How children learn to converse: Do differences in language ability and maternal education affect development?

One of the most important human skills is the ability to engage in conversation. Although conversation comes easily to most adults, it is a skill that children develop over time. Currently a clear description of the factors that may influence the course and rate of development is lacking. The present longitudinal study used 51 mother-child dyads to analyze how two such factors, child language abilities and demographics, influence conversational development. Studies with disordered populations indicate that atypically developing children show different patterns of conversational interaction than typically developing children. For example, Leonard (1986) reported that children with specific language impairment initiated fewer topics, only replied 25% of the time to an adult, and only answered 33% of adults’ questions. We extended this work by examining whether individual differences in language abilities (specifically syntax and vocabulary) within the normal range also affect conversational development. In addition, we looked at the impact of varying levels of maternal education on conversational development. Maternal education is highly correlated with socioeconomic status (SES), and both SES and maternal education affect some aspects of language development. For example, their mothers’ education level is correlated with children’s rate of vocabulary development (Hoff, 2003). The results of this study further our understanding of the factors underlying this basic human skill and may help pinpoint appropriate interventions for children with delays.