



‘Springboards for Learning’

Early Experiences Launch Children’s Development Forward

Lauren Lowry
Hanen SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

You may have noticed that there’s a lot of information available online, at doctors’ offices, or at your child’s daycare about how to provide your child with the best start possible when it comes to his development.

We know that things like:

- having conversations
- following a child’s lead to discover his interests
- playing with toys and imagining
- sharing books together

encourages young children’s language and thinking skills.

Not only do these types of experiences help your child when he is young, but they also benefit your child well beyond his preschool years. In fact, a new study [1] by researchers in New York and Michigan shows that a home environment that is rich with language and learning jumpstarts children’s skills and has benefits that can be seen until at least Grade 5.

Learning experiences at home

Children with delays in language development may have more difficulty picking out these patterns in language. However, studies have shown that they do pick out patterns; it just involves a bit more effort and they may need more exposure to language to find the patterns [2,4].

Because this type of learning depends on the language input a child hears, the way you speak to your child can make a big difference. There are some simple things you can do to help your child pick out patterns in language more easily:

The researchers studied a very large group of children (2,204) and their mothers to look at their learning at home when they were very young and how it affected their later skills in Grade 5. They visited these families four times when the children were between age 14 months and 5 years and looked at the following:

- How often mothers shared books and told stories to their child, and talked about letters, words, and numbers
- Whether mothers and children engaged in conversations, and whether mothers responded to their child and used words and sentences that encouraged their child's learning
- The types of books and toys in the home that encouraged children to express themselves (crayons, puppets, etc.) and develop fine motor and number skills (blocks, etc.)

When the children were in Grade 5, they looked at similar things, but with a greater focus on the types of conversations mothers had with their children.

The researchers also tested the children's school-related skills (vocabulary, reading, math, thinking skills) when they were 5 years old (Prekindergarten) and in Grade 5.

What the researchers found

Children with a home environment that was rich with language, conversations, reading and play had stronger school-related skills by Prekindergarten (age 5). Then, these PreK skills became 'springboards for learning', meaning they launched children's skills forward, so that by the time they were in Grade 5, they had strong school-related skills [1].

Skills build upon skills

What this study tells us is that providing learning experiences for young children at home gives them a solid foundation of skills by Prekindergarten. Then, this foundation launches them forward to keep learning and growing, so that years later they have strong school-related skills. Just as a child jumping off a diving board gets propelled further than he would if he just jumped from the side of the pool deck, these solid PreK skills work like springboards for learning. Put simply, **what you do early on makes a difference later.**

How can I help my child learn at home?

Learning at home doesn't mean sitting at a desk and showing your child flashcards or bombarding him with number or letter drills! You also don't need fancy toys or books to help your child learn and develop.

Providing rich language and literacy learning experiences at home means:

- following your child's lead so that you can talk about your child's interests
- having back-and-forth conversations in which you both participate equally
- sharing books together, ensuring you pause and wait for your child to contribute in his own way
- using language that is just slightly ahead of your child's level so that he can learn from your example
- playing with your child with toys that spark his interest and allow him to use his imagination

Learning at home should be fun and enjoyable for both you and your child. If you're having a good time talking and playing together, then you're likely providing very helpful learning experiences. These experiences will jumpstart your child's development so that he can reach his potential years later in school.

References

1. Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Luo, R., McFadden, K. E., Bandel, E. T., & Vallotton, C. (2019). Early home learning environment predicts children's 5th grade academic skills. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(2), 153-169.

References

1. Erickson, L. C. & Thiessen, E. D. (2015). Statistical learning of language: Theory, validity, and predictions of a statistical learning account of language acquisition. *Developmental Review*, doi: 10.1016/j.dr.2015.05.002.
2. Plante, E. & Gomez, R. L. (2018). Learning without trying: The clinical relevance of statistical learning. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 49, 710-722.
3. Head Zauche, L., Thul, T. A., Darcy Mahoney, A. E., & Stapel-Wax, J. L. (2016). Influence of language nutrition on children's language and cognitive development: An integrated review. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 36, 318-333.
4. Saffran, J. R. (2018). Statistical learning as a window into developmental disabilities. *Journal of Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, 10(35), 1-5.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)