



We welcome you to the inaugural issue of the TMW Center for Early Learning + Public Health Newsletter!



The TMW Center is a merging of disciplines, marrying fields as diverse as economics and medicine, developmental psychology and public policy, and neuroscience and anthropology.

As we navigate our first year, there is much to be excited about. A key distinction of our reimagining of early childhood education revolves around developing a public health approach to early learning. Most of our time so far has been spent building the foundation for a community-wide rollout of TMW's integrated suite of evidenced-based interventions in a single community's existing health, education, and social service systems. After a successful RFP announcement, the team is in the process of reviewing applications and planning the crucial next steps in the effort to select the first TMW Community later this summer. Here, using science to guide us, we will seek to understand how to bring best practices and interventions that work to scale. Our goal is to foster a community in which parents will be empowered to take control of their child's development, from day 1, if not earlier!

In addition to sharing updates from the TMW Center, we'll be looking to the broader early childhood landscape and beyond for inspiration. We start in this issue with a snapshot of some intriguing research out of the McGovern Institute at MIT, which beautifully links the role of conversation with brain activation and child outcomes. This is yet another example of good science pointing to the critical import of parents and the central role they play in their children's early education.

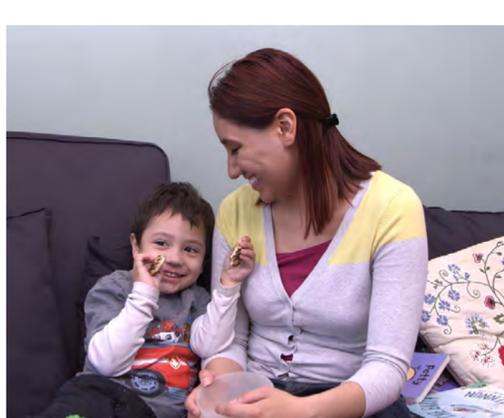
We, along with our team, look forward to collaborating, learning from, and continuing the conversation with you as we all work to support parents and caregivers in the critical role of raising our next generation.

Warmest regards,

Dana & John

Co-Directors, TMW Center for Early Learning + Public Health
Dr. Dana Suskind, Professor of Surgery and Pediatrics and Director of the Pediatric Cochlear Implant Program
John List, Kenneth C. Griffin Distinguished Service Professor in Economics and the Chairman of the Department of Economics

Meet TMW Power Parent Erika

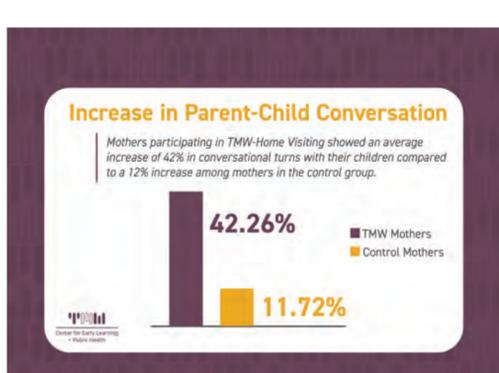


Recent TMW graduate Erika has a lot going on in her life. In addition to being a single mom to 2-year-old Gabriel, she's a full-time student and helps to care for her 94-year-old grandmother. Even with so much on her plate, Erika found time to participate in TMW-Home Visiting and she was kind enough to share some of her experiences with us.

"The most important thing I learned," says Erika, "is that using my words more often can make a huge difference in both my child's life and my own. I never thought that providing my son with the words to describe his feelings as well as the toys he plays with would be so beneficial. Now he can let me know when he is upset and why, which makes it easier for me to know how to handle the situation."

You can watch Erika's Story on our website and on the TMW Center Youtube Channel.

A First Look at TMW-Home Visiting Results



The longitudinal study of TMW-Home Visiting is fully enrolled and we're excited to share some of what we're learning.

Preliminary results show that after receiving the 12-module intervention, low-SES caregivers demonstrated increased knowledge of early childhood cognitive and language development. These caregivers provided more enriched home language environments for their toddlers including more back-and-forth conversational interactions. They also used more praise, explanations, and open-ended questions, as well as less criticism, physical control, and intrusiveness with their children.

"These findings are particularly promising," says Director of TMW Research Christy Leung, "because these are the behaviors that have been shown to promote young children's cognitive development and language learning."

The active intervention stage of our longitudinal study is on track to end in June of this year, with assessments ongoing through December, 2021. We will continue to share updates as they become available.

More Than Idle Talk: The Value of Conversation



New research[1] from the McGovern Institute at MIT has reinforced the notion that quality, back-and-forth language interaction between parent and child is critical to a child's learning and development.

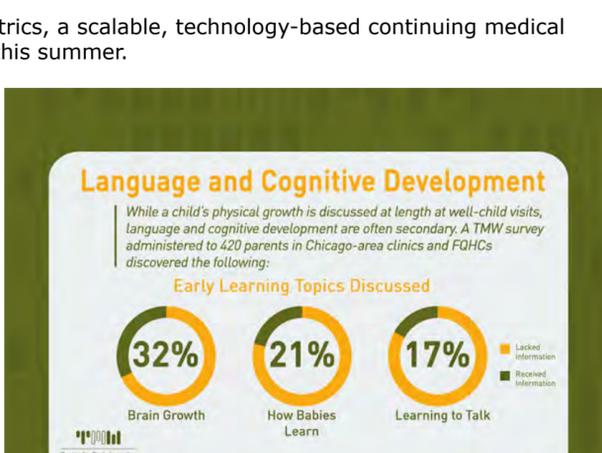
Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), researchers identified differences in the brain's response to language that correlated with the number of conversational turns a child is exposed to. In children who experienced more conversation, Broca's area, a part of the brain involved in speech production and language processing, was much more active while they listened to stories. More conversational turns boosted brain activity irrespective of parent education or family income.

"Often when people think about trying to close the word gap, all they think about is the quantity of child-directed speech, and this can result in a sort of 'word dump' onto the child," says Rachel Romeo, lead researcher on this study. "But our research suggests that children's brains care less about the sheer number of words, and more about meaningful, back-and-forth conversational turn-taking between the child and adults. It seems that during these exchanges is when learning really takes place."

The TMW Center is excited about this research for a variety of reasons. The importance of engaging children in conversation, what we call Take Turns, is a core component of our curricula. The McGovern Institute's work is a critical reminder that it's not the quantity of words that matter, rather the parent-child relationship and the interaction it promotes. These findings also support one of TMW's foundational tenets: within every parent, regardless of education or income, lies the ability to build their child's brain and shape their future.

We plan to include this research in TMW-Pediatrics, a scalable, technology-based continuing medical education (CME) program we'll begin piloting this summer.

Many parents report having unmet needs related to the type information they desire during pediatric visits. In a survey administered by TMW to 420 parents in Chicago-area clinics and FQHCs, the majority of parents reported discussing traditional preventive topics at the first 6 months of well-child visits, including, feeding (79%) and baby's weight (67%). Significantly fewer parents reported receiving information about brain growth (32%), how babies learn (21%), and learning to talk (17%). The goal of TMW-Pediatrics is to build on the unique positioning pediatricians have to intervene early and have a lasting impact on a child's future health and well-being by educating parents about the importance of a rich early language environment. By doing so, physicians can help prevent disparities before they start.



(1) R. R. Romeo, J. A. Leonard, S. T. Robinson, M.R. West, A. P. Mackey, M. L. Rowe, and J.D.E. Gabrieli. Forthcoming. "Beyond the "30 million word gap:" Children's conversational exposure is associated with language-related brain function." Psychological Science.

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