

RESEARCHWORKS

Discoveries in action at the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development

Before ABC

LEARNING TO READ BEGINS WITH THE EARLIEST LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Children build their vocabularies when adults speak to them.



The relationship between sounds and meaning is key.

Tools to assess a program are critical to a range of caregivers.

BY ANITRA BUDD

Before they begin formal education, children gradually learn how to use language to interpret the world around them. Professor **Scott McConnell** (educational psychology), an affiliate of the Center for Early Education Development (CEED) and Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs, studies language and literacy development in the formative years between birth and age five. Through his ongoing research on skills assessments and interventions, McConnell hopes to get all children ready to read by the time they enter kindergarten.

Children build their vocabularies through a variety of daily activities, particularly when adults talk to them or when they play games that teach them the names and descriptions of objects. “One important study [Hart and Risley, 1995] found that children whose parents talk to them more tend to have larger vocabularies by age three and that low-income parents were less likely to talk to their infants and toddlers than middle- and upper-income parents,” says McConnell.

Over time, young children develop a “store of knowledge” about colors, shapes, and other information about the world around them, all of which helps them understand basic concepts. These mental resources support children as they process new information and help them predict multiple possible meanings when they encounter new words in texts.

Another important component of early reading development is phonological awareness—learning that certain sounds go together to make specific meanings and certain combinations of letters can form these sounds. Children build these skills by reciting nursery rhymes, singing simple songs, or repeating words and phrases with similar sounds.

As children move into kindergarten, they continue relating the words and sounds they already know to their printed counterparts. “Reading development is a continuum,” says McConnell. “It starts with children listening to and decoding very simple stories. When kids are listening to those stories, that’s the beginning of literacy.”

What the research shows

Despite its importance, the field of early childhood education has been an informal network of providers. Rather than trying to organize this far-flung group, McConnell says, policy and outreach should focus on providing access to proven educational approaches. “What we want to do for the programs is provide more supports and resources for early childhood care and education, increasing quality, increasing curriculum intensity, so that there are more tools in their toolkit,” he says. “That means professional development, having a way for providers and teachers to assess skills, and really importantly, having an accountability system that helps teachers and parents know when programs are working.”

To that end, McConnell and several colleagues created [Individual Growth and Development Indicators](#), which measure expressive language, literacy, and other development benchmarks in young children. To help early childhood educators use these indicators in their own organizations, the researchers launched the [Get It, Got It, Go! \(GGG\) Web site](#), which offers a comprehensive system for measuring the skills and needs of children from birth to age eight. An online training program will be launched in June.

In partnership with colleagues at Michigan State University and the University of Kentucky, McConnell and fellow CEED researchers have analyzed data from the site, which is being used to track more than 100,000 children, to help establish national developmental norms for multiple populations. These include children with special needs, children in poverty, and children who are English language learners. Such individualized assessments can help family members and educators track a child's progress over time and identify approaches to help improve developmental outcomes.

McConnell sees the role of researchers in this field as one of empowerment and communication. "There's not an early childhood educator who doesn't want to do a good job. There are curricula out there that people don't know about, so it's incumbent on us to help them know about them. The notion of everyone doing their part is key."

What others are saying

"Dr. McConnell's research gives legislators the information to understand how to strategically invest in home visiting and preschool education," says **Rep. Nora Slawik** (Maplewood), who chairs the Minnesota House Early Childhood Finance and Policy Division Committee. "His research documents the need for at-risk children to have targeted interventions to accommodate their specific language and literacy learning needs in order to close the achievement gap in school readiness."

Carol Miller, a senior manager with the Hennepin County Research, Planning and Development Department, says, "In Minnesota we know that as many as half of our kindergartners are not ready for success in school and that early literacy skills are something they often lack. Dr. McConnell's work has helped many understand how those skills are built, what we can do to support the development of such skills, and, of particular importance, how to measure children's progress."

Online resources

Center for Response to Intervention in Early Childhood, www.crtiec.org

Estrem, T. & McConnell, S. (2004) "Monitoring Emergent Literacy Development of Immigrant Preschoolers Who Speak Somali, Spanish, or Hmong," ggg.umn.edu/pdf/ecrirpt9.pdf

McConnell, S., McEvoy, M., & Carta, J., et al. (1998) "Selection of General Growth Outcomes for Children Between Birth and Age Eight," ggg.umn.edu/pdf/ecrirpt2.pdf

McConnell, S., McEvoy, M., & Carta, J., et al. (1998) "Theoretical Foundations of the Early Childhood Research Institute on Measuring Growth and Development: An Early Childhood Problem-Solving Model" ggg.umn.edu/pdf/ecrirpt6.pdf

Missall, K. & McConnell, S. (2004) "Psychometric Characteristics of Individual Growth and Development Indicators: Picture Naming, Rhyming, and Alliteration," ggg.umn.edu/pdf/ecrirpt8.pdf

National Center for Family Literacy, <http://www.familit.org>

Providing professional supports for providers is key.

Development indicators help track children on an individual basis.

Data has led to national development norms for multiple populations.

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