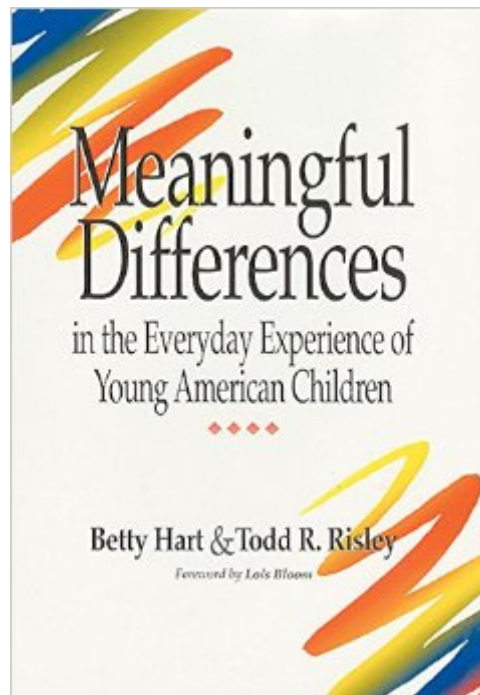


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# Meaningful Differences In The Everyday Experience Of Young American Children



## Synopsis

Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children is the story of the landmark research study that uncovered the widely cited "word gap" between children from low-income homes and their more economically advantaged peers. This groundbreaking research has spurred hundreds of studies and programs, including the White House's Bridging the Word Gap campaign and Too Small to Fail, a joint initiative of the Bill, Hillary, and Chelsea Clinton foundation. Betty Hart and Todd Risley wanted to know why, despite best efforts in preschool programs to equalize opportunity, children from low-income homes remain well behind their more economically advantaged peers years later in school. Each month, they recorded one full hour of every word spoken at home between parent and child in 42 families, categorized as professional, working class, or welfare families. Two and a half years of coding and analyzing every utterance in 1,318 transcripts followed. By age 3, the recorded spoken vocabularies of the children from the professional families were larger than those of the parents in the welfare families. Between professional and welfare parents, there was a difference of almost 300 words spoken per hour. Extrapolating this verbal interaction to four years, a child in a professional family would accumulate experience with almost 45 million words, while an average child in a welfare family would hear just 13 million—coining the phrase the 30 million word gap. The implications of this painstaking study are staggering: Hart and Risley's follow-up studies at age 9 show that the large differences in children's language experience were tightly linked to large differences in child outcomes. As the authors note in their preface to the 2002 printing of *Meaningful Differences*, "the most important aspect to evaluate in child care settings for very young children is the amount of talk actually going on, moment by moment, between children and their caregivers." By giving children positive interactions and experiences with adults who take the time to teach vocabulary, oral language concepts, and emergent literacy concepts, children should have a better chance to succeed at school and in the workplace. Learn more about how parent and children's language interactions affect learning to talk in Hart & Risley's companion book *The Social World of Children Learning to Talk*.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a contemporary classic. Published in 1995, in my opinion it remains one of the most important books ever published in the areas of developmental psychology, intelligence, and language development, and it has powerful implications for education. Perhaps more than any other book, it undermines the nativist views of people like Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker. Nativists argue that cognitive development is largely an automatic process, the result of in-born brain mechanisms; experience makes little difference. What Hart & Risley found was that experience makes a profound difference. Children whose parents provide a rich linguistic environment are far more advanced linguistically and intellectually when they start school, and do far better in school, than children whose parents do not. The study compares professional, working class and welfare families, so some may assume that the results merely reflect differences in genes: Poor kids don't do so well because the genes they inherit are just not as good. There's no denying that genes play a role in development, but what Hart & Risley found was that the quality and quantity of linguistic interactions, not income, was what predicted outcome. The children who did best were those who heard the most words, were given the most feedback, got the most positive feedback, and got the most complete answers to their questions. One reviewer, a librarian, complains that the book's language is scholarly and jargony. It's true that this book does not read like a John Updike novel. It is, after all, the description and analysis of a scientific study. But as scholarly books go, this one is a breeze.

This is a very interesting read on early childhood development. I think this research has managed to make its way into the occasional media story. I heard a reference to it on NPR once. The authors constructed a longitudinal study where graduate students spent one hour with families every other week for four years. They observed the quantity and type of words spoken by parents to children

from birth to four years of age. They picked three groups of parents. The first set were professional families. These included professors from the University of Kansas as well as some lawyers and doctors. Then they picked another group of working class families. Finally they picked a group of families that were receiving government benefits ("welfare"). They decided to count the use of the spoken word by parents. Television words did not count. There were 42 families in each group. They cross-tested observers for observer neutrality. Here are a few of the findings: 1) A child in a professional family hears 48 million words by the age of four. A child in a welfare family hears 13 million. 2) A child in a professional family hears 6 positive encouragements for every negative prohibition. A child in a welfare family receives two prohibitions for every positive encouragement. The impacts show that while socio-economic status was predictive, quantity of words and particularly the ratio of positive to negative were far more significant. The welfare children had an average iq of 75 and the professional children scored around 119. The working class families scored 99. The iqs were roughly the same when they revisited the children at age 19. Their belief is that both sets of parents were trying to do right by their children.

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