

The Social Dance of American Family Life

It is often said that children take an active part in learning to talk. The purpose of this book is to tell about that part. In successive chapters we describe what children do as they learn to act as partners in the social dance that is talking between parents and children, and how interactions change as baby talk turns into back-talk. We describe the pattern of change as the reciprocal responses of turn taking become coordinated contributions to conversation such that even when parents and children are engaged in independent tasks, they can stay and play in a dance of talking.

We are able to describe the gradual development of talking as a social dance because of the longitudinal data we collected on the everyday lives of young American children. Each month for 2-1/2 years we recorded in their homes the interactions between 42 children and their parents as the children learned to talk. We spent 10 more years creating and verifying an immense computer database in order both to preserve the priceless gift of these families' willingness to be watched and to ensure that the database would be one of a kind in the depth and scientific integrity of its information about the everyday experience of young American children. This book refines what is already known about language development by giving a fuller description based on more complete data from a much larger group of children in families more varied in size, race, and socioeconomic status (SES). But more important, this book also adds information previously unknown: a description of the social world of ambient conversation and casual interaction in which language development proceeds.

We undertook the longitudinal observations to discover what was happening to children during their first 3 years of life. We could find studies of families with special needs, families having physical, marital, or mental problems, and families subject to societal intervention related to neglect and abuse. We could find astonishingly few data, however, concerning what actually goes on in the daily lives of the well-functioning families that are the stable, unremarkable majority of Americans. As specialists in clinical language intervention, we were well aware of how different children are in terms of language resources by age 4, but we found far more theories than facts that would explain why some 4-year-olds were performing so much more proficiently than others on verbal/cognitive tasks. We assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that the early experience of most children in ordinary American families was very similar to what we and our college-educated colleagues had experienced growing up. We designed a study to measure children's early experience and find out how much talking ordinary families actually do and how often and about what parents interact with 1- to 2-year-olds in the course of taking care of their household tasks.

Even after 2-1/2 years of observing the daily lives of 42 ordinary families that all were similarly socializing their children to participate in American society, we could not see the massive differences the data revealed in the amount of talking that went on across families until we had converted our observations into quantified data. We were further surprised at how consistent the relative quantity of talking was in a family over time such that we could calculate how much experience with words a child was accumulating month by month while learning to talk. The amount that parents talked with their 1- to 2-year-old children was generally correlated with the parents' SES. But the data showed that no matter what the family SES, the more time parents spent talking with their child from day to day, the more rapidly the child's vocabulary was likely to be growing and the higher the child's score on an IQ test was likely to be at age 3.

When we analyzed what was happening in the families such that the amount of talking differed so greatly, we saw that all of the families devoted similar amounts of talk to socializing their children, getting them properly fed and dressed, and keeping them safe and appropriately engaged. The added amounts of talk we recorded in some of the more talkative families concerned topics other than the giving and getting necessary in everyday life, and it was this extra, optional talk that was highly correlated with measures of the children's verbal/cognitive competence at age 3. The data showed that when parents and children were staying to talk together with no need beyond social interaction, much more was happening than children hearing and saying words and sentences or learning reference and the names of things. Most of the optional talk occurred when parents and children were partners in mutual or parallel activities in which accomplishing something was rewarding but not imperative, doing a puzzle, for instance, or the child picking out socks to try on as the parent folded laundry. As partners in play, the children tended to be more cooperative, the parents more approving, and both of them less demanding and more likely to comment on nuances and elaborate what was said. The prohibitions required to manage the children's behavior were diluted by the amount of talk about a shared activity, and the vocabulary and concepts embedded in the talk were, without planning or effort, contributing to the accumulation of language and cognitive accomplishments that later tests would measure.

Even as we focused on the importance of the amount of experience with language and interaction parents provided their children before age 3, we knew that was only part of the story and that we would have to write this book to describe the importance of the children's contributions to the amount and kinds of experience their parents provided. In this book we have focused on the children learning from their interactions how to talk and thus influence their experience. But this too is only part of the story. The whole story is the intimate social dance between children and parents interacting as

partners, listening and speaking, following and leading, locked into the ways language works between people. As children learn to talk they become increasingly heterogeneous dance partners: each learns the social dance of his or her own family culture that governs what its members talk about, how much, and in what circumstances.

The amount of time the children and parents spent dancing together above and beyond what was needed to take care of everyday necessities influenced not only the amount of language experience the parents provided but also the amount of the children's practice using language. All of the children had ample practice using words and constructions to get the objects and attention they wanted and to influence how they were dressed and cared for. The extra talk we recorded in the parents' data began to appear in the children's data when the children started using words to explore how things work and how people respond. We began to record dances devoted to persuasion and resistance as 2-year-olds, encouraged both to act independently and to conform to society's rules, began choosing to do neither. But most often we saw children exploring the words that would entice their parents into a dance and prolong it once it began. The data showed the talkativeness of the parents becoming the talkativeness of the children.

Talkativeness affected the amount the children learned more than the language development of the children: the size of the vocabulary and the range of expression more than the words and constructions the children began to use. Talkativeness affected both the frequency of the social dance and its elaboration as the children's display of increasing knowledge drew automatically more complex responses from their parents. Talkativeness provided the children with more language experience in increasingly sophisticated social dances with expert partners whose willingness to dance encouraged both the children's talkativeness and their assurance that they were important, competent, and understood. Self-confident, talkative 2-year-olds began to use their skills, though, not only to share new discoveries with their parents but also to manipulate them and weary them with a profusion of self-centered comments. Parents who had things they needed to do and other adults available to talk with began leaving the children to practice with their toys or their siblings. The parents had gotten from their investment in dancing what they would need when their children went from the safety of home to the outside world full of mysteries and temptations: children intent on exploring experience who could and would talk with their parents about what was happening to them.

Our observations showed us children growing up and learning to talk in preexisting social worlds that were continuing to develop around them. Each child was added to a family whose members each had friends, interests, and obligations that did not include the child. Learning to talk opened the gate to the more complex and exciting world on

view in the family, and the children applied all of their cognitive resources to practicing until they gained full access. This book describes the pattern of the children's practice, its influence on the amount of language experience their parents provided, and the increasing extent to which the children were determining their own outcomes. For the children, mastery of the social world began with taking up talking.

Excerpted from chapter 1 of **The Social World of Children Learning to Talk**, by Betty Hart, Ph.D., & Todd R. Risley, Ph.D.

Copyright © 1999 by Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.