**Poor Kids Are Starving for Words**

According to a new initiative, launched at the White House on Thursday, the "word gap" that afflicts low-income children needs to be addressed with the same passion as child hunger.

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“Education,” Horace Mann declared in 1848, “is a great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery.” But increasingly, the condition of American children—and even their eventual role in society—is determined well before their first day of kindergarten. I’ve taught the children of wealthy, well-educated parents, and I’ve taught children raised in poverty, and in my own experience, these two populations arrive at the schoolhouse door with two very different skill sets and expectations.

According to a 2012 [report](http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2012/3/19%20school%20disadvantage%20isaacs/0319_school_disadvantage_isaacs.pdf) by the Brookings Institution, less than half of poor children show up to school prepared with the early math and reading skills, emotional and behavioral control, and physical well-being needed to be ready to learn, and that disadvantage persists into adulthood. The report continues, “children with higher levels of school readiness at age five are generally more successful in grade school, less likely to drop out of high school, and earn more as adults, even after adjusting for differences in family background.”

Much of this disadvantage has been attributed to what researchers call the “word gap.” Higher-income parents spend nearly a half hour more per day engaged in direct, face-to-face, [*Goodnight Moon* time](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/pdfs/aspen_July%2010.pdf) with their children than low-income parents do, and by the time these children are 5 years old, the poor ones will have heard 30 million fewer words than their wealthy peers. Nearly all of my more affluent students read in their leisure time, but approximately two out of every 10 of my poor students tell me, “I don’t read” when I offer to help them pick out an independent reading book.

Because the word gap first appears during periods of critical neurological and cognitive development, its effects cannot be easily remedied by later interventions. Teachers, standards, technology, even those hallowed halls of ivy—none of this matters as much to a child’s educational and economic future than an informed and empowered parent.

Poverty of vocabulary should be discussed with the same passion as child hunger.

Unfortunately, explained [Ann O’Leary](http://thenextgeneration.org/about/people/ann-oleary), Director of the Children & Families Program at [Next Generation](http://thenextgeneration.org/) in a phone call, “there’s a lack of alignment among low-income parents regarding how much talking, singing, and reading to children really matters over a lifetime,” and research backs that up. One [study](http://www.nber.org/papers/w19144.pdf?new_window=1) found that low-income parents underestimate their power to influence their children’s cognitive development, sometimes by as much as 50 percent. Wealthy parents spend more time engaged in these activities because they have better access to information, and O’Leary argued that when parents understand the impact they have on their child’s cognitive development, they invest.

In other words, the word gap is not about access to income, but access to information. According to [Too Small to Fail](http://www.clintonfoundation.org/files/2s2f_framingreport_v2r3.pdf), a partnership between the [Bill, Hillary, and Chelsea Clinton Foundation](https://www.clintonfoundation.org/) and [Next Generation](http://thenextgeneration.org/), insufficient vocabulary is analogous to insufficient food.

When a child is deprived of food, there is public outrage. And this is because child hunger is correctly identified as a moral and economic issue that moves people to action. We believe that the poverty of vocabulary should be discussed with the same passion as child hunger.

Earlier this year, President Barack Obama challenged Americans to [bridge the word gap](http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/06/25/empowering-our-children-bridging-word-gap), and Too Small to Fail has responded by partnering with [The Urban Institute](http://www.urban.org/) in an unprecedented showing of federal, state, and local support that includes the Department of Education, The Department of Health and Human Services, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the American Academy of Pediatrics, The Centers for Disease Control, the University of Chicago School of Medicine’s Thirty Million Words Initiative, The City of Providence, Georgia’s Talk with Me Baby, Scholastic Education, the George Kaiser Family Foundation, and many, many others.

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