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Development of conversation in toddlers: The role of maternal input

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One of the most important human skills is the ability to engage in conversation. This includes our ability to initiate topics, take turns appropriately, and respond contingently to a partner's utterances. While we know that children learn these skills, a clear understanding of the steps they take in developing them and of the factors that may influence the course and rate of development is currently lacking. The present longitudinal study uses language samples collected from 45 mother-child dyads to analyze how children between the ages of 20 and 30 months develop conversation. In addition, it examines the impact of maternal education on this development. Results indicate that the nature of mothers' and children's contributions to discourse change with age. Children become more adept at contingent responding, and the percent of consecutive utterances and topic initiations made by mothers decreases as the children age. Maternal education does not significantly affect the way mothers and children converse in this study. These results suggest that turn-taking between mother and child increases as mothers respond to their children's growing conversational competence. At least within this population, maternal education does not affect the way that the mothers respond. Future studies might examine a wider range of maternal education and investigate whether children's conversational development depends substantially on their language skills.