Judith Carta, Ph.D.
Director, Bridging the Word Gap Research Network
Juniper Gardens Children’s Project
University of Kansas

How Health Care and Early Education Are Coming Together to Bridge the Word Gap
What is the Word Gap?

By age 3, low-income children have heard roughly 30 million fewer words than their wealthier peers.

This word gap can be seen in brain scans.

Source: Rice University
The Achievement Gap Starts Early

THE 30 MILLION WORD GAP

Professional
45 Million Words

Working-class
26 Million Words

Welfare
13 Million Words

Estimated Cumulative Words Addressed to Child (in Millions)

(Age Child in Months)

The Language Exposure Gap Sets the Stage for Children’s Vocabulary Gap

Hart & Risley, 1995
A Startling Statistic

By the age of 3, high-income children have double the vocabulary of low-income children.
LACK OF THIRD GRADE READING SKILLS CASTS A LIFELONG SHADOW

4x
Third graders who cannot read at grade level are four times more likely to drop out of high school.

6x
And if the child also lives in poverty, he or she is six times more likely to drop out of high school.

Baby Ella
The Good News!

We know what it takes to bridge the word gap.
We have evidence-based interventions for promoting language in infants and toddlers.
These are easy to do behaviors that parents and caregivers can embed into their everyday routines.
Bad News

The word hasn’t gotten out how important it is to engage and interact and talk with children.
What Will It Take to “Move the Needle” on the Word Gap?

PREVENTION

• **Broader public awareness** of the importance of talking with young children

• **Greater variety of programs** spreading the message and giving parents and caregivers training and advice on ways to interact to promote language
What Will it Take to Move the Needle on the Word Gap?

INTERVENTION:

• Use of evidence-based strategies that can change how parents/caregivers/early educators interact with children to promote language

• Interventions that help parents and caregivers make a habit of talking and interacting with their children, tuning in, taking turns
150+ nationally recognized researchers and practitioners from multiple sectors creating a coordinated research agenda addressing the Word Gap.

Funded by HRSA in Fall 2014.
GOAL of the BWG Research Network

Reducing the vocabulary gap of young children in poverty by increasing their early language learning experiences
What the BWG Research Network Is Doing

1. Synthesizing research to find out “what works” to promote children’s language
2. Sharing most effective practices with practitioners from multiple disciplines
3. Identifying research gaps and developing new studies and new innovations
4. Growing a Practice-Based Research Collaborative
Currently recruiting a 2nd cohort of research-program partners to join Practice-Based Research Collaborative
Community-Wide Public Awareness Intervention
Too Small to Fail
Weaving Early Brain and Language Development into the Fabric of Communities
Too Small to Fail: Creating “Talking is Teaching” Communities

- Creates public awareness and action community campaigns public awareness to promote the importance of early brain and language development
- Empowers parents with tools to *talk, read, and sing* with their young children from birth
- Organizes *multiple sectors* within a community: partnerships with pediatricians, hospitals, faith-based leaders, community based organizations
- Meets parents where they are to help them prepare their children for success by creating opportunities for meaningful interactions anytime, anywhere
Providing parents with language interaction tips at the laundry, supermarket, or playground
A multi-sector collaboration to foster early literacy development of NYC children

City’s First Readers
An initiative of the New York City Council
City’s First Schools Partners

• Brooklyn & Queens Public Libraries
• Reach Out and Read (Pediatric Setting)
• Video Interaction Project (Pediatric Setting)
• United Way
• Committee for Hispanic Children and Families
• Jumpstart—early childhood education organization
• Literacy Inc.—community-based literacy organization
• Parent-Child Home Program—home visiting program
Population-Based Interventions in Pediatric Settings
Hello, Baby!

Talk With Me Baby
GEORGIA’S LANGUAGE NUTRITION STRATEGY TO BRIDGE THE WORD GAP
The Language Nutrition Solution
PARENTS AS THEIR BABY’S FIRST AND BEST TEACHER
LITTLE BRAINS NEED LOTS OF WORDS TO GROW AND THRIVE

Just like a child needs an adequate amount of food for physical growth, a child also needs adequate language for his or her brain development.

In the same way that the quality and nutritious value of the food differs and matters for a child’s growth, the quality of language is important.
A Call to Action

Advantage of an initiative that begins with nurses

Prenatal: 3rd trimester - talk to baby in utero

Perinatal: welcome baby in the language of your heart

Postnatal: emphasize language in 7 well-checkups in the first year

Lifelong: confident and engaged parents raising strong readers

Nurse-delivered transfer of capacity from beginning of 3rd trimester to end of child’s first year builds parent’s capacity to provide language nutrition to infants.
Using Pediatric Primary Care for Population-Level Delivery of Low-Cost Literacy Intervention

National program that makes literacy promotion a standard part of pediatric primary care

- Evidence-based with more than 15 studies showing impacts
- Reaches 4.5 million children/year in US or more than 25% of all low income children ages 6 months to 5 years in US
- Low cost: $25/child/year
Individual Interventions
Teaching Parents Specific Language-Promoting Strategies

Video Interaction Project

Tools for Advancing Language in Kids

THIRTY MILLION WORDS
BUILDING A CHILD'S BRAIN

TALK
Tools for Advancing Language in Kids

DANA SUSKIND, MD
Video Interaction Project

Alan Mendelsohn, M.D.
NYU Langone Health

Intervention to support parent-child interaction delivered one-on-one during each pediatric well-child visit
Individual Interventions Aimed at Parents and Early Educators

**Tune In:** Notice what the child is focused on and talk about that. Respond when child communicates.

**Talk More:** Narrate day to day routines.

**Take Turns:** Keep the conversation going.

**Promoting Communication Strategies**
- Arrange Environment
- Follow Child’s Lead
- Comment & Label
- Imitate & Expand
- Open-Ended Questions
- Time-delay
- Positive Attention
- Providing Choices

Dana Suskind, M.D.
University of Chicago

Dale Walker, Ph.D.
University of Kansas
Take-Home Points

Multi-sector collaboration is taking place:
• Sectors working together to design community-wide public awareness campaigns—a common message
• Agencies across sectors finding ways to work together toward similar goals in early literacy
• However, most multi-sector work is working in parallel (working side-by-side on similar goals).
Challenges for Future Work

More integration of work being done across sectors:

• Sharing of data across sectors—so data from pediatric sector can inform early education setting or home visiting

• More screening in pediatric settings and referral to more intensive services in home visiting and early education
When we work together:

We can develop Word Gap interventions that can

• Strengthen parental bonds
• Promote resilience and influence multiple outcomes
• Equip children with a buffer against adversity
• Protect children against health conditions and diseases
Acknowledgments

• City’s First Readers: http://www.citysfirstreaders.com/.


• PC TALKS: http://www.talk.ku.edu/projects/.

• Reach Out and Read: http://www.reachoutandread.org/

• Talk with Me Baby: http://www.talkwithmebaby.org/.

• Too Small to Fail: http://toosmall.org/.

• Thirty Million Words: http://thirtymillionwords.org/

• Video Interaction Project: http://www.videointeractionproject.org/

Contact the BWG Research Network

Co-PIs
◦ Dr. Judith Carta
carta@ku.edu
◦ Dr. Charles Greenwood
greenwood@ku.edu
◦ Dr. Dale Walker
walkerd@ku.edu

Project Coordinator
◦ Dr. Alana Schnitz
aschnitz@ku.edu

www.bwgresnet.ku.edu

@BWGResNet

Bridging the Word Gap Research Network

HRSA Award #: UA6MC27762

This project is/was supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant UA6MC27762 Bridging the Word Gap Research Network. The information, content and/or conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.