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## Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children

**Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co,  
Baltimore-London-Sidney, ISBN 1-55766-197-9**

Received: 11 August 2005 / Accepted: 13 August 2005 / Published online: 17 January 2006  
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This book, written by two developmental psychologists, summarizes their work on the language acquisition skills of one to three-year-old children in American families. In their very thoroughly planned and carefully executed longitudinal study, they compared the children in 42 families; a third of them from well-educated families of the upper social class, a third from middle-class families, and a remaining third from families on welfare. In monthly visits to the homes of all families, every word spoken by the child and every word spoken by the parent was recorded, while a psychologist noted additional observations. It took six years for the authors to obtain the first results of the huge amount of data that they had collected, but the results were of frightening clarity. During the two years of observation, the children of well-educated families had learned as many words as the parents of the welfare families had spoken to their children. Altogether, the children of well-educated families had heard eleven million words compared to three million for the children from the families on welfare. Not only was the amount of words different, the children of well-educated families had heard several times more encouraging words than those in the families on welfare, and the opposite was the case for discouraging words. The vocabulary growth rate varied accordingly, and when the children were tested for

their reading performance, it correlated strongly with the findings at three years of age. The authors had started these studies after having demonstrated that, after the age of four years, special educational programs for disadvantaged children had only a short lasting effect on their performance. They conclude that, from age one to age three, there may exist a window of opportunity, a period of great brain plasticity, during which educational efforts in disadvantaged children might have longer lasting effects. Since current scientific understanding is that heredity and the environment contribute about equally to human performance, the idea of early intervention is convincing.

These are only a few data from these most detailed studies, which should encourage the reader to explore the full picture. In the 21st century, the social and economic value of knowledge will grow further. Scientific understanding should become accessible to as large a number of human beings as possible, since it is required to understand today's society and, further, to understand how to preserve health and how to behave when confronted with health problems. Promoting access to knowledge through all ages will be as important as the promotion of health by biomedical research.

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