

Talk to Me, Baby!: How You Can Support Young Children's Language Development
by Betty Bardige Ed.D. (Author)
Edition: 2nd

Chapter Excerpt:

WE ARE FAMILY

In a Smart from the Start class for expectant parents, the mothers are quietly reading to board books to their unborn children. “They’ve learned that their babies hear their voices in the third trimester and are already picking up language,” the instructor explains to a visitor. “The reading helps them feel more connected – even before the baby is born. For some of the moms, it’s an important confidence builder. They aren’t used to reading aloud – or reading period – so this gives them a chance to practice and get more comfortable. But mostly we do this because we want our parents to realize how much they have to give to their children. We can give them “stuff” like books and toys and layette items – and we do – everyone gets a baby shower for completing this class. But they can give what their children really need – love, words, play, and teaching. I think – by the end of the class – they get that.”

In Boston’s poorest neighborhoods and a similar area in Washington, DC, Smart from the Start is connecting families with young children to services ranging from child care and early intervention to GED and financial literacy classes to health and mental health services. It offers parenting workshops and leadership training, play groups and family outings, community gardens, cooking and exercise classes, and sometimes even housing.

When existing services are missing or inaccessible or a poor fit with a family’s needs, Smart from the Start finds ways to fill the gaps. But what it really does is to create community and build esprit de corps. It embraces families – and spurs them to embrace each other. They support each other’s achievement of personal goals, and celebrate milestones and successes. They tout the power of playing and talking, reading, and positive discipline as they see their children’s responses and encourage each other’s efforts. They come to believe that their children are “smart from the start” and that they can assure that they enter school ready to soar.

Like the Harlem Children’s Zone, Smart from the Start aims to catch every neighborhood child at birth if not before and to extend a hand to every family. It addresses the entire spectrum of family needs – health, economic, educational, recreational, and social – and takes a long view of child development. It helps families access services – and helps service providers reach out to Smart families and modify offerings as necessary to meet the families’ needs. Smart creates services itself if appropriate offerings aren’t available.

Most important, as its name implies, Smart from the Start assumes that every child in its orbit is “smart from the start,” born “at promise,” with the potential to succeed

in college and beyond, and that every parent and every family has much to give to their children and to their community.

The challenge of rebuilding a “village” to prime all of its children to soar is daunting across the economic spectrum, but particularly so in communities facing poverty, segregation, high or rising crime and public disorder, an influx of refugees from war or other traumas, or a rapid change in the demographics and needs of their young families. Of course, neighborhoods that are poor in economic resources can be rich in supports for robust language development. They can be places where tight-knit linguistic communities become supportive extended families, or where neighbors speaking multiple languages learn English together while their children learn each other’s languages, as well.

Too often, though, children growing up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty face stresses that can compromise their development: poor nutrition and health care, neighborhood and sometimes family violence, environmental toxins, a dearth of basic resources such as safe places for young children to play or sources of high-quality children’s books, and a climate of fear that keeps families isolated and children indoors. Too often, as well, the children enter schools where their language or dialect is not understood or valued, where the strengths they bring are unnoticed, where their teachers struggle to keep up with the myriad demands of too many children with too many deep and divergent needs, or where the curriculum has been impoverished in an ironic effort to leave no child behind.

Like other place-based models, such as AVANCE, the Harlem Children’s Zone, and Miami’s Liberty City Impact Zone, Smart from the Start pulls neighbors into a supportive family and builds local leadership over time. It builds relationships with institutions and initiatives in the larger community that can stay with families as their circles broaden and their children grow. With a whole community invested in their well-being, its children tend to enter school on track for success and to continue doing well.