

# For Poor Kids, Words Can Mean Everything

Emily Badger

THE WASHINGTON POST

The Toronto Star, December 31, 2015

*Family's income level can have startling impact on speech development.*

Dana Suskind, a paediatric surgeon at the University of Chicago, performs cochlear implant surgeries every Tuesday on children as young as 7 months old who were born deaf. When she activates the tiny device in their inner ears for the first time, often the startled expression of the children and tears from their parents, she celebrates each child's "hearing birthday."

This is the moment, Suskind once believed, when she set each child on the path to understanding words, then speaking them, then reading them, then thriving. Perform the surgery early enough and you can give children the ability to hear while their malleable brains are still developing, feeding off the language around them.

Several years ago, though, Suskind realized some children who had received the surgery continued to struggle anyway. She describes in her new book, *Thirty Million Words*, one little girl from a poor family who could still barely speak by the third grade.



Early exposure to language helps build a child's brain; and predicts later reading skills.

"When I looked at her lovely face," Suskind writes, "it was hard to say whether I was seeing the tragedy of deafness or the tragedy of poverty."

Studies show that children in poor families are spoken to less often. By the time they're 3, according to one famous estimate, they have heard 30 million fewer cumulative words than kids who come from wealthier homes. They can suffer, like children born without hearing, from what Suskind calls the lifelong effect of silence.

That discovery has made the surgeon, who has the patient temperament of someone who works with small kids, a devout advocate for poor children.

Now she researches what they hear at home and how that language influences their brain development. And her work is behind a series of efforts in different corners of the US to translate this emerging science onto public programs that might actually change how low-income parents talk to their kids.

“Sometimes I look back and think: ‘Gosh, how did I get here? I’m a surgeon – I’m not supposed to be doing this,’ ” Suskind says. “I look at children in such a different way,” she adds. “You can almost look into their eyes and see neural connections happening.”

---

**The average child from a ‘professional’ family heard 2153 words an hour; the average child from a family on welfare heard 616.**

---

Her Thirty-Million Words initiative (and her book) takes its name from a small but seminal study conducted in the 1980s by psychologists Betty Hart and Todd Risley. They spent more than 1 300 hours observing parents and their children in 42 families of varying incomes and they uncovered a startling word gap: The average child from a “professional” family hear 2 153 words per hour; the average child from a family on welfare heard 616.

Over the child’s first few years, Hart and Risley concluded that the gap could add up to 30 million words. The pattern is not just about reading but about talk of all kinds. Researchers now know that early exposure to language like this help build a child’s brain and it predicts later reading skills. Young children not immersed in words fall behind before they enter pre-kindergarten.