children’s language (childcare and other programs) weren’t available. [1]

Parent tip – Respond sensitively to your child’s signals

The way you respond to your child’s signals and messages has a big impact on their language development. When you notice your child’s attempts to communicate with you, and respond sensitively with interest, your child has a chance to hear words that match their message.

Responding sensitively begins with the “OWL™” strategy, which stands for **Observe, Wait, and Listen**:

- **Observe your child** – Get down to your child’s level so you can see your child easily. Observe your child’s subtle signals and notice what they’re focussed on.
- **Wait** – Stop what you’re doing and wait quietly, without talking. If you wait for several seconds, it gives your child a chance to send you a message.
- **Listen** – Children’s signals can be subtle, so listening carefully will ensure you don’t miss them.

As soon as your child sends a message, respond sensitively by saying something about their message. Match what you say to the moment, talking about whatever has caught your child’s attention.

Parent-child activities and children's vocabulary

In a large study, researchers from 13 different countries looked at the connection between children's vocabulary and the activities they were engaging in with their parents during the first pandemic lockdown [3]. This study included 1742 children who were aged 8- to 36-months.

The researchers collected information in March 2020 and then again in September 2020. Parents filled out a vocabulary checklist that measured how many words their child understood or understood and said (for children between 8-18 months of age), or how many words their child said (for children between 18-36 months of age). Parents also filled out questionnaires about the amount of time their child engaged in a variety of activities at home, such as reading and playing games with their parent, singing, playing outside, playing digital games or passively watching screens.

The researchers found that:

- **Children who spent less time passively watching screens had more growth in their expressive vocabulary between March and September** (expressive vocabulary is the number of words a child can say)
- **Children who spent more time reading with parents had larger growth in their receptive vocabulary between March and September** (receptive vocabulary is the number of words a child understands)
- **Children's vocabularies grew more than researchers were expecting during the lockdown** (compared to the expected norms published in the vocabulary checklist)

The researchers weren't able to explain why children's vocabularies grew more than expected during the lockdown. They wondered if spending more time together meant that parents were more aware of their child's capabilities, or that they were engaging in language-rich activities more often (or both). Regardless of the reason, their results tell us that **engaging in shared reading and less passive screen viewing seems to have promoted children's vocabulary growth.**

Parent tip – Grow your child’s vocabulary by reading together

You can use the OWL™ strategy described above to help you have sensitive interactions when you share books with your child.

As you look at the book together, wait for your child to show or tell you what’s caught their attention. Observe what your child notices and shows you. Listen for what your child wants to tell you about the book. Then respond with interest by saying something related to your child’s message. Then wait again, giving your child an opportunity to keep the conversation going!

You can find many other tips for shared books with your child in these articles:

- *Make Book Reading a Time for Conversations*
- *Light Up Your Child’s Brain with Books!*
- *Encourage Conversations with Wordless Books!*

The above studies show us that **when parents interact with their child, it makes a difference.** Having sensitive interactions and engaging in language-rich activities like reading together has a positive impact on children’s language development. And when faced with challenges such as pandemic lockdowns, these positive interactions support children’s development, allowing their vocabulary to flourish.

References

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2. Dunst, C. J., & Kassow, D. Z. (2008). Caregiver sensitivity, contingent social responsiveness, and secure infant attachment. *Journal of Early and Intensive Behavior Intervention*, 5(1), 40–56. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0100409>
3. Kartushina, N., Mani, N., Aktan-Erciyas, A., Alaslani, K., Aldrich, N. J., Almohammadi, A., ... Mayor, J. (2022). COVID-19 first lockdown as a window into language acquisition: Associations between caregiver-child activities and vocabulary gains. *Language Development Research*, 2, 1–36. doi:10.34842/abym-xv34.

About The Hanen Centre

The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization committed to supporting all the important adults in young children's lives to build the best possible social, language and literacy skills. This includes children with or at risk of language delays/disorders, autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.

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