

An Investigation of the Timing of Mother-Child Dialogue in Families in Poverty

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Children in low-SES families tend to have smaller vocabularies and lower scores on measures of school readiness. Children's language environment is likely an important factor, with children in poverty encountering 30 million fewer words before the age of four than children in more affluent families (Hart & Risley, 1995; "30-million-word gap"). Much less is known about the detailed timing of mother-child dialogue, and how these factors may influence language development. In this study we examine video recordings of mother-child dialogue from families who participated in the nationwide evaluation of the Early Head Start (EHS) program. Mother-child interactions were coded at three ages (14, 24, and 36 months) for various temporal measures, such as number of utterances, response latency, duration of utterances, and the number of interruptions. Our previous work identified a correlation between the timing of maternal and child utterances, as well as age-related decreases in response latency (Smith & McMurray, 2018). We extend this work with the EHS database to examine two overarching questions: What maternal predictors correspond to differences in these temporal measures?, and What differences in child language outcomes are predicted by differences in these temporal measures? Some such maternal predictors we will analyze are demographic factors, maternal mental health, and parenting behavior. Some child outcomes we will analyze are behavior, vocabulary, and academic outcome. Our preliminary results suggest that mothers with higher levels of depression have slower or more variable response latencies, and we expect to continue finding other relationships such as this as we analyze the data further.