



GEM OF THE MONTH

Highlighting an exemplary intervention study



When Cultural Norms Discourage Talking to Babies: Effectiveness of a Parenting Program in Rural Senegal

This study evaluated the effects of the Tostan Reinforcement of the Parental Practices (RPP) program on caregiver-child interaction and child language development. Wolof-speaking Senegalese caregivers and children ($n = 443$) completed pre-post data to measure caregiver-child interactions and child language skills. Researchers also collected survey data to include in regression analyses. Caregivers who participated in the program demonstrated significantly higher levels of verbal engagement with their children - leading to greater child language gains. The RPP program provided caregivers with information on how to improve their child's developmental outcomes in the context of a non-Western culture.

Weber, A., Fernald, A., & Diop, Y. (2017). When cultural norms discourage talking to babies: effectiveness of a parenting program in rural Senegal. *Child Development, 88*(5). doi: 10.1111/cdev.12882

Advancing Knowledge to Bridge the Word Gap

The authors of this article tackle a very interesting, and sometimes controversial, topic related to closing the word gap in populations where cultural norms differ from Western parenting practices. They situate their study around the concern that low levels of parent-infant engagement can affect widespread economic growth – not only individual child language skills. Dr. Weber and colleagues provide an outstanding example of what it takes to conduct community-based research in a unique population by designing a rigorous study – working within the constraints of an existing program and designing assessments for this.

Meet the First Author

Ann Weber, Stanford University

Why did you do this study?

Ann: In a study of third grade reading in primary schools in Senegal, only 1 in 10 children could read. Tostan thought that they could help change these statistics. Our role was to assess change in caregiver behavior, and whether change resulted in an improvement in children's language ability. In addition, we wanted to establish that language environment matters for language development of children in rural Senegal, just as it does in WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, and rich - Henrich et al., 2010) countries.

How is this study informing your next research steps?

Ann: Our finding has influenced how I think about approaches to behavioral change programs, especially in non-Western contexts. I am currently involved in a project in poor, rural areas of China, where the grandmother often provides caregiving. The Senegal and China programs highlight the significant challenge of educating *all* of the child's caregivers.



Commentary by the Nominators: Scott McConnell & Anne Larson

This article is a gem for several reasons: First, the prospect of conducting this study – more than 400 families participating in rural Senegal – is daunting. Second, this study is a remarkable example of adapting evidence-based practices for different linguistic and cultural contexts. Finally, this study brings attention to an issue that occasionally comes up regarding the word gap: How should we think about language promotion in cultures where adult-child interactions may not be expected to occur at high rates?

