

Early language experiences are vital to children's future success in school and quality language-rich interactions can be promoted at home and around the community in many creative ways.



Artwork courtesy of Project ELLO

Reimagining everyday language learning

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Project ELLO (Everyday Language and Learning Opportunities) is a research-based public engagement campaign that began as a novel and efficient way to address opportunity gaps for young children and their families prior to school entry. During children's earliest years, it's not the number of costly toys or alphabet

A COMMUNITY-
BASED
PARTICIPATORY
APPROACH

flashcards they have that is of utmost importance but rather something that is completely free—talking. Language is central to all strands of a child’s development—attachment, early literacy, early math, and social emotional development.

Yet decades of research have identified a “30 Million Word Gap.” By the time children are 2 years old, a six-month gap in language comprehension can be seen between infants from higher-income and lower-income families; by age 4, the average child in a family living below the poverty level might have 30 million fewer words of cumulative experience than the average child in a working-class family. Such disparity remains apparent throughout the school years.

Building from this research, more recent evidence has shown conversational turns to have more brain-building power than adult words alone, and without family income as a predictor. Conversational turns are simple back-and-forth exchanges between a child and an adult. Children whose caregivers talk with them are more likely to use language with confidence and to develop larger

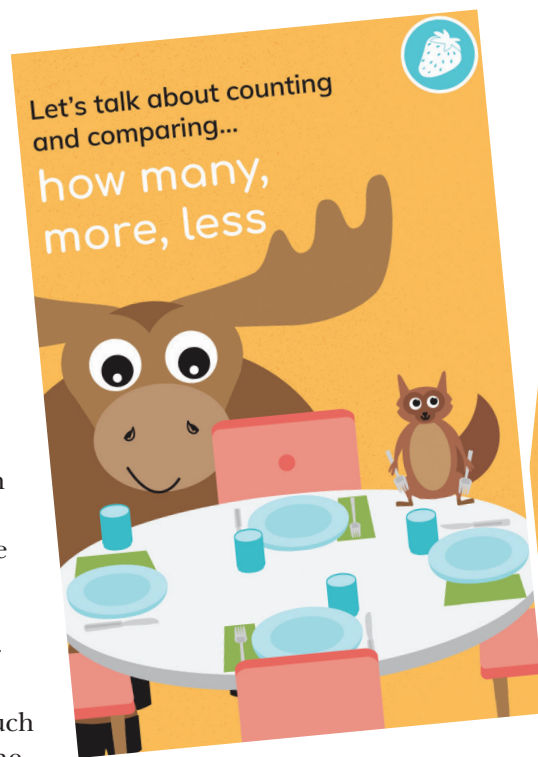
vocabularies at younger ages. Such research provides an encouraging platform to help parents and caregivers, especially those with limited resources, understand how much they can benefit a child’s life through quality, language-rich interactions.

Communities as Learning Spaces

Traditionally, strategies to increase opportunities for learning require young children and families to connect with school or social services. While these programs are intentionally designed to promote meaningful learning opportunities, it is not realistic to expect that all children have access, nor is it the only space where learning can take place. Project ELLO has the overarching goal of harnessing the predictive power of early language experiences by connecting with home routines and

community spaces regularly accessed by families. These spaces include grocery stores, laundromats, public transit, libraries, and outdoor spaces.

Young children develop in an environment of relationships. Learning language should be fun and everyone has a role to play. Family friends, neighbors, pediatricians, grocery store clerks, librarians, and bus drivers are all valuable assets contributing to a child’s language development. ELLO resources encourage and model ways for caregivers to talk



with children and are thematically tailored to everyday routines and spaces. Intentionally embedding opportunities for conversations throughout these everyday routines can empower caregivers and community members to realize how much they can positively impact a child's life through quality language-rich conversations.

Project ELLO Initiatives

With the overarching mission to address opportunity gaps for young children and their families, ELLO has collaborated with community partners over the past six years through various initiatives with the common goal of promoting quality language-rich interactions. The outcome of each initiative has been the creation of thematically tailored, place-based resources and transportable routines-based activators for conversation. Resources are designed for use with families and their very young children just beginning to repeat words through to those enrolled in kindergarten. As young children develop within a broader environment of relationships, the materials also may be used by early learning professionals, social workers, faith leaders, health care professionals, and local businesses. A combination of permanent place-based ELLO installations and transportable routines-based resources promotes quality, language-rich interactions across a wide variety of familiar everyday settings and routines.



Installation of Community Displays. Stationary installations were created for community-based settings, such as the grocery store, public transit, outdoor recreation areas, and diaper changing tables. Displays are placed strategically to promote place-based conversations. While shopping for groceries, for example, a family may see a sign in the produce section that says, “*hELLO friends! Oranges are round. What else can you spy that is round?*” Or, “*I spy something that grows on a tree...*” While waiting in a public transportation bus shelter, a colorful display panel presents prompts such as, “*Let’s estimate how many... minutes until our bus arrives. People who can fit on the bus. Number of bus routes.*” When visiting county library locations, families can find the ELLO learning trail with a series of displays to promote science-themed conversations in the outdoor space, such as, “*Shhh what sounds can you hear now? Where are they coming from? Do they change based on which ear you listen from?*” When caregivers step inside the libraries, they’ll find displays above changing tables to encourage positive language-rich interactions with very young children during diaper time: “*Smile, giggle, sing songs and rhymes, point to belly buttons and toes.*”

Dissemination of Transportable Resources. To expand the reach of ELLO resources to families who may not be in close physical proximity to community installation locations, Project ELLO created transportable resources to promote embedded learning



opportunities throughout families' everyday routines. Resources include a story card set, a series of four transportable math conversation card sets, a grocery shopping tote, and a math conversation poster series that families and community members can display in choice locations.

ELLO Story Cards. ELLO story cards encourage conversation in fun and creative ways during wait time and downtime, like riding in a car, waiting for a meal, or bedtime routines. Each card features an animal local to the region (turkey, moose, black bear, eagle, etc.) with a brief description, emphasizes novel vocabulary words, and provides open-ended conversation starters. For example, the bear story card reads, “*hELLO friends! I am a black bear. I can actually be black, brown, cinnamon, or blonde in color. I am an omnivore and am not a picky eater! I love to eat huckleberries, fish, and bugs. Tell me about your favorite foods. My teeth are specialized. I use sharp and pointed front teeth (incisors and canines) to cut and rip meat, and my flat broad back teeth to grind other foods like huckleberries. How do you use your teeth?*” Story card images are available as two different formats in response to community population interest and need. Some feature realistic drawings of local animals with narratives in, for example, both English and Salish for the local tribal community. Some feature drawings of local animals, with an anthropomorphized aesthetic, and a narrative.



Math Conversation Series. Math conversation card sets, a math poster series, and a math talk tote bag are thematically focused to promote intentional math-rich conversation throughout familiar family routines and community settings. Card sets are thematically tailored to four unique routines: mealtimes, laundry, grocery, and neighborhood walks. Each set includes ten 4x6" double-sided cards with rounded corners that are assembled together with a carabiner and stroller strap; they are available in English, Russian, Marshallese, and Spanish. The posters and HELLO Math conversation card sets are available as a free download from the Everyday Resources section of the Project ELLO website (www.helloello.org). The posters can be displayed in the home, early learning setting, or community space and the conversation cards can be assembled on a key ring to take on the go with the math talk tote!

Design and Use of Project ELLO Resources

Consistent across each ELLO initiative, resources include visual displays or transportable resources that are tailored to the everyday experiences of young children and families. ELLO targets these everyday learning opportunities through creation of content that aims to promote meaningful, place-based, and child-led conversational exchanges. ELLO suggests a guided framework for increasing positive, language-rich interactions (QRST+):

Question. The adult or caregiver poses an open-ended question or statement based on the current activity (e.g., *Tell me about the texture of your sandwich...*).

Repeat. The adult or caregiver repeats what the child has said to reinforce the child's response (e.g., *Your sandwich is soft and crunchy?*).

Stretch. The adult then uses sentence stretching to build on the child's response and add additional content or key vocabulary (e.g., *Your sandwich is soft and crunchy? I wonder what other kind of foods might be soft and crunchy at the same time?*).

I spy with my eagle eye...

different colored cars!

Let's count...
How many cars do you spy?

How are they alike?

How are they different?

90% of a child's brain is developed before kindergarten.

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Spokane Transit

Talk+. The adult or caregiver continues talking with the child by looping back through the question, repeat, and stretch feedback process.

The QRST+ conversation style generalizes across environments, routines, and curriculum content areas to reinforce key content through quality child-caregiver interactions, which lead to an increase in vocabulary, quality relationships, and overall positive school outcomes. Families may use materials as a fun way to inspire conversation and build vocabulary skills, while early learning professionals may use the materials in the classroom and with their school families to introduce the importance of conversation. Community members and local businesses can use ELLO materials to promote language-rich, positive experiences throughout settings that are frequented by young children and families. To supplement and enhance community-based initiatives, Project ELLO hosts an open-access website where all resources are available for download and may be used or adapted by other programs and communities.

A Framework for ELLO Success

Strategies of ELLO initiatives mirror those found in public health. ELLO aims to not only raise awareness of language-rich learning opportunities, but also influence attitudes and behaviors of young children, their families, and community members. Implementing multiple initiatives at the population, community, and child levels facilitates changes in programs and practices within and across the settings in which children live, learn, and play.

The emphasis on a community-based participatory approach (CBPR) that is responsive to the unique needs of partnership communities has been critical to the success of ELLO. At the core of ELLO work are the collaborative partnerships used to develop, implement, and sustain initiatives. ELLO initiatives involve families, caregivers, and community partners throughout all phases of development through focus groups,

needs assessment, and usability surveys. Community-based partnerships have included home visitors, child care providers, librarians, business owners, health authorities, and other community stakeholders. The result has been evident in both sustainability and scalability of ELLO work through community ownership of ELLO resources and collective investment in outcomes for young children and families.

Implications of Project ELLO

The opportunity for scalability of Project ELLO work is significant. The intentional efforts of ELLO work centers on everyday routines and community spaces that are familiar to all families (mealtimes, laundry, grocery stores, etc.). Embedding Project ELLO within these everyday routines provides a seamless opportunity for generalization to additional communities and partnerships. While a portion of Project ELLO work has included distribution of tangible items, all content and templates for materials are available as free downloads accessible through the Project ELLO website (www.helloello.org) and promoted through social media outlets (Facebook and Instagram). Cross collaboration and partnership with diverse community stakeholders further promotes success with generalization of ELLO intentions and sustained impact. ELLO's use of a CBPR approach has significant benefits, including:

- An increased potential for sustainability
- Emphasis on social and cultural context important for our community through a place-based approach
- Community ownership
- Availability of local resources and investment in outcomes through matched funds, community grants, and in-kind
- Utilization of relationships to inform best procedures for outreach to maintain engagement
- Motivation of community partners to support evaluation efforts based on contextual understanding of the Project ELLO.

For Further Reading

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