Bridging the Thirty-Million-Word Gap

A Plan for Scaling Up

The University of Chicago Medicine

Dana Suskind, MD
• 6 million children age 0-5 live in poverty in the United States
• 5.5 million more are “near poor”
• The SES-achievement gap is profound.
• Only 48% of low-SES children are school ready by age 5

• Thirty Million Words Initiative at the University of Chicago
• Vision: impact early language environments of children living in poverty to improve school readiness and school outcomes
Thirty Million Words

• **Approach:** focused lens of parent talk
• Parent-directed behavioral intervention to enrich child language environments
• One-on-one home visiting
• True change comes about when parents know the power of their words to build their children’s brains and prepare them for school.
• This must happen on an individual level: one caregiver, one child at a time.
Reaching one caregiver at a time makes a difference in one child’s life at a time.

But to narrow the gap, the approach must be broadened to the population level.
Population-Level Efforts

Community-Level Interventions

Individual-Level Interventions

Intervention Dosage

Low

High
Every parent can benefit from ‘parent talk’ messaging

- Broad messaging should target the population at large

Efforts serve dual purpose:

- Disseminate information about impact of early language environments
- Mobilize and support intervention efforts on community and individual levels
Population-Level Efforts

- Media Campaigns
- Internet Interventions
- Healthcare/Public Health Interventions
Population-Level Efforts

- Media Campaigns
- Internet Interventions
- Healthcare/Public Health Interventions
Media Campaigns

• Increase general public awareness of importance of ‘parent talk’ and simple strategies:
  – Let’s Talk! campaign

• Span across media modalities (billboards, television, radio, Internet)

• Celebrity endorsements
• Successful efforts:
  – Too Small to Fail and Next Generation’s public awareness campaign to promote health and wellbeing of children 0-5
  – text4baby.org: sends health and safety text messages to mothers
  – Sesame Street
Population-Level Efforts

- Media Campaigns
- Internet Interventions
- Healthcare/Public Health Interventions
Internet Interventions

• Widely extends reach of intervention
  – especially to rural populations
• Successful in promoting health behaviors
  – (e.g. smoking cessation, weight loss, chronic illness management)
• Low cost per person
• Tailored messaging possible
• Successful efforts:
  – InfantNet: adaptation of Susan Landry’s PALS program to reach rural families
Population-Level Efforts

- Media Campaigns
- Internet Interventions
- Healthcare/Public Health Interventions
• Work within existing healthcare infrastructure to reach expectant parents and parents of young children
  – Perinatal care
  – Well Child checks
  – Universal Newborn Hearing Screen
• Map messaging onto already established points of contact with parents
• Successful efforts:
  – Reach out and Read: literacy promotion through pediatric primary care
  – Mendelsohn’s Video Interaction Project (VIP): review of videoed parent-child interaction mapped onto pediatric visits
  – Thirty Million Words Newborn Initiative mapped onto UNHS
Community-Level Interventions

Population-Level Efforts

Individual-Level Interventions
Community-Level Interventions

- Work through local civic, community, and neighborhood-based organizations
- Map onto existing community programming
- Group-level intervention dissemination
Community-Level Interventions

- Preschools/Daycares
- Libraries
- Churches
- Family Outreach Organizations
- Birthing Hospitals
- Home Visiting
- Cultural Institutions
Preschools and daycares should have particular focus

- Preschool teachers’ language predictive of children’s vocabulary, literacy outcomes in 4th grade
- Obama administration’s Early Learning Initiative expands preschool to all 4 year olds below 200% federal poverty line

(Dickinson & Porche, 2011)
Community-Level Interventions

• Successful efforts:
  – Early Head Start
  – Ounce of Prevention’s Educare
  – Toddler Language in the Classroom: professional development to enhance teachers’ use of language-promoting strategies
Community-Level Interventions

Population-Level Efforts

Individual-Level Interventions
• Highest intensity intervention
• Typically one-on-one, multiple sessions
• Often home visiting
• More cost-effective when adopted into existing home visiting programs
  – Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program - Dept Health and Human Services
• Successful and early efforts:
  – Play and Learning Strategies (PALS)
  – Providence Talks
  – Thirty Million Words
Required:
- Ongoing evaluation
  - Rigorous assessment of interventional efforts
  - Evaluation of initiative as a whole
- Identification of appropriate intervention dosage
- Funding streams
- Cross-sector communication, collaboration
- Early language environments become public health indicator
Resources

