



FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALLS

Caregiver Interventions to Enrich Early Language

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QUESTIONS FROM JULY 23RD FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALL

Q:

Dr. Dana Suskind is a cochlear implant surgeon at the University of Chicago Children's Hospital. So it's really fascinating that she's doing this type of research and intervention. Dr. Suskind, could you say a bit about why you got interested in this type of study and intervention?

DR. DANA SUSKIND:

Well, I'd like to mention that this is really a group effort. Kristin (Leffel) and I have been together since the beginning. And Beth Suskind, Shannon Sapolich, and a whole host of people were a big part of developing and testing this intervention.

But I got into this line of research about five or six years ago when I started the pediatric cochlear implant program at the University of Chicago. I don't know if you know, but a cochlear implant is this amazing piece of technology that allows children who are born deaf to be able to hear and develop spoken language. It became apparent very early on that children who were born into low-income backgrounds didn't develop speech and language as easily or at as rapid a rate as their more affluent peers. I'd like to stress this was not a lack of potential. These kids had all the potential in the world.

So I started really becoming interested in this idea, and realized that one of the key determinants of this health outcome was a child's early language environment: how and how much their parents talked to them. And because I'm a strong believer that the power of the word is within every parent, we started developing interventions both for typically developing children and children with hearing loss. It's been a very fun journey.

Q:

That's just fascinating. Kristin, you do some of the intervention work. Can you give us a sense of the reaction when you share the data with the parents?

KRISTIN LEFFEL:

Most parents are really excited to see the numbers. Our first module for TMW just shows parents the overall 30-million-word-gap numbers. Usually people are shocked to hear that. We tell them the basics about brain development and the 30-million-word gap. Then they start to realize what LENA is and how it works. After that, they're just kind of hungry to get going. Most parents keep wanting to do more.

I always give them the choice, “Do you want to see your numbers now, or do you want to do the lesson first?” They’re, like, “Numbers.” It’s just always, “Let’s see the LENA. I need to see the LENA.” In one case, the whole family got involved. It was, like, “When are we recording?” Then her boyfriend would come home and interrupt our home visit so he could see the numbers right away. She would bring the numbers to work and her manager at work would, like, check them. You know, and it became this—her whole social world got into her LENA numbers.

I think there’s just such power in knowing. If I asked you, “How many words did you say yesterday,” how would you know until you have this thing that can count them. People really start to feel empowered by being able to know.

Q:

One listener’s question asked: Are you targeting specific vocabulary words, or is it really just about increasing the language and noting the conversational turns?

DR. DANA SUSKIND:

At this point, we don’t use tier one, tier two vocabulary. This is really about getting parents to understand the impact of their language and using what they have. You know, people say, “Well, parents come with different levels of vocabulary.” I don’t think that’s the point. I think the point is redirecting their language. They have enough language to have rich and detailed conversations with their girlfriends, their family members — and can be cognizant and redirect it to their child. That’s been incredibly effective. I think that if you go in saying, “Okay, you know, we want to change how you talk” —that’s not our philosophy. Our philosophy is that every parent has within them enough language. They just have to redirect it to their child.

KRISTIN LEFFEL:

And we encourage parents to tell their child something the child doesn’t know. We talk about how “what” questions don’t help. Because if you’re just asking them, “What color is this,” you know, that’ll get them talking. But the child knows it’s red, if he already knows his colors. But start telling him something about it that he doesn’t know. If you’re talking about the red fire truck, then you can talk about the loud sirens, and how they’re flashing, etc.. You’re always going to know some words that he doesn’t know. We talk about strategies like that to build vocabulary.

DR. DANA SUSKIND:

Another important thing is the idea of decontextualized language—talking about the past and the future. We emphasize to parents that that’s a great way. So, while we don’t dictate what people say, we give them different strategies that they can use in other conversations with their child.

Q:

Regarding expansion into executive function, can you say a little bit about what that’s going to look like or what you’re thinking?

DR. DANA SUSKIND:

We’re lucky to have animators on staff who translate some of our creative ideas into beautiful visuals. We’ve shown executive function as a stoplight, and embedded it into the brain, so that parents realize that executive function isn’t something you’re born with. It develops until, you know, late adolescence, early young adulthood. Behavior isn’t good or bad. It’s something that has to be developed. So we’ll let you know how that goes.

Q:

Here on site we've seen the illustrators' work in the office. We saw, for instance, a row of shiny piggy banks. How do you use those?

KRISTIN LEFFEL:

We like to teach with very concrete concepts that are really memorable. It goes back to the cognitive fluency that we mentioned earlier. We use many symbols through those concepts. One of them is: Think of your child's brain as a piggy bank —every word you're saying is just another penny you're putting in the bank. You'll see those throughout our modules. As another reminder, on one of the weeks, parents get their own piggy bank. The kids get their own piggy bank, and they get into using their piggy banks too.

Q:

It's lovely. It's, like, this metaphor of a college savings account, right. So you're, like, building that potential.

KRISTIN LEFFEL:

Right, and you're investing your words.

Q:

Some people have written in and are curious about the LENA and how they might use that in their work in early Head Start. Can you say a little bit about accessing the LENA?

DR. DANA SUSKIND:

I think the LENA is a very powerful tool to make concrete something that's abstract. As a parent, I don't think that any of us are really cognizant of how much we're talking or how many conversations we have. What the LENA does for us and our families is give an idea of how much we're talking.

Kristin and Beth, who do interventions, notice that about three or four weeks into it, parents really get an idea of how much they're talking. Incorporating LENA into early Head Start could be thought of creatively. I think that it could give you an idea of who's getting enough language input and who's not. And it can give a picture of the language environment you're providing the kids in your care.

Q:

In addition to LENA, you're doing videotapes and transcribing conversations. Regarding the quality of the conversations, do you see those change? Are you measuring that?

DR. DANA SUSKIND:

We are actually in the midst of analyzing that data. We do videotape sessions with the parent and child pre-, post- and then four months post. Believe it or not, that takes the longest period of time. We're probably two-thirds through the decoding. We're looking at that because, while we're strong believers in the LENA, it's simply one tool for your preparation. The tried-and-true tool is obviously the video coding. So we're definitely including that.

Q:

A lot of our listeners are probably working in center-based settings and doing some home visiting. Could you imagine how this would roll out if your curriculum was taking place in a center-based setting?

DR. DANA SUSKIND:

Ooh, we would love it. Actually, that's something that's very exciting to us. Because, let's face it, 70% of children are not in the care of their parents. I mean, I strongly believe that this should be parent-directed, but adult-directed works too. I always joke, you know, if I had known what I know now I would've been a much better mother. But unfortunately, mine are all older. Kristin's children will be the only ones that benefit. But we would definitely love to think creatively about how this can be adapted for that sort of classroom.

For me, the most gratifying part is not just the numbers. Meeting the mothers, even the grandmothers, and really seeing how incredibly excited they are too, that they really embrace this concept, is empowering. They embrace it because it's not something external. This is internal. This is something they have. And to know that the power resides within you is huge. I think we could adapt it in the same way for lots of other places.

KRISTIN LEFFEL:

And, we always tell the parents it takes a village. We talk to them about getting the important adults in their child's life on board too. We've always liked the idea of getting daycares, and Head Starts and similar programs on board too, because what's going to make an impact on these children is to have every adult in their lives thinking, "How can I put more words in their piggy bank," or, "How can I surround them with really rich language." So, yeah, we're hungry to get into centers as well.

Q:

You referenced a bath of language. That's such a great image, immersing children in this language bath. I am so sad to say that we are out of time today for our Front Porch Series.

I just want to note that this masterful intervention and powerful research study was put together on a shoestring budget. I can only imagine what you can do with even more resources. Dr. Suskind and Kristin, thank you so much for spending time with us today, letting us come and see your research lab. Thank you to Trevor Johnson, who came from Seattle to Chicago, bringing all of his equipment, so that we could record the presentation. The recording will, at some point, be archived and posted on the ECLKC — so that you can see the PowerPoint slides within the video, and hear the audio again. You can find Dr. Suskind on the University of Chicago's website, to get involved in what she is doing. Join us again next month for the Front Porch Series, where we will talk with Rochelle Gelman about early science intervention. Everyone, have a fabulous day. Thanks again.

DR. DANA SUSKIND:

Thank you.



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