Maternal Speech, Rather Than Socieoeconomic Status, Affects Early Vocabulary Development

Family socioeconomic status is a powerful predictor of many aspects of child development, although how parents' education and occupation affect children is not always clear. It has been argued that children from advantaged backgrounds develop more optimally because they share the genes of their high-achieving parents, not because of anything parents do. A great deal of evidence argues, to the contrary, that children's development is shaped by their experiences and that children from more advantaged backgrounds are the beneficiaries of the more supportive environments that their parents provide. Direct tests of these two possibilities are needed.

In this study, the language environments and language development of two groups of 2-year-old children were compared. One group of 33 children came from homes in which both parents were college educated; the other group of 30 children came from homes in which both parents were high school educated. Properties of the mothers' speech to their children were measured, as well as the subsequent rate of the children's vocabulary development. College-educated mothers used more complex language and a richer vocabulary in talking to their children than the high school educated mothers, and their children increased the size of the vocabularies at a faster rate. Regardless of SES, more complex and richer maternal speech was associated with more rapid vocabulary development in children. The central finding of this research was that the effects of the complexity and richness of their mothers' speech fully explained the SES-related difference in the children's vocabulary use.

The clear implication of this finding is that children from different socioeconomic strata differ in the language skills they demonstrate because they have had different language experiences, not because they have different genes. This conclusion does not contradict the claim that the course of human development is coded for in the human genome. Rather, this conclusion supplements the genetic explanation by identifying environmental contributions as well. In terms of understanding how the environment exerts its effects, the findings support a model of environmental influence in which different aspects of the environment influence different aspects of development. That is, these children's experiences differed in many ways, but it was only their language experience that affected their language development. This specificity of environmental influence implies that it should be possible to optimize the language development of all children with specific interventions that enrich their language experiences.

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