Singaporean families famously spare no expense when it comes to ensuring their children’s education, with estimates that up to 90 per cent of youngsters take tuition classes from early ages. But one of the most important investments parents can make to improve children’s learning outcomes is free: It turns out to be much more critical than enrichment programmes: It is talking to them.

This may sound like common sense and part of every family’s daily routine but a growing body of evidence shows that a massive word gap exists between children from disadvantaged families compared with their middle-class counterparts. Researchers in the United States note that by the time a poor child is three years old, she will have heard 30 million fewer words than a wealthier peer.

This is because of the patterns of interactions between parents and children in different kinds of households. It turns out that, on average, less well-off parents speak less to their children, especially before children have developed language abilities, and the kind of speech tends to be more directive: “Stop that” or “Pick up your toys”.

IMPACT OF WORD GAP

Children are less likely to develop expansive vocabularies with directed speech because it requires little in the way of response and does not elicit conversation.

Interactive speech, more common among the middle class, forces children to search for words and use them: “What should we do at the playground today?” or “Let’s tell your little brother a story — what kind would he like?”

The word gap means that many children from poor households start kindergarten already far behind and some scientists fear that it is almost impossible for many children to catch up at that point. Studies have shown that, without intervention, kids who lag in vocabulary at age three add words more slowly than children with expanded speech so that, over time, the gap grows. And children’s facility with language at age three is a good predictor of how well they perform in school at ages nine or 10.

In Singapore, the Government’s goal is to make sure that every child develops to his fullest potential. The word-gap evidence is just one more reason why a focus on the early years is essential to making that goal a reality.

THE THREE T’S

One way to help close the gap is to encourage preschools to focus on language acquisition strategies and to partner with parents to reinforce talking to children at home.

What do we mean by talking? Dr Duna Suskind at the University of Chicago says it all boils down to the “Three T’s:“ Tune in, talk more, take turns. That means, watch and listen to what children are doing and saying so that adults engage with what is important to them. Talk more refers to using more descriptive language so that children hear a broader range of vocabulary. Taking turns may be the most important of all. It is not just about talking to children; it is about talking with them. Children need to use language so the adults around them have to try to engage them in conversation.

Pre-schools can focus on many activities that promote language learning. Teachers can sing songs and have their classes recite poems to play with rhyme. Field trips should be an occasion for new words that can be thought of in advance — a trip to the wet market, for example, allows all kinds of vocabulary, not just food words but smells, colours, and textures.

Reading books to children on a daily basis and going over words to ensure they understand them is essential. Acting unfamiliar words out is a great way to promote comprehension.

Giving children as many opportunities as possible to talk is also crucial: Teachers can encourage little ones to talk to each other and help keep those conversations going by asking questions or commenting on what children are saying.

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