

2011/100

Strict embargo: 00.01 hours Thursday 30 June 2011

Reading and talking to children at home makes starting school easier

Researchers in Bristol today published a report that shows that children's early communication environment makes an important contribution to their readiness to start school.

This project was led by Professor Sue Roulstone, Underwood Trust Professor of Language and Communication Impairment at the University of the West of England in collaboration with Professor Tim Peters from the University of Bristol, Professor James Law from Newcastle University, Dr Robert Rush from the Queen Margaret University and Dr Judy Clegg from the University of Sheffield.

The researchers used data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, led by the University of Bristol, that showed children with a positive communication environment had a better expressive vocabulary by their second birthday.

These children went on to achieve higher scores on tests of language, reading and maths when they entered school. In the early years, the communication environment was a better predictor of children's success with language than their more general social background.

This project is the first large scale longitudinal study to examine the impact of the child's very early environment – before their second birthday - on their language and school. In this study, the child's communication environment is defined by the number of books available to the child, the frequency of trips to the library, the mother teaching a range of activities to the child, the number of toys available and attendance at preschool. The amount of time that the television is on in the home is included: as the amount of time increases, so the child's language scores or success later in school decreases. These findings emphasise that what parents do with their children, even before they have begun to talk, can help to prepare children for school.

Professor Roulstone, who is also Director of the Speech and Language Therapy Research Unit for North Bristol Trust, said, "These findings are an encouragement to all parents to provide a positive communication environment for their child from the very start of their lives. The project did identify particular aspects of the communication environment, like having children's books around and not having the television on too much. But the main message is that, as parents, we can have an impact on how our children learn to talk by providing a range of communication experiences. And the better our children are at talking by the age of two years, the better they will do when they start school."

NHS Bristol, Bristol City Council, North Bristol NHS Trust and other partners are supporting through 2011 the Hello campaign, organised nationally by The Communication Trust to increase understanding of how important it is for children and young people to develop good communication skills.

Bristol City Council health partnership manager Rebecca Cross is co-ordinating the campaign for Bristol and said, "This research will help us promote language development with Children's Centres and schools in Bristol. Positive communication right from babyhood is the key to good communication later on."

For more information go to www.hello.org.uk.

Professor James Law, Newcastle University, who was one of the researchers in the University of the West of England-led study, said, "Although we recognise that traditional indicators of social risk such as material wealth remain influential later on, what you do with your child and how you communicate with them when they're under two is far more important than having a flash car or a detached house in the country.

"This is a very positive message as it gets us away from the belief that a child's educational future is pre-determined by standard measures of socio-economic disadvantage such as income, housing or the mother's education.

"Social disadvantage is often measured by parental income or education but this doesn't tell us how parent choose to spend their time or money. Simple activities such as visiting a library more often, playing simple games together or joining a Surestart group can help improve a child's communication skills immensely."

The project was funded by the Department for Education. The full report can be found at:

*<http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR134.pdf>

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Editor's notes

Please contact the Press Office for a copy of the research brief and full report. The links to the report will go live from Thursday.

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