

425

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If there is one thing you can do to change the destiny of a child and the community for the better, it's this: prepare that child for kindergarten. The reason is in the numbers.

United Way of King County says 50 percent of children entering kindergarten in Washington state are being identified as not ready to succeed and are starting school as much as two years behind in language and learning skills. These are primarily kids from low-income households. Of the children living in poverty, 54 percent graduate high school. Of children living in middle- and upper-income households, the graduation rate is 84 percent. These numbers matter because these children are our future business leaders, doctors, teachers and parents.

"It's naïve to think that the way today's children are educated will not affect you. Today's children are our future," said Karen Howell-Clark, director of early learning at United Way of King County. "Working for us, taking care of us, everyone is made up of the community. We are going to go farther if each one of us has the ability to go farther. If some kids are behind, it holds everybody back. Resources and time are going to bringing those children up to speed."

Vocabulary is a significant measurement in understanding this gap. United Way of King County says children in higher-income families have more words per hour spoken to them, resulting in larger cumulative vocabularies — meaning a greater number of words children understand and use. In professional families, children heard an average of 2,153 words per hour, while children in working-class families heard an average of 1,251 words per hour and children in families in poverty heard an average of 616 words per hour. By age 3, the observed cumulative vocabulary for children in the professional families was about 1,100 words. For children from working-class families, the observed cumulative vocabulary was about 750 words, and for children from families in poverty it was just above 500 words.

"When we talk about the achievement gap between kids, whether it's between kids of color or kids of lower income or



English as a Second Language kids, we know it's something that doesn't just occur in school. Research shows that it's a preparation gap," said Howell-Clark. "Spelling, numbers, emotional skills, managing yourself, following directions, working in a group, being away from parents or whoever is taking care of you, physical skills — we know when kids come in (to kindergarten) behind in those areas it becomes challenging for them to catch up. Those deficits can magnify" as they get older.

United Way of King County has a way to close the gap: the Parent Child Home Program. At the family's invitation, specially trained home visitors come twice weekly over a two-year period with gifts of books and educational toys. Using these tools, the home visitor works with the parent in exercises to increase the child's development so that parents become adept teachers. The program serves 2- to 4-year-olds and their parents in isolated, diverse, low-income families in King County, focusing on parents because they "can have a long-term influence on the child's long-term trajectory of their education," said Howell-Clark.

Among children in low-income households who participate in Parent Child Home Program for two years (ages 2-4), the high school graduation rate is 84 percent — that's equal to the rate for children in middle- and high-income households. Participants also do better

on standardized tests than their peers.

Jonathan Munoz, 2, is one of the many children who have flourished under the program. His father, Nicolas Munoz, works as a car detailer and painter, and his mother, Mirna Gonzalez, is a housewife. At 1, before joining the program, Jonathon fought with his siblings and cousins and refused to share toys. He was quiet, and his speech was >>

READ ME A STORY "My role is to model these things to the parents. Sometimes these parents just read the books and they are done. My job is to read the book, find questions, make the book interesting to the kids and interesting to the parents. We give the parents tools and ideas to use with the books and toys to make it more educational.

"For instance, when I have a book, I read it slowly. I point to the words I am reading, I give them other ideas. If we are reading about the animals, we talk about all kinds of animals, not just the animals in the book. If they have a dog or cat, we make it a little more interactive. So they can read it and they can see it and find it in their environment. We try to use our imaginations and go with it."

- Vianny Daniels of Kirkland, home visitor, Parent Child Home Program

limited. He wasn't attentive to activities, and yet he was desperate to express something.

After eight months in the program, "Jonathan is more open to sharing with his siblings and interested in the books or toys during the activity," said Jonathan's home visitor, Carmen Casillas. "Jonathan now has knowledge of some colors, numbers and shapes. He is able to very comfortably work with books and objects. He also asks questions, and when I am talking, he repeats word by word what I am saying. Usually I do read or talk slowly to have him be able to catch all the words when he repeats."

The parents love the program because Jonathan is progressing so well: "My husband is very glad, because he has been noticing the progress of Jonathan since he is taking the sessions," said Mirna Gonzalez. "Carmen is an excellent teacher — patient ... she explains everything to my son with simple words that he can understand. Jonathan loves her a lot, and she has done a really perfect job."

This year, the Parent Child Home Program served about 750 families in King County. The program has been based in the New York area since the 1960s and has steadily spread across the country. In 2004, a business group brought the program to Seattle, looking for an intervention to prepare

the future workforce.

United Way of King County is spearheading a \$25 million fundraising campaign for the program expected to wrap up in 2014.

"In King County, we work with a greater diverse group of families than other parts of the country," said Howell-Clark. "The home visitor is from the language and culture of the family. They can build the relationships because they share common culture and language."

Home visitor Vianny Daniels, a native-born Spanish speaker who works with Spanish-speaking families, said it's about respect: "It is important to speak the language and understand the culture, because people are very proud of where they come from, and I respect that. To honor their cultures is a positive thing, and it gets me closer to the families."

One of the biggest obstacles is attitudes. Many people just don't know that simply talking to your baby — exposing it to as much language as you possibly can — will give it a head start. Some parents, more often immigrant or refugee families, come from cultures where it isn't "normal" to get down on the floor and play with, talk to and read to very young children.

"There are attitudes that kids will learn when they get to school. There is a

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE? "From the broadest level, we are all responsible in that we should be voting for important policies that give kids a great start. Then, school districts and schools have a responsibility to reach out to their younger children. Of course families are responsible for preparing their children for kindergarten. And by that I don't mean drilling them with flash cards. I mean providing children a loving, caring early childhood so that they can develop independence and confidence as well as some of those hard skills for school."

— Karen Howell-Clark, director of early learning at United Way of King County.

gap in understanding the importance of these learning years: the brain developing, the importance of vocabulary developing, the positive social interactions that happen," said Howell-Clark. "Your 2-year-old is learning all sorts of things, and they will learn more if you are talking to them and explaining what you're working on and playing blocks with them. The return on investment is so enormous in the early years." 📖

READY FOR KINDERGARTEN? Although there is no perfect formula for determining when a child is ready for kindergarten, research has identified six areas often associated with early school success. Contact your school district for details.

LANGUAGE & LITERACY

- Uses oral language to express emotions and thoughts
- Listens to stories without interrupting
- Talks in complete sentences of five to six words
- Is able to look at pictures and tell a story about a picture
- Knows some basic sight words
- Identifies sounds in words, rhyming words, lower- and upper-case letters
- Understands print concepts such as front of the book, left to right, top to bottom

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

- Recognizes, names and writes some numerals
- Understands one-to-one correspondence
- Counts to at least 30

PHYSICAL

- Runs smoothly, hops, maintains balance
- Is able to work with puzzles and scissors, color, trace shapes, etc.
- Writes name

SCHOOL-RELATED

- Is enthusiastic and curious about new activities
- Pays attention for short periods (10 minutes to adult-directed tasks)
- Is able to work independently with supervision
- Is able to listen and pay attention to what someone else is saying

SELF-HELP

- Manages bathroom needs
- Buttons shirts, pants and coats and zips up zippers

SOCIAL

- Is able to play, share and cooperate with other children
- Assumes responsibility for personal belongings
- Is able to follow simple rules and structured daily routines
- Separates from parents without being upset for a long period
- Begins to control oneself; understands actions have both causes and effects

MORE PLEASE

Here are a few early learning tools that might be useful:

- **Born Learning** bornlearning.org
- **Zero to Three** zerotothree.org

- **"Messages from Home: The Parent-Child Home Program for Overcoming Educational Disadvantage,"** a book by the Parent Child Home Program founder, Phyllis Levenstein. temple.edu/tempress/titles/1924_reg.html