We’re Closing the Word Gap

Grand Prize Winner of the 2013 Mayors Challenge

The City of Providence developed Providence Talks for the Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Mayors Challenge, a competition that encourages cities to generate innovative ideas that solve major challenges and improve city life. Providence was the grand-prize winner of the challenge in 2013 and received $5 million to implement the program.

Numerous studies have shown that insufficient exposure to vocabulary and language can have a profoundly negative impact on the brain development of children and their learning. This is especially true for children from low-income households. The good news is that these early limitations can be reversed.

By capitalizing on the power and knowledge of families and educators, and using innovative language processing technology, Providence Talks is dramatically decreasing the word and achievement gap of low-income children living in Providence, and, in doing that, is changing the trajectory of thousands of young lives.

How It Works

Providence Talks helps parents and educators use more words – and engage in more conversations – with children during the critical brain development years from birth to age 3½. Coaches and facilitators rely on a curated early learning and coaching curriculum and language use recordings when they meet with families and educators. Depending on the model — home visiting or playgroups for families, or a professional development training series for educators – children and adults participate for between six weeks to nine months. All services are free and are offered in both English and Spanish.

The language use recordings are captured using specialized technology that records the number of words a child

Above: Zuleica Martins (right), a Providence Talks home-visiting coach, introduces a new book to Mercedes Concepcion and her 14-month-old son, Jacob. Families receive a high-quality book at every point of contact with their coaches.
hears and the amount of dialogue that occurs through back and forth conversations. The Digital Language Processors (DLPs) function as “word pedometers;” families use them in their homes and educators in their classrooms. To protect privacy, words and conversations are unidentifiable to participants and Providence Talks staff. These recordings let coaches show parents and educators their progress and offer tips for enhancing language.

Providence Talks also recognizes the incredible power of early access to books. All playgroup and home visiting children receive a free book (in Spanish or English) at every point of contact. Since the program’s inception, Providence Talks has distributed more than 10,000 high-quality books, and also helps families acquire library cards. Providence Talks is also offering playgroups in community libraries.

Providence Talks operates from three core constructs: (1) Parents and those who serve in parenting roles are children’s first, longest, and best teachers; (2) With the right tools and supports, parents have the ability to significantly improve their children’s futures; (3) Early childhood educators, through interactions with children and families, further anchor and propel early learning and well-being. Through its tailored curriculum, coaching, and language use feedback reports, Providence Talks is upending the status quo that comes from early disadvantage.

Why It’s Important

Studies indicate that for healthy brain development, a child needs to hear 15,000 words every day, 21,000 for optimal development. Many children from low-income homes hear only a fraction of the necessary words. In fact, over 35 percent of Providence Talks families start with daily word counts under 8,500 words per day.

Research also tells us that by the time children from low-income homes reach the age of four, they hear several million fewer words than children from higher-educated, higher-income families.1 While studies differ on the actual number of words that make up the “word gap,” the necessity of layered language intervention is undisputed.

A continuous history of hearing and using fewer words affects a child’s daily experiences and his or her understanding of the world around him. Less use of language negatively impacts kindergarten readiness, overall learning, and critical third-grade reading scores. To understand and eventually decode words within the reading process, children need to hear words repeatedly in context and have opportunities to use them. The earlier these precursors to formal reading are put in place, the stronger the learning is.

Who We Reach

Fifty-six percent of all Providence Talks families receive Medicaid or Rite-Care benefits. Nineteen percent of families have less than an 11th grade education, and 24 percent of participants are single caregivers. Additionally, 75 percent of all Providence Talks families self-report that they do not participate in any other early childhood program.

Providence Talks also supports families who are bilingual. Seventy-five percent of the families it serves identify as Hispanic/Latino, with 61 percent reporting that Spanish is the primary language spoken at home. Research tells us that educational outcomes for dual language learners are most improved when children acquire strong language skills in their native language.

Since 2014, Providence Talks has served over 3,000 low-income Providence children. It recently expanded its professional development model for early childhood educators statewide, and is currently launching a pilot playgroup in Pawtucket, R.I. Providence has a child poverty rate of 37.5 percent. Pawtucket has a child poverty rate of 30.7 percent. The referral services and literacy training of Providence Talks helps to combat the effects of poverty in these communities.

What We’ve Achieved

Providence Talks accelerates children’s learning and language development in the here and now. It also sets the trajectories for kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading scores. These collective outcomes impact current and later success.

- Since 2014, Providence Talks has served more than 3,000 children.
- Home-visiting coaches have conducted more than 8,000 sessions.
- Children from families who complete at least eight LENA Developmental Snapshots, a child development assessment tool, gain 14 months of child development growth in nine months.
- For our neediest families, adult word count percentiles increase well over 200%.
- 71% of program participants from our neediest families increase the amount of conversational turn-taking.

How Providence Talks Is Making A Difference

As a result of Providence Talks interventions, 71 percent of the program’s neediest home visiting families increase conversational turn-taking. Moreover, home visiting children, who participate in an average of at least eight sessions and are from the neediest families, gain 14 months of child development growth in just nine months. This growth path brings children closer to the achievement of higher performing peers.

Providence Talks’ neediest home visiting families are also significantly increasing their adult word count. When looking at the data through percentiles, which allows comparison of Providence Talks families to their peers in the general adult population, home visiting families are increasing their percentile rank by over 200 percent. The neediest families participating in playgroups are seeing percentile rank increases of more than 260 percent.

On average, both home visiting and playgroup families see a statistically significant score increase on the self-reported Parenting Ladder, an assessment tool that measures parental confidence. Increased parental self-confidence correlates to learning success and the positive social-emotional development of children.
What Is a Digital Language Processor?

A signature hallmark of Providence talks is its use of LENA Research Foundation technology – Digital Language Processors, also known as DLPs. DLPs are specialized “word pedometers” that confidentially record both the number of adult words spoken and the number of conversational turns that occur between an adult and a child. Media noise from televisions and other electronic media is routinely filtered out by the DLP.

After each recording is completed, adult participants return DLPs to a Providence Talks staff person at either a home visiting or playgroup meeting. Data is then uploaded to a computer with software that categorizes information. The recording itself is then permanently erased. At no point can uploaded words or conversations be heard by participants or staff.

Finally, participants receive a series of data reports with easy to understand charts and visuals. The reports show the number of words spoken during a recording day (which can be up to 16 hours), the number of conversational turns, and changes in language use. This DLP feedback and the reflective conversations between Providence Talks facilitators and participants generate meaningful cycles of improvement.

What Is a Conversational Turn?

The back and forth, serve and return interactions between a child and a caregiver are of particular importance for brain development. These interactions occur when a caregiver or other person consciously notices and reacts to the gurgles, babble, facial expressions, gestures, words and actions of a young child with smiles, physical contact, pointing, words, play, and reading. Moreover, conversational turn-taking increases parental engagement and a child’s social and emotional well-being.

Our Partners

Providence Talks is currently delivered in partnership with the City of Providence; Federal Hill House-Providence; Ready to Learn Providence; the RI Department of Health/Parents as Teachers Program; and Providence Community Library (a system of nine neighborhood libraries). Providence Talks is part of University College at Roger Williams University in Providence.

Providence Talks remains a key educational initiative of the current mayor of Providence, Jorge Elorza. The potential and promise of Providence Talks has been heralded on NBC News and a variety of publications, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, The New Yorker, The New York Times Magazine and The Economist. Several municipalities across the country are exploring the adoption of the model in their cities.

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Providence Talks is part of University College at Roger Williams University in Providence, R.I. For more information, please go to www.providencetalks.org, or call Maura Pearce, executive director of Providence Talks, at (401) 254-4837, or Kevin Slattery, assistant director, at (401) 254-4836.