

# Pathways to Quality

## LENA Start



### ► Project Description



LENA Start is a program for parents and their young children that supports positive interactions and promotes development of early language. Based on more than 20 years of research, starting with Betty Hart and Todd Risley's *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Lives of Young American Children*, LENA Start seeks to better understand and reduce early differences in the language development of young children in our communities. The Pathways to Quality (P2Q) project implemented LENA Start in partnership with the University of Minnesota. The idea was to bring an innovative parenting engagement tool to family child care providers as a way for providers to engage with their families around decreasing the word gap. This fits well within our strategic plan Parent Engagement strategy to support parents in preparing their children for kindergarten.

The LENA Start curriculum is a 13-week parent education program designed to promote parent-child interaction and early language development. P2Q adapted the curriculum to include early childhood education providers in addition to parents. Trained by the LENA Research Foundation, Think Small staff used a LENA recorder, a device that records and analyzes the language vocalized around it, to measure the quantity and quality of verbal communication between adults and the child wearing the device over an entire day (usually around 16 hours). After each recording, providers and parents received reports of their progress and were taught strategies to promote language interactions with children.



### ► Impact

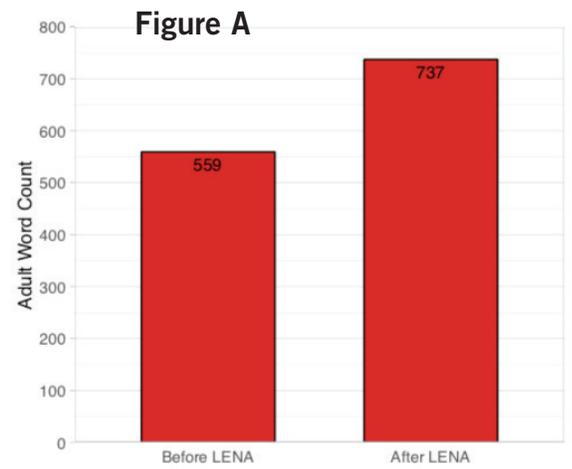
We conducted two cohorts in fall 2016 and two cohorts in spring 2017. Each lasted 13 weeks and met weekly. In total 38 adults participated, and 26 children were recorded weekly. This included 23 early learning providers and 15 parents who completed the program. There was one Spanish-speaking cohort and one Hmong-speaking cohort.

Parents and providers received weekly print outs on the amount of words and turns with their child. They often shared their data with one another, giving everyone in regular care of a child an idea of when and where language development is happening.

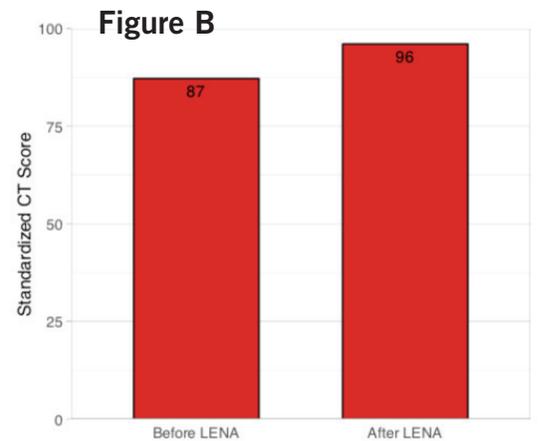


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The children that participated in LENA Start showed great progress during each 13-week session. Figure A shows an increase in the average number of words spoken near a child over an entire day by an adult (not counting TV and other media) after parents received family supports (from 559 to 737 words). This gain represents a movement from about the 20th percentile before family supports to about the 47th percentile after family supports, compared with a normative dataset provided by the authors of the LENA Start curriculum (Gilkerson and Richards 2008). Although these results suggest a substantial positive effect, they carry three important caveats: (1) data were not available for all children whose families participated in this support; (2) a child's parents may not account for all the adult words analyzed because the LENA recorder does not differentiate between parents and other adults; and (3) the LENA intervention was delivered to both parents and providers, and therefore the increase may reflect an increase in the engagement of parents, providers, or both.



Data capturing the number of “conversational turns” (adult–child alternations in conversation), as measured by the LENA recorder over an entire day, were also used to evaluate children’s preliterate skills. Figure B shows a slight increase in the median standardized score for conversational turns (CTs) between children and adults after receiving family supports (from 87 to 96). This gain represents a movement from about the 20th percentile to the 40th percentile. These results suggest that the LENA Start curriculum may be an effective intervention to help close the word gap through quality early childhood education programs.



### ► Ability to Scale

Think Small explored scaling the LENA Start curriculum into an intervention targeted at family child care providers. This investigation included consulting with the LENA Foundation and looking at the work from a group in Florida who developed a center-based curriculum. After determining the true costs for a provider to participate in this intervention, we quickly realized it was too expensive to scale in its current format throughout the early childhood system in Minnesota. The biggest challenge to implementing this program is the cost. Substantial subsidies are necessary for providers and parents to participate in a 13-week cohort.

### ► Next Steps

This intervention demonstrated highly positive results for parents and children. In fact, Dr. Scott McConnell at the University of Minnesota is authoring a journal article based on the results of the LENA intervention.

Sourcing additional funding could be used to adapt the LENA Start curriculum for family child care providers. This would add support to the practice of enriching literacy interventions for young children, while increasing parent engagement opportunities for family child care providers.

**To learn more about Pathways to Quality, visit [ThinkSmall.org/pathways](https://ThinkSmall.org/pathways)**