

A SUPERIOR CHILD WHO WOULD NOT TALK

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Size of vocabulary has been regarded as the best single indication of intelligence. The failure of a child to develop normally in this respect would consequently appear to be a very bad sign. Occasionally, however, we find a child who breaks all the rules, and Carolyn is a case in point.

At the age of two Carolyn could say only thirteen words, as follows: bread; butter; bye; daddy; gak (milk); here; is; it; mother; there; wow-wow; Gaga (Arthur); Gak (Jack).

The writer has made little attempt to indicate how these words actually sounded. The child's pronunciation was extremely "dutchy," and the parents often despaired of being able to reduce it to exact phonetic symbols. The pronunciation did not improve greatly until she started to school at the age of six, when, under the direction of an excellent primary teacher, rapid progress was made.

Whether this faulty pronunciation was connected with the abnormally slow vocabulary development is an interesting question. No other explanation suggests itself. Carolyn is the daughter of a college professor. The mother was before her marriage also a college professor. Carolyn has a brother two years older, and has always played with other children. The home in no way presents an environment which is unusual.

The full extent of Carolyn's vocabulary deficiency can be appreciated only by a comparison with the accomplishments of other two-year-olds. After a search of the literature, the writer has found a total of thirty-three cases of two-year-old children for whom vocabulary counts have been made. These vocabularies range from 5 to 1400 words. The mean is 520 and the mid score is 507. Among these thirty-three cases, Carolyn ranks next to the lowest.

These thirty-three counts represent attempts to list the actual words in each child's vocabulary. It is true that the different totals are not directly comparable, since each investigator formulated his own rules as to what should constitute a separate word. But this consideration can scarcely cover up a discrepancy between 13 and 520 words! It is also true that most of these children are very superior in intelligence, sons and daughters of college professors, and living in homes that are above average from the intellectual point of view. But since Carolyn belongs in this class herself, the point furnishes no excuse for her poor showing.

Smith,² in attempting to estimate the total vocabularies of twenty-five two-year-olds by means of a vocabulary test, found a mean of 272 words. These children are presumably less brilliant than most of those for whom total counts have been made, although they were considered somewhat above average. But their vocabulary development is still far above that of Carolyn.

During her third year Carolyn made rapid progress, and at the age of three had a spoken vocabulary of 652 words. However, for nineteen published vocabulary counts of three-year-old children, the mean is 1230 and the mid score, 1139. The range is 48 to 2282.³ Smith,⁴ using a vocabulary test,

¹From Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, School of Education, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

²Smith, M. E., *An Investigation of the Development of the Sentence and the Extent of Vocabulary in Young Children*, University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare, v. 3, No. 5, pp. 92.

³The case showing only 48 words at age three is the same as the one showing 5 words at age two. This child had 1135 words at age four. Nice, M. M., *A Child Who Would Not Talk*, *Ped. Sem.*, v. 32, 1925, pp. 105-142.

⁴op. cit.

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estimated the average vocabulary of 20 three-year-olds to be 896 words. Drever⁵ reports four slum children as averaging 376 words. Carolyn is superior to these slum children, but is inferior to Smith's cases and far behind most of the cases for whom total vocabulary counts have been made.

Even at the age of three, however, Carolyn gave evidence of intellectual superiority. She was given the Stanford-Binet test (1916 form) and earned an I.Q. of 133, passing all of the three-year tests, four tests at year four, and two tests at year five.

At the age of four, Carolyn had a spoken vocabulary of 1019 words. Twelve published vocabulary counts at this age have a mean of 2092 words, a mid score of 1818, and a range from 1019 to 4200, Carolyn's total being the lowest. Smith's⁶ 26 four-year-olds were estimated to have an average vocabulary of 1540 words. Their average I.Q. was 109. Drever⁷ reports five four-year-old slum children to average 451 words. Carolyn's vocabulary development is still relatively poor, especially in view of her intelligence rating.

No further vocabulary counts were made for Carolyn. She started to school at the age of six. The next spring, at the age of six years ten months, she was again given the Stanford-Binet test (1916 form). She passed all the tests at year eight, four tests at year nine, two tests at year ten, and two at year twelve, making an I.Q. of 139. She knew 20 words in the vocabulary, the norm for year eight. This fact indicates that her early vocabulary deficiency had by this time been made up. Some two months later, she was retested by a clinician at the Ohio State University, and earned an I.Q. of 137. As a result of superior work in Grade One, she was given a double promotion to Grade Three. She adjusted herself to this change and has continued to earn very satisfactory marks.

At the age of eight years ten months, Carolyn was again given the Stanford-Binet test (1937 revision). Her I.Q. was 147. This gain was of course to be expected, since the 1937 revision gives higher ratings to superior children. At this time she knew 20 words of the revised vocabulary, the norm for average adults! Her vocabulary development is now indicated as definitely superior.

In the opinion of the writer, two important deductions can be made from this case. First, even an extreme deficiency of vocabulary development at two years of age does not necessarily indicate deficiency of intelligence. Second, it does not even indicate a relative vocabulary deficiency in later years.

⁵Drever, J. The Vocabulary of a Free Kindergarten Child, *J. Experimental Pedagogy*, v. 5, 1919, pp. 28-37.

⁶op. cit.

⁷op. cit.