



Society for Research in Child Development

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PRESS RELEASE

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Immigrant Children's Verbal Development Varies Based on Race/Ethnicity

A study published in the September/October issue of the journal *Child Development* found different developmental patterns of achievement between immigrant children of different races/ethnicities. Overall, the study found that immigrant groups as a whole make large gains over time, and that some groups are more likely to have problems than others.

The study, from researchers at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Columbia University in New York City, also finds that across racial/ethnic groups, immigrant children (except for black immigrant children) had significantly lower verbal scores on average than their respective non-immigrant peers, and that these lower scores were directly related to family income and the mother's level of education and age. Yet most immigrant children made more individual progress over time in their verbal ability than non-immigrant children.

The study's goal was to examine differences in elementary school-age children's verbal abilities by immigrant and racial/ethnic status. The researchers focused on English verbal ability because it is central for children's success in school and beyond. A secondary goal was to see if family and neighborhood socioeconomic resources explained differences in immigrant children's verbal ability and whether patterns differed for children of different racial/ethnic groups.

The researchers evaluated 2,136 immigrant and non-immigrant children from four racial/ethnic groups: white, black, Mexican and Puerto Rican. The children lived in 80 Chicago neighborhoods that differed by socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic composition and were followed as part of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods.

Researchers evaluated children's verbal ability three times over a six-year period. They then averaged children's scores over time and compared verbal differences ("inter-individual verbal growth"). They also examined how individual children's scores changed over time ("intra-individual verbal growth").

For inter-individual verbal differences, findings revealed that:

- White children, both immigrant and non-immigrant, generally had high average verbal scores, but non-immigrants' scores were higher than immigrants'.
- Black immigrant children had higher average verbal scores than their non-immigrant peers.

- Mexican and Puerto Rican children, immigrant and non-immigrant, had low average verbal scores, but non-immigrants' scores were somewhat higher than immigrants'.

The gap between immigrant and non-immigrant children's average verbal scores was explained by the family's income and the mother's education and age.

When it comes to children's patterns of intra-individual verbal growth, all immigrant children showed more verbal growth into adolescence than their non-immigrant peers, except for Mexican immigrant children, who made less progress than their non-immigrant peers.

However, despite most immigrant children's higher levels of individual growth by adolescence, non-immigrant children entered kindergarten with sizeable advantages over their immigrant peers. The immigrant disadvantage at school entry was especially large for racial/ethnic minorities.

Family and neighborhood resources do not explain the immigrant group differences in verbal growth, said lead researcher Tama Leventhal, PhD, associate research scientist of the Institute for Policy Studies and assistant professor at the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University. "It is possible that immigrant children have greater motivation to succeed in school than non-immigrant children," she said. Additionally, she noted, as immigrant children become more proficient in English during the early school years, they may benefit more from the schooling experience than non-immigrant children by middle childhood and early adolescence.

"The findings have important implications for research, theory and practice regarding immigrant children and children of color," said Dr. Leventhal. For one, the findings suggest that studies of immigrant group differences in achievement that neglect variation across racial/ethnic groups may lead to biased results. Additionally, the results show the importance of studying inter-individual as well as intra-individual processes of change, particularly in the case of immigrant children; these two types of change were distinct and worked in opposite directions.

"Finally," she noted, "the policy implications point towards Mexican immigrants and African-American non-immigrants as groups that are struggling and merit attention."

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Vol. 77, Issue 5, *Immigrant Differences in School-Age Children's Verbal Trajectories: A Look at Four Racial/Ethnic Groups* by Leventhal T (Johns Hopkins University), Xue Y (University of Michigan) and Brooks-Gunn J (Columbia University). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.