

Betty Hart



**REMEMBERING THE WORK
AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS
OF DR. BETTY HART**

Betty Hart, Ph.D.

1927–2012

Emeritus Associate Research Professor and Scientist, University of Kansas,
Schiefelbusch Institute for Life Span Studies

**1949 Undergraduate Degree in English from the
University of California, Berkeley**

**1950s traveling, backpacking, hiking
France, Switzerland, Russia**

**1960s Accountant, Translator, Teacher
Tucson & Seattle**

**1965 Teaching Certificate, Laboratory Preschool,
University of Washington, Seattle**

**1967 Master's Degree, Human Development,
University of Kansas**

**1969 Doctorate in Developmental and Child Psychology,
Human Development and Family Life, University of Kansas**

EARLY INTERVENTION TO FORESTALL THE TERRIBLE EFFECTS OF POVERTY



Dr. Hart's early work, initiated during the 1960s War on Poverty, began in Kansas City, Kansas, where she focused on bringing "knowledge of child development to the front line in an optimistic effort to intervene early..." (Hart & Risley, *American Educator*, 2003). Incidental teaching procedures were demonstrated to increase children's communication and formed the basis for many of the evidence-based language intervention techniques used today.

DECADES BEFORE THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING LANGUAGE IN FUNCTIONAL CONTEXTS WAS UNDERSTOOD

Contrary to the deficit model then popular, Dr. Hart's work showed that minority children reared in poverty were not lacking in language ability.

Along with Dr. Risley, she speculated that the disparity in vocabulary they observed began earlier than preschool... when children were just beginning to develop language.

In 1982, they began their landmark study of children's language learning experiences in homes.



THE METHODOLOGY USED IN THEIR STUDY IS UNPRECEDENTED



42 infants were followed from 7 to 36 months of age during one-hour long visits to homes. Everything said to the baby and all that occurred in context was recorded.

Each tape took 16 hours to transcribe and code for words, context, and grammar. It took Dr. Hart more than 22,000 hours, or 11 person-years, to collect the data. It took another decade to analyze and write up the findings.

STAGGERING DIFFERENCES IN THE CUMULATIVE AMOUNT OF TALK HEARD IN HOMES

Parents of children who had the largest vocabularies at 36 months:

- **Talked more often**
- **Interacted more**
- **Asked open-ended questions**
- **Used fewer prohibitions**

Children's early experiences made for staggering differences in the cumulative amount of talk they heard in their homes ranging from 600 to 3,000 words per hour. By 4 years, Hart estimated some children heard as many as 45 million words; others, 13 million.

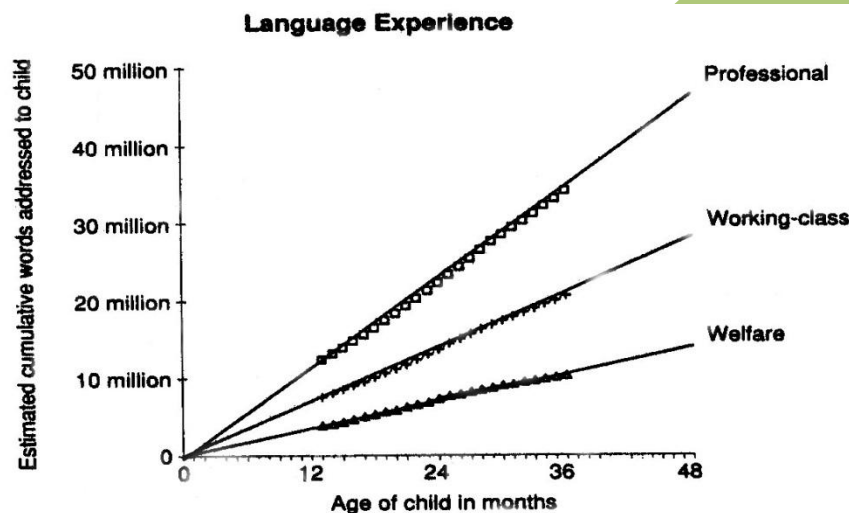
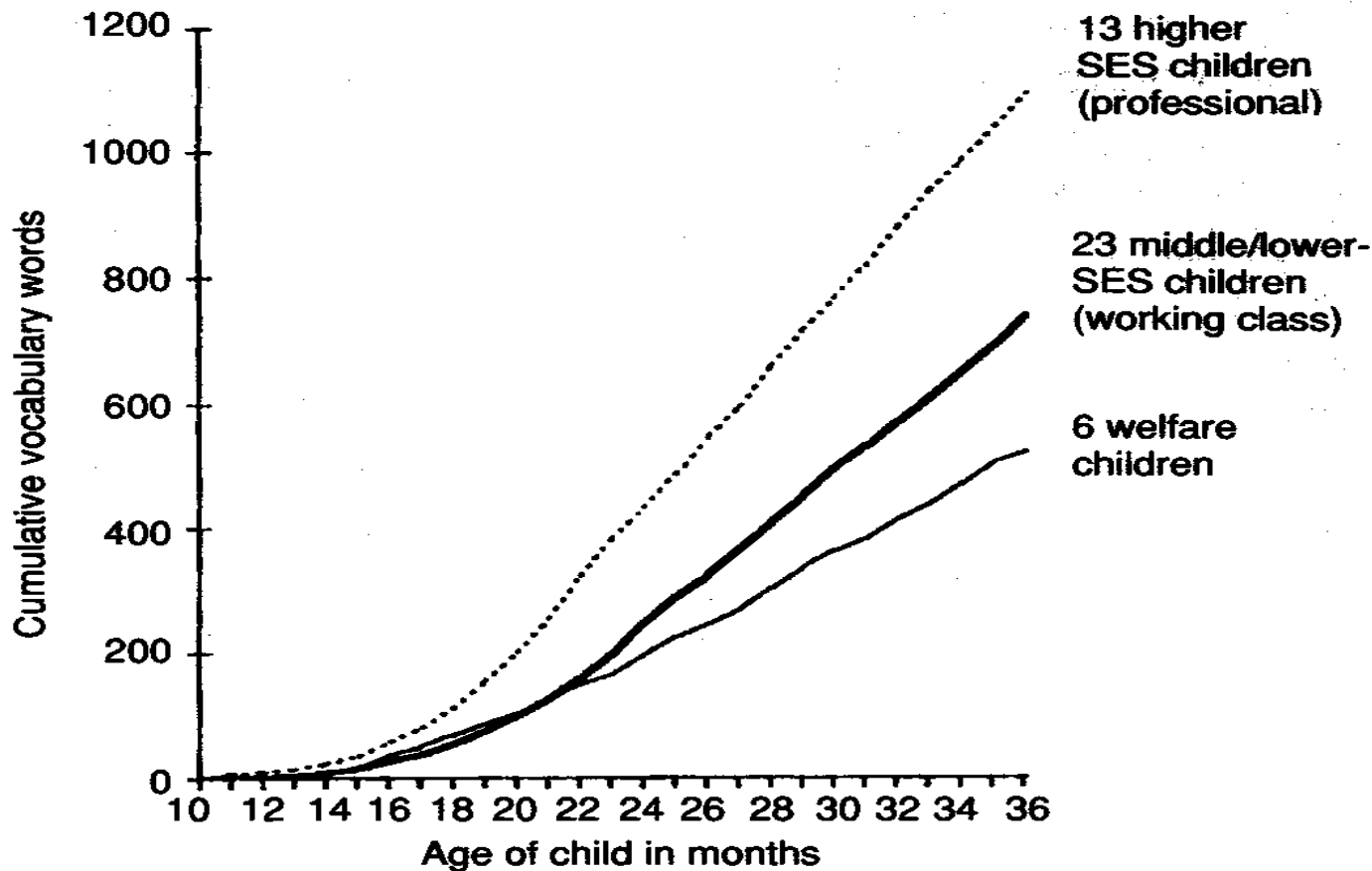


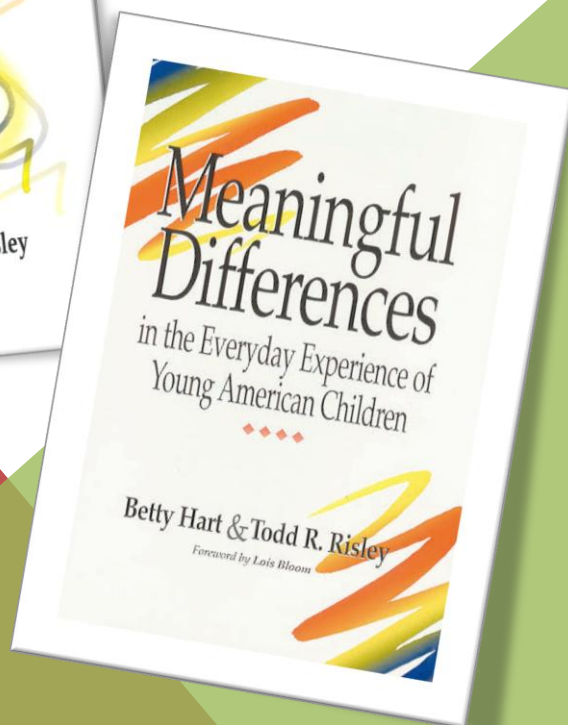
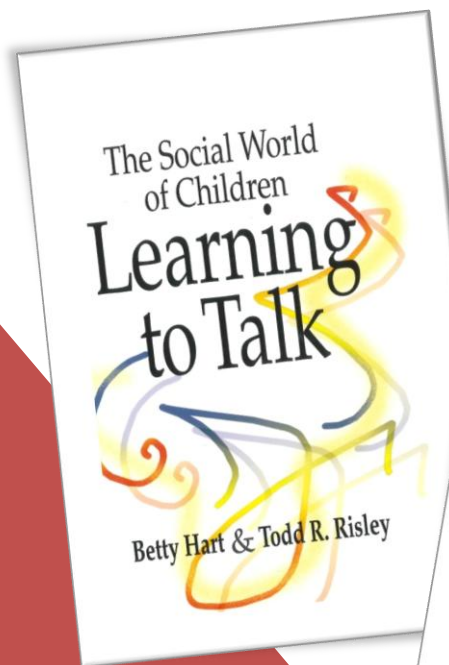
Figure 19. Estimated cumulative differences in language experience by 4 years of age. (See Appendix B for a detailed explanation of this figure.)

Disparities in Children's Early Vocabulary Growth

From their study findings:



MAKING A MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE



Dr. Hart's seminal study conducted with Dr. Todd Risley was published in 1992 and chronicled in two books, *Meaningful Differences* (1995) and *The Social World of Children Learning to Talk* (1999).

**“Our hope is that our discoveries, as documented here, may improve many children’s lives by continuing to influence what parents, caregivers and policymakers do.”
(Dr. Betty Hart, 1995)**

Dr. Hart was recognized in 1999 by the Division for Early Childhood with the Research Award for Contributions to the Field



Knowledge generated from their work about the importance of a language-rich environment has been compelling to research scientists and early educators, and has resonated with parents and policymakers as well.

In the words of one Congressman:

“[This work] alerts us to how much each person’s future intellectual ability hinges upon his or her experience in the first years of life.”

U.S. Senator Thomas Daschle

WHERE *MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCES* HAS MADE CHANGES

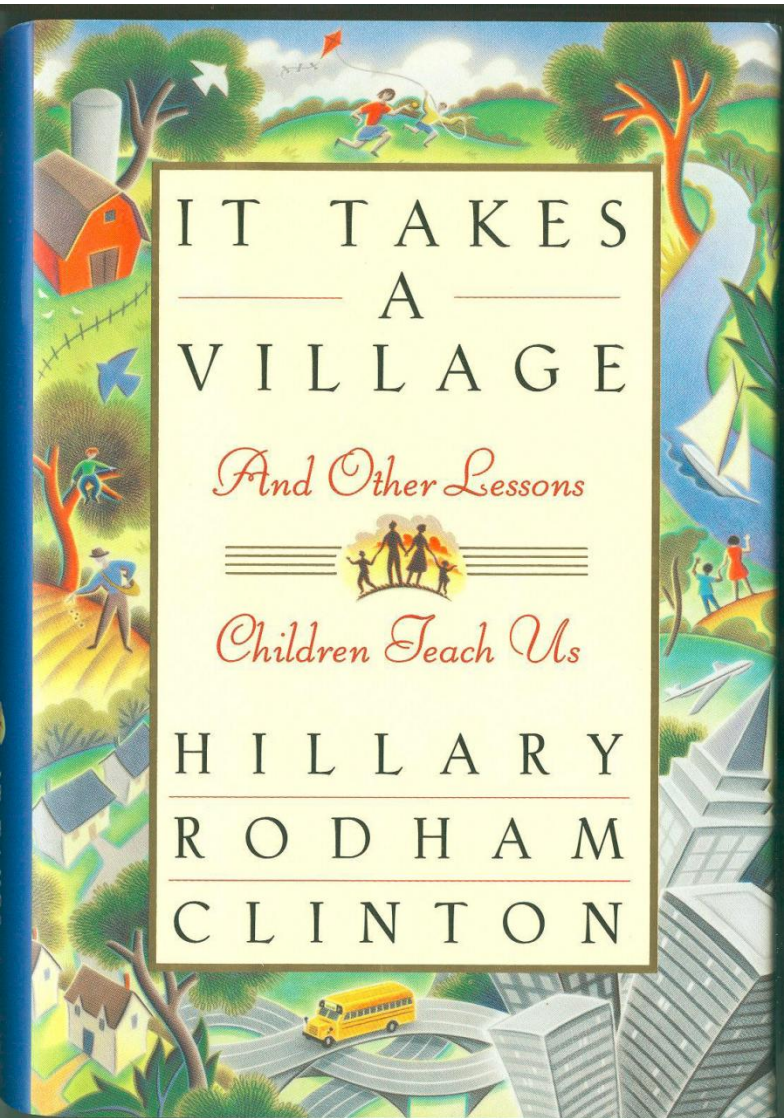


“The whole thing reads like a detective story of the most serious academic kind.”
(Lois Bloom, 1995)

REPORTED IN THE MEDIA,
FROM MAGAZINES TO NEWSPAPERS

“Talkative Parents Make Kids Smarter” (*Science News*)
“Your Every Word” (*Prevention*)
“The Smartest Thing You Can Do for Your Baby” (*Parenting*)
“A Hard Look at Words” (*U.S. News and World Report*)

DR. HART'S WORK HAS
INFLUENCED MANY PEOPLE...



HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

January 5, 1996

Ms. Betty Hart
Schiefelbusch Institute for Life
Span Studies
1052 Dole
Lawrence, Kansas 66045

Dear Ms. Hart:

It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us will be in bookstores this month. I have mentioned you in the book and enclose this copy with my gratitude and compliments. I hope you enjoy it.

With best wishes for a happy and healthy New Year, I am

Sincerely yours,

Hillary Rodham Clinton
Hillary Rodham Clinton

Enclosure

A year after publication of *Meaningful Differences*, then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote about the importance of Hart and Risley's findings in her book, *It Takes a Village*.

...AND INSPIRED CHANGE

Speaking of Differences

BY PAUL CHANCE

Mr. Chance discusses the findings of a study that raises important questions for educators who seek to make meaningful differences in the lives of all children.



BY THE time many children from low-income families go off to school, the best that educators can hope to do is prepare them for unskilled jobs that do not exist. Yet this fate might be avoided if parents regularly provided simple educational experiences in the home.

So say Betty Hart and Todd Risley, two prominent researchers at the University of Kansas. Their book, *Mothering the Motherless*, describes an intensive longitudinal study of the effects of parents' behavior on the language development of children.

PAUL CHANCE is an assistant professor of education at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kan.



HEALTHY parenting

department of human development at the University of Kansas, recently reported on at the American Psychological Association.

For 1 hour every month for 2½ years, researchers tape-recorded every verbal interaction with a designated child (average age 9 months at the start) in 42 different homes. The families were selected to represent a broad social and economic range. Participants were instructed to go about their days as usual so the researchers could observe unstructured, naturally occurring interactions.

When the kids' IQs were measured in standard intelligence tests at age 3 and again at 9, it was no surprise to researchers that the children of parents who provided more time, attention and a greater variety of words tested as the brightest—and remained there. But they were stunned at the magnitude of the link between "total talk time" and the children's

Your every word

More talk builds a brighter

child

your child's intelligence—a difference that can be measured in IQ levels. It seems that ordinary talk—scads of it, millions of spoken words, lessons, discussions

The Smartest Thing You Can Do for Your Baby

An infant's brain thrives on words: Feed her as many as you can, as often as you can

By William Phillips

There's something about babies that brings out the babble in all of us. But what parents may view as innocent, entertaining chitchat packs a powerful neurological punch for little ones. Recent studies have found that how—and how much—parents and other caregivers "converse" with a baby, especially during her first year, can have a profound impact on her intellectual development for the rest of her life.

This is because the foundations of brain development that allow us to be creative, perceptive, able to reason and to process and understand new information, largely develop during the first 12 months of life. And what promotes that development more than anything else is human speech.

These findings are good news for parents who may worry whether their infant is being properly stimulated and wonder if buying the latest high-tech develop-

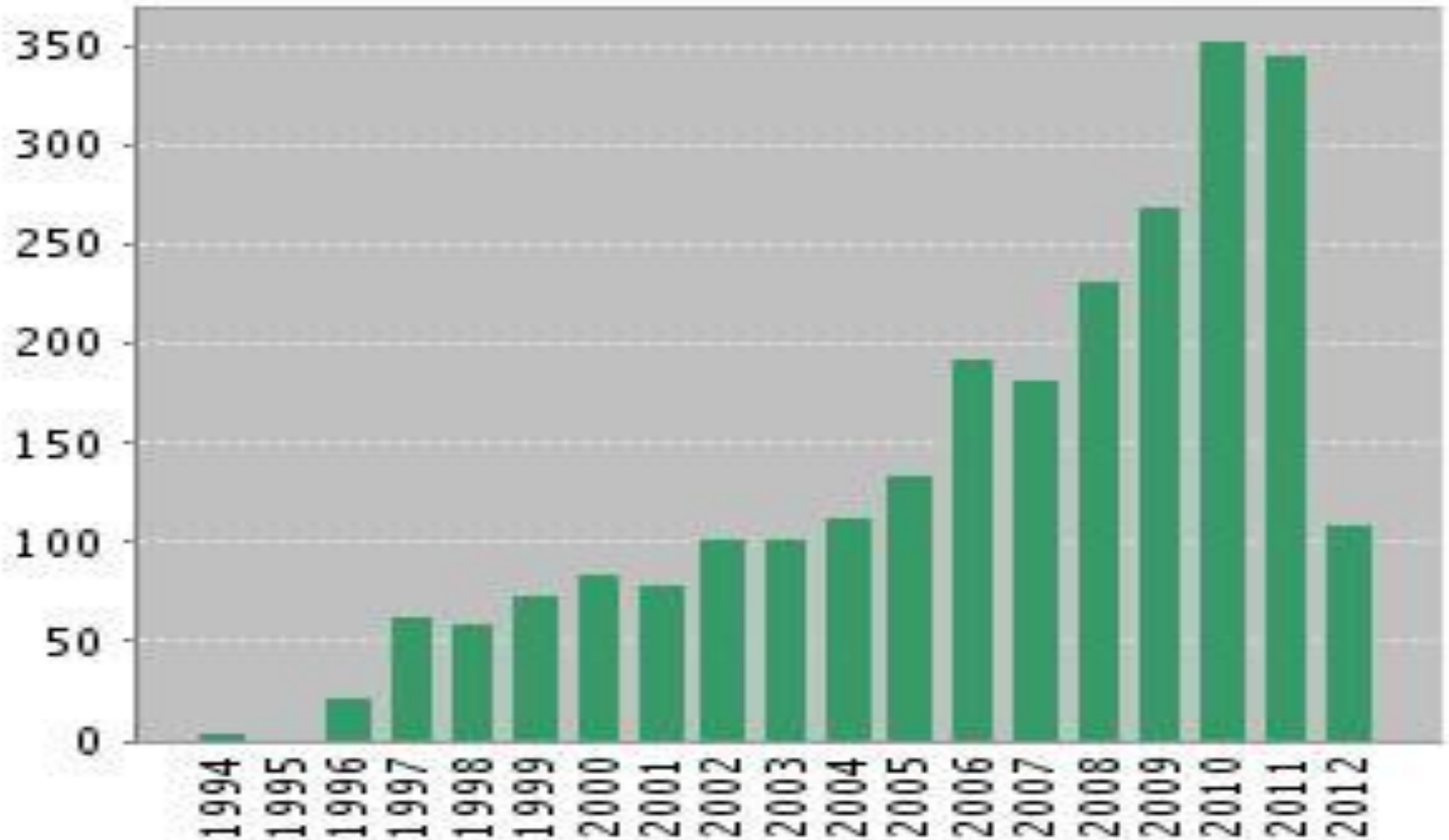
ment toys is worth the expense. William Staso, Ph.D., an educational psychologist in Santa Maria, CA. This isn't to say, however, that genes don't play a part in a child's potential.

All infants are born wired to learn: Unless they have a neurological problem or experience extreme sensory or social deprivation, they'll master the basic physical skills—crawling, walking, talking—right on schedule. The same goes for cognitive development: Almost all kids will learn to scribble and then write; recite their ABCs and then read; count on their fingers and then calculate their tooth fairy earnings. How well they're able to do these things—in other words, how smart they become—depends on the complexity of their brains' network of neurons, many of which are developed during the first year of life.

Why Talking—A Lot—Is So Important

The impact of Hart and Risley's work has been immense. It has provided researchers, early interventionists, and educators with knowledge about how important early experience is for children's language development and later literacy. There are more than 3,000 journal citations to their 1992 study and more than 50,000 copies of their books in circulation.

HART & RISLEY 1992 STUDY CITATIONS IN EACH YEAR



"[*Meaningful Differences*] may very well change our thinking about how we arrange early experiences for our children, if not revolutionize our approach to childhood. It should be required reading by anyone seriously involved in early education and intervention as well as policy makers."

***Journal of Early Intervention*,
1/1/1997**

Provides support for current early childhood policy and legislative initiatives, including:

- ***Early Head Start***
- ***Race to the Top, Early Learning Challenge***
- ***Reach Out and Read***



IF YOU TALK, THEY'LL TALK

Around their first birthday, most babies start to talk. For the next few years, they'll rapidly gain new words, building lifelong language skills. But the strength of those skills depends largely on how talkative their parents and caregivers are.

Why talking matters
 Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, at the University of Kansas, studied family speaking habits. They found that by age 3, children from talkative households had vocabulary twice as big as those of the children who heard the fewest words. A follow-up study found that by third grade, those differences translated into better school performance and higher IQs for the kids of talkative parents.

Talking with toddlers
 With toddlers, it often falls to the adults to keep the conversation going. In the example below, notice how the mother continues the conversation through her own early one-word words.

Ross: Ball!
 Margaret: What's new about that?
 Ross: Ball!
 Margaret: Oh, there's another ball. How many? Just, you got another ball.
 Ross: Ball!
 Margaret: Ball! How many balls?
 Ross: Ball!
 Margaret: Yes, you dropped your ball and it rolled away.

consider this...
 When it comes to talking to a young child, it's important to be a good listener too. How do you do that?

Model early education preschool and child care programs, neighborhood and town reform efforts designed to address the achievement gap, informational campaigns, and technological innovations have all used the lessons reported in *Meaningful Differences* to support their platforms.

Hart and Risley's findings underpin key efforts:

- Educare Learning Network Model
- Baby College at the Harlem Children's Zone
- "Talk/Read/Succeed" initiatives and campaigns



“Former *Post* columnist Raspberry uses Baby Steps to transform lives”

With Dr. Betty Hart's passing, we lose an exemplary behavioral scientist, colleague, mentor, author, advocate, and friend.



Betty's legacy may well be the meaningful changes that have occurred, and continue, as a result of her pioneering research discoveries concerning the importance of children's earliest experiences with language and the potential of early experience to either optimize or diminish development.