

WHY SHOULD I TALK TO MY BABY?
A REVIEW OF MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCES IN
THE EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG
AMERICAN CHILDREN BY HART AND RISLEY

BETH SULZER-AZAROFF

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, AMHERST

Like lava from a semidormant volcano, periodically the nature–nurture argument spews forth. Recognizing the power of genes, behavior analysts nevertheless continue their search for the ways in which environmental variables lawfully influence behavior. We have shown how such events affect the rates and patterns with which pigeons peck a disk or depress a foot pedal, and humans lie, cry, destroy, create, solve problems, hit, and embrace. So, when it comes to children’s evolving cognitive behavior, it is natural for us to try to identify the kinds of variables that can make meaningful differences.

One compelling argument posed by “naturalists” is that poor and working-class people with low IQs tend to beget children who score similarly. Perhaps, though, instead of genetic endowment alone, those children’s very early life experiences play an especially important role. If so, isolating such factors might enable society to take appropriate remedial action.

When, in the mid-1960s, Hart and Risley embarked upon their effort at Turner House in the Kansas City ghetto, their main quest was to lift children out of poverty through an enriched early education. Over the years, they have applied and tested just about every promising behavior-analytic tool they could

borrow or contrive. Improved language and other cognitive and social skills resulted. The Turner House model has become a standard of excellence for many early educators. If consumer acceptance were the ultimate metric, Hart and Risley’s job would be finished.

In true scientific fashion, though, the two insisted on assessing the enduring impact of those early interventions. As reported in *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (1995), any special advantages began to diminish over time. Eventually, differences in achievement or IQ between children with and without the Turner House experience faded.

It takes a special dedication to persist in the face of such disappointment. Yet Hart and Risley decided next to embark on a search for any environmental variables in the very earliest home experiences of young children that (a) might explain the disparities along class lines and (b) could perhaps be altered in some way to diminish their adverse impact. *Meaningful Differences* reports the results of their efforts in the form of a longitudinal study of children’s language growth and environment from their very earliest years.

Forty-two reasonably intact families containing infants 6 to 9 months of age were observed for 1 hr every month over 2½ years, and all parents’ and children’s language was recorded. Thirteen of the families were of upper socioeconomic status (SES), 10 were middle SES, 13 were lower SES, and 6

Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Address correspondence to Beth Sulzer-Azaroff, 5555 Heron Point Drive, Unit 1102, Naples, Florida 34108 (E-mail: 75463.1745@compuserve.com).

were on welfare. The analysis of their 1,318 observational hours took much, much longer, but the researchers were able to establish reliably the number and quality of words and phrases the children and parents spoke over that span.

General findings resembled those of other studies that showed that the vocabularies of the children in poverty began and stayed relatively small and of poor quality. This, of course, would diminish their IQ scores. Further analyses, though, also revealed that the children's parents spoke far less to them, and what they said was primitive and discouraging, when contrasted with the experiences of their more affluent peers.

At first blush, those findings might seem to support a strictly hereditary argument: Intellectually limited parents pass on their inferior genes to their offspring. But suppose that parents could be taught to say more to their children and be more reinforcing when their youngsters imitated and embellished upon their examples? As the book reports, that particular experiment was carried out in Milwaukee. Infants of 6 to 8 weeks of age

with mothers scoring 75 or below on IQ tests were enrolled in an out-of-home full-day child-care program. At home and on the job, the mothers were trained in effective parenting and other skills. At age 8, their children "were equal to the national average in accomplishment" (p. 206).

According to Donald Campbell, "Current policy decisions on compensatory education, Head Start, and the like should take a moratorium until all policymakers have read this important book" (back cover). The merit of this view is incontestable. Fortunately, Hart and Risley's simple, clear writing style provides a succinct product that should appeal not only to behavior analysts but also to makers of policy and the general public. Read it yourself. Send one to your congressional representatives.

REFERENCE

- Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Received April 7, 1997*
Final editorial decision April 11, 1997
Action Editor, David P. Wacker