**Parent Teacher Interviews: Understanding the “Goodnight Moon” Advantage**

Meeting parents for the first time can be a challenging experience. In a short 10 to 15 minutes, you try to learn as much as you can about your students and their home life while simultaneously trying to convey your expectations for the class and the year ahead. It’s easy to forget to address the role that parents play in their child’s education but they must be made aware that their support is essential to their child’s future.

Success in school starts in the home. Most teachers understand this implicitly, but parents frequently underestimate just how much they influence their children’s cognitive development. Research shows that the biggest contribution parents can make to their children’s academic success is to help them develop their vocabulary through regular conversation and reading.

Educational researchers in the United States have found that high-income parents spend nearly half an hour more per day engaged in face-to-face, ”*Goodnight Moon”* time with their children than low-income parents do. This produces what researchers refer to as the “Word Gap”.Hillary Clinton addressed the problem of the word gap in 2013, explaining that, “studies have found that by age four, children in middle and upper-class families hear 15 million more words than children in working-class families, and 30 million more words than children in families on welfare. This disparity in hearing words from parents and caregivers translates directly into a disparity in learning words. And that puts our children born with the fewest advantages even further behind.”

Vocabulary is the key that opens all doors. In 1922, Johnson O'Connor was asked by the management at General Electric to develop a means of ascertaining which employees would be best suited for retraining. Essentially, he was asked to determine who were the most flexible learners. He found that the single best predictor of occupational success in every area was a person's vocabulary level. This should hardly be surprising. Words represent concepts and ideas. New ideas broaden your mind. As Oliver Wendell Holmes put it: “One's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.” But the most exciting conclusion reached by Johnson O’Connor was that the ability to acquire vocabulary, unlike aptitudes which are largely innate, was mostly learned. This means that improvement in vocabulary (and the resulting opportunities) could be available to everyone. Unfortunately, there is a large gulf between what is available and what is accessible, especially to very young children of differing socio-economic groups.

Educators can play a role in bridging this gap and broadening students’ vocabulary, but studies have shown that even in the most language-enriched classrooms, students learn less than 3000 new words per year. In short, we need parents’ help. But what can parents do? Psychology Today suggests three simple strategies parents can use to build their children’s oral language:

1. Tune in by paying attention to what your child is interested in.
2. Talk more with your child using lots of descriptive words to build their vocabulary.
3. Take turns with your child when engaging them in conversation.

To improve reading comprehension, the same strategies that we use in the classroom also work in the home. Parents should continue to read to their children even into the intermediate grades and explain the meanings of clusters of words and individual words as they come up. They should encourage wide reading by taking their children to the library regularly or by buying books, magazines or comics as gifts. They should read regularly in front of their children and model a deep interest in language and words. It should also be noted that parents and students don’t necessarily need to read or speak in English if it’s not their first language. A broader understanding of their first language will eventually translate to a broader understanding of English.

Don’t let a parent escape from your classroom without first sharing with them the important role they play in their child’s success. It is only when the lessons of school and home mutually reinforce one another that parents and teachers will achieve our ultimate goal of having children reach their full potential.

Sources Referenced and Cited:

Tackling the "Vocabulary Gap" Between Rich and Poor Children, Christopher Bergland, Psychology Today Feb 16, 2014

Poor Kids and the 'Word Gap’, Jessica Lahey, The Atlantic, October 16, 2014

# Students Must Learn More Words, Say Studies, Education Week, By Sarah D. Sparks February 5, 2013