



The influence of television coviewing on parent language directed at toddlers



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ABSTRACT

This study examined parent language directed at 1-year-olds during coviewing of infant-directed television programs, compared to a free play situation with the television off. Parent–child dyads participated in a laboratory no TV, free play session and, during a subsequent visit, viewed an infant-directed video program (*Baby Einstein* or *Sesame Beginnings*). Quantity of parent language and number of different words used decreased during coviewing as compared to the no-TV free-play session. Nevertheless, during coviewing, although they spoke less, parents used richer vocabulary per utterance as they labeled objects and actions depicted on the program. This increased vocabulary richness continued during a 15-minute post-viewing free play session. Media-use diaries indicated that television coviewing in the home predicted less parent use of language in the laboratory free-play situation without television. Taken together the results indicate that coviewing baby videos decreases the quantity of parent language, but also can increase parent language quality.

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Research has conclusively shown the importance of parent language in providing input data for children's language development. In most contemporary homes, television is a major part of children's environment. Television provides language input itself, but also potentially influences parent language directed at the child. This study compares parent language directed at toddlers during shared television viewing as compared to the television being off. To the degree to which shared television viewing influences parent language directed at children, it has the potential to influence language development.

Prior to speaking their first words, infants use the sound and intonation of their parents' voices to learn about language. Infants as young as 4 days old show a preference for their mother's voice over that of a stranger (DeCasper & Fifer, 1980; DeCasper & Prescott, 1984). Between the ages of 6 to 11 months, sensitivity to non-native speech sounds dwindles as children continue to learn about the sounds of their native language through a process of perceptual narrowing that comes primarily from exposure to people in their environment (Kuhl, Williams, Lacerda, Stevens, & Lindblom, 1992; Pons, Lewkowicz, Soto-Faraco, & Sebastián-Gallés, 2009). Experimental research indicates that this process occurs through real-world social reciprocity and is not produced by exposure to audio or audiovisual media (Kuhl, Tsao, & Liu, 2003).

Children learn words from their parents when spoken to or while engaged in conversation. It has been estimated that 86% to 98% of

words recorded in children's vocabularies are also present in their parents' vocabularies (Hart & Risley, 1995). Bornstein, Maital, Tal, and Baras (1995) showed that maternal mean-length of utterance (MLU) was positively related to 18-month-olds' vocabulary sizes and overall comprehension.

Research supports an inductive model of language learning for the first few years of life through engagement with others. One of the common phenomena linked to successful language development is the propensity of parent–child dyads to engage in joint attention, or shared focus, which can include television. By one year old, children are able to participate in mutual engagement with an adult (Ahktar, Dunham, & Dunham, 1991) and by 17 months, children are more likely to learn words that label their focus of attention as compared to other non-attended points of focus. In the context of shared television viewing, by 12 months old children follow parents' gaze to the television screen during infant-directed programming, although not during adult-directed programming (Demers, Hanson, Kirkorian, Pempek, & Anderson, 2013).

Comparisons of children in disadvantaged environments to those raised in average or advantageous environments allow estimates of the importance of child-directed speech. Hart and Risley (1995) observed low, middle, and upper socioeconomic status (SES) families. Children from low SES families were exposed to 616 words per hour on average, as compared to the middle SES children who received 1251 words per hour and upper SES children who received 2153 words per hour. In a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies examining the impact of SES on children's development, Gottfried (1984) reported consistent positive associations between SES and children's language. In later work, Hoff-Ginsberg (1998) showed SES to be related to many

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measures of children's language development including richer vocabulary, more question asking, and fewer explicit directives.

Hoff and Naigles (2002) noted that the importance of parent language depends in part on the child's developmental age. After recording parent–child dyads at two time points in a 10-week span during routine activities, these researchers showed that the relation between social-pragmatic behaviors, like mutual engagement, and the quantity of language directed at children seem to be differentially important at different times during development. Their results suggest that from 12 to 24 months old, the social aspects of language development are most important for word learning; after 2 years old, a shift occurs to focus more on the amount of total language exposure and the child's ability to sift through its informative features.

The effects of television on parent language

Television is a ubiquitous facet of family life that provides a seemingly endless stream of verbal content. Estimates suggest that 47% of infants under the age of 2 actively watch about 2 h of TV every day, and 39% of young children live in homes where the television is on "most of the time" whether a family member is watching or not (Common Sense Media, 2011). Although many infants and toddlers are exposed to television on a daily basis, very little is known about the consequences of this exposure. One possibility is that television influences parent language directed at children. In the present study, the focus is on shared viewing by parents and toddlers of infant-directed television programs. Such shared viewing occurs during about half the time that very young children watch TV (Zimmerman, Christakis, & Meltzoff, 2007). The central question addressed by the present study is how parent language directed to the child is influenced by the shared television-viewing situation.

The presence of adult-directed as well as child-directed television programs has been shown to reduce the quality of parent–child interactions such as scaffolding during shared object play (Courage, Murphy, Goulding, & Setliff, 2010; Kirkorian, Pempek, Murphy, Schmidt, & Anderson, 2009; Nathanson & Rasmussen, 2011; Pempek, Demers, Hanson, Kirkorian, & Anderson, 2011). The specific effects of shared viewing of child-directed videos on quantity and quality of parent language directed at the young child have not yet been explored. It should be noted, however, that Christakis et al. (2009) equipped infants and preschoolers with audio recorders worn at home. They showed that parents spoke less when a television could be heard on the recording, but no distinction was made on the basis of whether the TV content was child-directed or adult-directed or whether it was a parent–child coviewing situation. In a laboratory experiment, the presence of adult-directed, background television substantially reduced parent language directed at 1-, 2-, and 3-year-olds (Pempek, Kirkorian, & Anderson, 2014). In addition, in 14 parent–child dyads, Tanimura, Okuma, and Kyoshima (2007) demonstrated that lower verbal input was offered to children by parents in the presence of television.

In an 18-month longitudinal study of children under four years old, a negative influence of television on language development was shown to be fully mediated by the amount of language addressed to the child (Zimmerman et al., 2009). As with other studies demonstrating decreased language addressed to the child, this study did not determine whether the effects might be different during shared viewing of child-directed content.

Several recent studies have examined the associations between parent coviewing and child language development. Mendelsohn et al. (2010) indicated a moderating effect of parent verbalizations during coviewing at 6 months old on later language development at 14 months. Their results showed that infants who had vocal mothers during coviewing did not show adverse effects of early media exposure. Furthermore, the authors revealed that parent vocalizations during educational media viewing at 6 months positively predicted language at 14 months after controlling for the quality of the home environment.

In a separate study Fender, Richert, Robb, and Wartella (2010) showed that parents who differ in teaching style offer unique patterns of language to their infants while watching educational DVDs; their results suggest that parents who were highly focused on teaching their infants were most likely to take advantage of labeling opportunities, offer the most words related to the DVD-watching experience, and keep their language focused on DVD content. Along similar lines, two separate studies have shown that the quality of parent–child interactions as well as the amount of caregiver language input influenced infants' looking time to the television (Barr, Zack, Muentener, & Garcia, 2008; Fidler, Zack, & Barr, 2010). While these studies provide insight into the relation between coviewing and children's language outcomes, they do not compare parent language patterns in the presence and absence of television.

In sum, many infants and toddlers are exposed to television on a daily basis. When the television is on, generally, parents speak less to their children. However, it is possible that some parents may intentionally make coviewing educational media a beneficial experience for the child. The present study examines parent language during shared viewing in greater detail than previous research. In particular, parent–infant dyads were observed in a free play situation without television and while coviewing an infant-directed video. Although prior research has shown that the quality of engaged parenting decreases in the presence of infant-directed videos (Pempek et al., 2011), there have been no parallel analyses of both quantity and quality of parent language directed at the child. The research goals are: 1) in quantitative terms, to determine the changes in quantity and quality of parent language during shared child-directed video viewing. This has not yet been established in prior research although, as reviewed above, indications are that parent language likely decreases in quantity. As a shared focus of attention, however, it is possible that the video may produce an increase in the quality of parent language as parents label and elaborate on depicted objects and actions. 2) To determine whether familiarity with the video series influences parent language directed to the child. 3) To determine the relation between shared television use at home, as reported in parent-kept viewing diaries, with parents' language directed at their children observed in the laboratory with and without television.

The present study

This study is a secondary analysis of the parent–child dyads observed by Pempek et al. (2011). Dyads were randomly assigned to watch one of two baby video series (*Sesame Beginnings* or *Baby Einstein*) at home for two weeks prior to their lab visits or were assigned to a control condition with no assigned video exposure. Dyads came in for two visits: one 30-minute free play session with the television off to serve as a baseline comparison, and another session that consisted of viewing either an episode from their assigned video series or a *Sesame Beginnings* video for the control group. This viewing session was immediately followed by a 15-minute free play period with the television off. Two age groups were included in this study based on prior research concerning differences in attention to and comprehension of video: 12- to 15-month-olds and 18- to 21-month-olds (Pempek et al., 2010). Based on prior analyses of these dyads showing that engaged parenting decreased during shared television viewing (Pempek et al., 2011), it was expected that quantity of parent language would decline in the presence of television. It is possible, however, that the quality of parent language could actually increase as the parent discusses and labels events and objects. Using measures developed by Hoff and Naigles (2002), dependent measures of parent language quantity included utterances per minute and words per minute. Measures of quality included number of new words per minute and mean length of utterance (MLU). These measures were shown by Hoff and Naigles (2002) to predict subsequent language development. Quality of parent language has not been examined in prior research concerning infants and coviewing of child-directed media.

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