

# Of Course, We Already Knew This . . .

## Babies Need Words Every Day

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Shortly before the 2014 Annual Conference, the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) was invited to contribute to the Obama Administration's Thirty-Million Word Gap initiative. The word "gap" relates to the vast difference in the number of words that children from different backgrounds hear before they enter school.

Children from families who talk constantly hear 30 million more words by the time they enter school than children from families who don't frequently talk or who only use command and "business language."<sup>1</sup> The disparity is most frequently associated with household income levels, and it can have a significant effect on the child's vocabulary. Children from lower-income households can start school with a vocabulary half the size of a child from a family with a higher income.

On the ALSC *Blog*, Betsy Diamant-Cohen wrote, "Research has indicated that there is a link between the number of vocabulary words children know and their economic background."<sup>2</sup>

Published in 2003, "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3" by researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risley noted that during the first years of life, children from low-income families hear about 30 million fewer words than their peers from more affluent homes.<sup>3</sup>

Young children learn words by hearing them spoken by other human beings (not necessarily electronic media); when parents speak with their babies, they are building neural connections in their children's brains. In addition to building a larger vocabulary, the young brains are growing more synapses to enable easier learning later on in life.

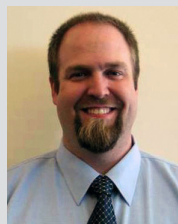
The study by Hart and Risley determined that lower-income parents were speaking less or using fewer words while in conversation with their children. Further studies made the

connection between having larger vocabularies when entering kindergarten and higher rates of graduation from high school.

Having a high school degree influences the type of job and salary a person can generally expect to get. It has also been shown to affect health outcomes, family stability, and lifetime earnings. Thus the number of words a child knows when entering kindergarten can lead to disparities, increasing the economic divide in our country.

The Every Child Ready to Read curriculum teaches that children are "learning to read" all the way up through third grade. One of the key indicators of a child's success throughout his entire school career is his readiness to read at the start of kindergarten. This includes knowing his letters and sounds, numbers up to ten, experience with drawing and writing, and the number of words in his vocabulary.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of kindergarten readiness is the main reason for ALSC's Babies Need Words Every Day. It's another way to help parents realize the importance of talking and playing with their children. Sometimes parents don't think their babies are learning yet. They may not understand that everything they say is being absorbed. Singing, talking, playing, and reading are all ways for parents to be proactive about helping their children get ready for kindergarten. More importantly, they are helping their children prepare for a lifetime of learning.



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## What You Can Do

This campaign is founded on the belief that libraries can help with the progress of bridging the 30 million word gap. Through storytimes, librarians can help parents understand that babies learn by hearing words spoken or sung and can teach parents to remember to use all kinds of words when their babies and young children are listening to them.

The more words their children hear and learn, the better prepared they will be to do well in school and learn throughout life.

What started as an effort to put posters above diaper changing tables, has morphed into a powerful message that can be shared anywhere. The ALSC Board's commitment to make the posters freely available signifies the importance of the Babies Need Words Every Day message. While libraries may not be able to provide direct education, libraries can organize communities and be the bridge for getting disparate groups together. This is a perfect opportunity for libraries to use their influence as trusted community partners to build a network of partnerships to promote early literacy throughout the community.

By using the Babies Need Words Every Day posters, communities can share the message far and wide, with a branded series of posters that people will recognize. The artwork, tips, and rhymes will help parents remember to talk, sing, read, and play with their children. The message can amplify work that is already being done, and strategic partnerships with businesses, government agencies, and state libraries can help cover the costs of printing the posters.

With your network of community partners, you can provide the posters to anyone who wants one and ask them to display them. You can offer them to any business that has a changing table, but as the project has grown, we believe they will be particularly effective in doctors' offices, WIC clinics, health departments, laundromats, public transportation stations, government offices, day care facilities, and, of course, libraries. And the list is only limited by your creativity! ↻

Visit [www.ala.org/alsc/babiesneedwords](http://www.ala.org/alsc/babiesneedwords) to view the posters. All eight are available to download as an 11 × 17" or 22 × 28" poster in English and in Spanish. The committee thanks Nina Lindsay and the Oakland Public Library for the Spanish translation of the posters and addition of culturally authentic songs and rhymes.

## References

1. Maya Shankar, "Empowering Our Children by Bridging the Word Gap," *The White House Blog*, June 25, 2014, [www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/06/25/empowering-our-children-bridging-word-gap](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/06/25/empowering-our-children-bridging-word-gap).
2. Betsy Diamant-Cohen, "Changing Table Initiative Come to Fruition," *ALSC Blog*, June 22, 2015, [www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2015/06/changing-table-initiative-come-to-fruition](http://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2015/06/changing-table-initiative-come-to-fruition).
3. Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, "The Early Catastrophe:

## Birth of a Resource

The Babies Need Words Every Day program began at the 2014 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia. ALSC then-President Starr LaTronica visited the Early Childhood Programs and Services Committee and spoke of developing early literacy posters that could be displayed above changing tables. Consider the captive audience, she noted—speaking about how the posters could connect a new audience to libraries and how it could encourage parents to talk to their children more often.

The committee started to put some literacy tips together using Every Child Ready to Read as the starting point with its concepts of talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing. The committee developed several tips for each of the five practices.

Shortly before the 2014 Annual Conference, ALSC was invited to contribute to the Obama Administration's Thirty-Million Word Gap initiative. During the conference, the ALSC Board made a commitment to create a project that would assist with closing the gap. They were clear in their message: They wanted the posters to be freely available to everyone to make as much progress as possible.

Having already come up with several literacy tips, the committee began putting together additional ideas for poster content and decided that each poster would include a literacy tip, a song or fingerplay, and fun and eye-catching artwork.

The committee considered artists who had written or illustrated children's books; after a rousing chat session on ALA Connect, we decided to request artwork created by Il Sung Na (*A Book of Babies*, *A Book of Sleep*, *Hide and Seek*, *The Thingamabob*).

The committee worked on refining our literacy tips and matched them up with songs and fingerplays. We also developed a booklist that could be downloaded to accompany the posters.

A few months later, Random House gave permission to use Na's artwork for the project; the first preview poster debuted at ALA Midwinter in 2015.

- The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3," *American Educator* (Spring 2003), [www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/TheEarlyCatastrophe.pdf](http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/TheEarlyCatastrophe.pdf).
4. "Literature Review (2010)," Every Child Ready to Read @ your library, accessed January 23, 2016, [www.everychildreadytoread.org/project-history%09/literature-review-2010](http://www.everychildreadytoread.org/project-history%09/literature-review-2010).