

## Caregiver-Mediated Everyday Language Learning Practices:

### I. Background and Foundations

Carl J. Dunst  
Carol M. Trivette  
Melinda Raab  
Tracy L. Masiello

This paper includes a description of the communication and language intervention model developed at the *Center on Everyday Child Language Learning*. The model is based on research and practice conducted by Puckett Institute researchers and practitioners over the past 15 years. The paper includes background information for understanding the key elements and characteristics of the model. A companion paper includes a description of the methods and procedures for implementing the model (Dunst, Trivette, Raab, & Masiello, 2008).

The research foundations of the model include studies of the sources of young children's everyday learning activities (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2000; Dunst, Raab, Trivette, & Swanson, in press), patterns of children's participation in the activities (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2002), the relative effectiveness of interest-based children's learning opportunities (Dunst, 2000; Dunst et al., 2001), and the different outcomes associated with contrasting approaches to using everyday activities as the sources of children's learning opportunities (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, & Hamby, 2005, 2006). This research, as well as research by others (e.g., Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993; Göncü, Tuermer, Jain, & Johnson, 1999; Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993), has been used to systematically identify the key characteristics of everyday children's learning and the use of these characteristics for developing evidence-based practices (e.g., Dunst, 2006; Dunst et al., 2006; Dunst & Swanson, 2006).

#### Everyday Language Intervention Model

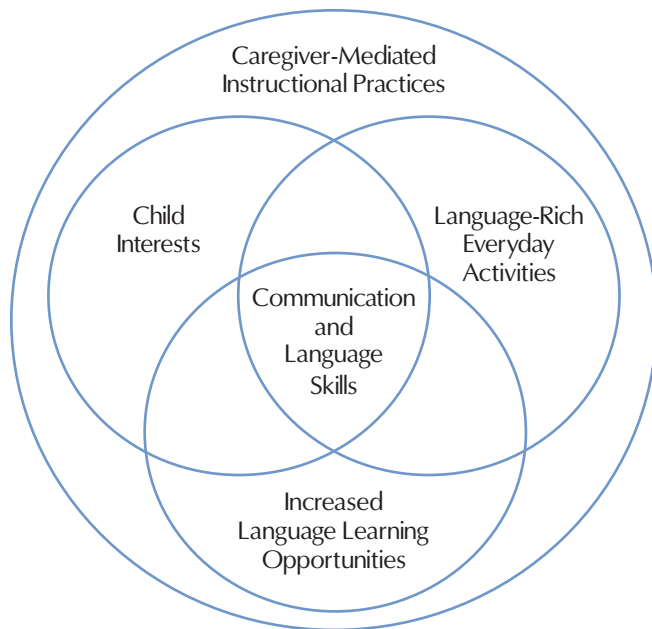
The model, which includes four components, is shown in Figure 1. The four components are child interests, everyday family and community activities, strategies for increasing child participation

This paper includes a description of an intervention model that uses child interest-based participation in everyday family and community activities as sources of communication and language learning opportunities. The intervention model includes four components: (a) child interests, (b) everyday family and community activities, (c) child participation in interest-based everyday activities, and (d) responsive teaching for promoting child communication and language competence in the contexts of everyday activities. The paper includes background information for understanding the key features and characteristics of each of the components of the model.

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in interest-based everyday language learning activities, and the use of caregiver responsive teaching for supporting and strengthening children’s communication and language competence in the contexts of everyday activities.



**Figure 1. Four major components of the caregiver-mediated everyday language intervention model for facilitating early communication and language skill acquisition.**

The approach to early communication and language intervention places primary emphasis on supporting and strengthening parents’ and other caregivers’ abilities to: (a) increase child participation in interest-based everyday family and community activities and (b) interact with a child in ways that encourage and promote communication and language learning. These different abilities taken together are defined as *caregiver-mediated everyday child language learning intervention practices*.

The description of the model, as well as the components of the model, include terminology that is used to be specific about important characteristics of a caregiver-mediated approach to everyday child language learning. Table 1 includes definitions of the terms germane for describing the key features and elements of the model.

### **Child Interests**

*The foundation of the model is the use of children’s interests as a way of promoting acquisition of functional and meaningful communication and language competence.* Interests include the likes, preferences, favorites, strengths, and other child attributes that motivate children to engage and participate in activities providing contexts for interest and competence expression. The indicators of children’s interests include, but are not limited to, sustained attention, arousal, curiosity, social-affective behavior (smiling and laughter), excitement, and prolonged engagement.

Interests can be either a *person* or *situational* characteristic (Raab, 2005). *Personal interests* are a child’s personal

**Table 1**  
*Definition of Terms Specifying the Key Characteristics of the Model*

<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<i>Interests</i>	A child’s likes, preferences, and favorites that engage attention and excitement
<i>Personal Interests</i>	The characteristics of a child that influence engagement in activity or with people and objects
<i>Situational Interests</i>	The characteristics of the social and nonsocial environment that encourage child engagement in activity or with people or objects
<i>Engagement</i>	The time spent involved in an activity or interactions with people or objects
<i>Competence</i>	Child behavior, abilities, or skills used to initiate interactions with people or objects
<i>Mastery</i>	A child’s recognition and understanding that his or her behavior is the source of an expected or unexpected consequence
<i>Exploration</i>	A child’s engagement or interactions characterized by discovery or curiosity
<i>Everyday Activity</i>	Those experiences and opportunities that happen as part of daily living that are the contexts of child learning
<i>Development-Instigating</i>	Those child characteristics and those social and nonsocial environment characteristics that invite, encourage, and sustain child interactions with people and objects
<i>Development-Enhancing</i>	Child competence manifested and displayed as a consequence of involvement in an activity or interaction with people or objects
<i>Responsive Teaching</i>	An instructional practice that uses caregiver responsiveness to child behavior as a way of encouraging and supporting child competence
<i>Caregiver-Mediated</i>	A parent’s ability to provide a child interest-based everyday learning opportunities and use responsive teaching to encourage child communication and language competence

or individual likes, preferences, favorites, strengths, and so forth that encourage and sustain child engagement and participation in desired and appealing activities. *Situational interests* are those aspects of social and nonsocial environment that attract child attention, curiosity, and engagement in interactions with people and objects. They are characterized by the *interestingness* of people, events, and things. According to Renninger et al. (1992), both *personal* and *situational* interests influence child learning and development.

Figure 2 shows a framework that is useful for capturing key features of everyday learning opportunities and which mirrors what we know from available research. The foundation of the framework is interest-based child learning opportunities. Research indicates that children's learning is enhanced when interests engage them in interactions with people and objects that provide children opportunities to practice existing skills, explore their environments, and learn and master new abilities (Raab & Dunst, 2007). Nelson (1999), for example, found that variations in the development of children's language competence were "related easily to the child's life activities and interests" (p. 2). It is now generally acknowledged that early communication and language skills are acquired most easily when learning opportunities are interest-based or have interest-based elements (e.g., Frijters, Barron, & Brunello, 2000; O'Sullivan, 1997; Ortiz, Stowe, & Arnold, 2001; Pruden, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Hennon, 2006).

The way in which interests influence child learning and development can be explained as follows: People, objects, and events that are either children's personal interests or are interesting to children are the things that capture and maintain their attention, and encourage them to interact with people and objects. Interest-based playing, interaction, and participation provide a foundation for child engagement. When children are actively engaged in everyday activities, the experiences

provide opportunities to practice existing abilities, perfect emerging skills, and acquire new competence. Everyday activities that afford children opportunities to express competence are ones that are more likely to encourage and support exploration. As a result of exploration, children come to learn the relationship between their behavior and its consequences, which enhances and strengthens a sense of mastery. A sense of mastery, in turn, is likely to reinforce existing interests and promote the development of new interests.

### Language-Rich Everyday Activities

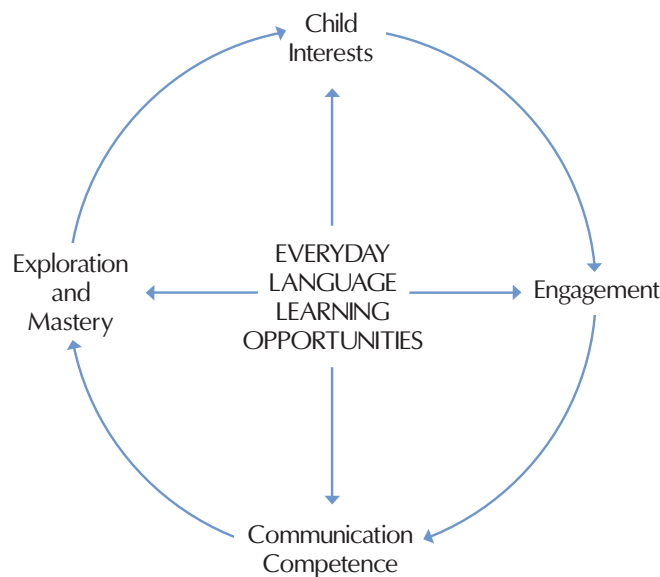
Everyday activities include many different kinds of experiences and opportunities afforded young children as part of daily living, child and family routines, family rituals, special events and outings, and family and community celebrations and traditions. The learning opportunities that happen as part of child participation in everyday activities have been found to be important contexts for learning in general (e.g., Dunst, 2001; Kellegrew, 1998; Rogoff et al., 1993) and communication and language development more specifically (e.g., Duchan, 1995; Kaiser & Hester, 1996; Roper & Gurley, 2006).

Everyday life is made up of hundreds of activities that are the contexts for functional communication and language learning. The everyday activities making up the fabric of *family life* include such things as dressing and undressing, eating meals, brushing teeth, taking care of pets, getting ready for bed, rough housing, parent/child play episodes, household chores, and so forth (e.g., Dunst & Hamby, 1999b; Dunst et al., 2000). Everyday activities occurring in the context of *community life* include car, subway, or bus rides; eating out; neighborhood walks; hiking; library story time hours; play groups; playgrounds and play lands; feeding ducks or fish at a community pond; and so forth (e.g., Dunst, 2000; Dunst & Hamby, 1999a; Dunst et al., 2000).

Table 2 includes some, but certainly not all, of the everyday activities that are contexts for communication and language learning (see also Dunst et al., 2000; Dunst, Hamby et al., 2002). Any one of these, as well as many other family and community activities, provide young children many different kinds of opportunities to learn and master communication and language skills (e.g., Dunst et al., 2001; Rogow, 1984) though certain activities may be better suited for promoting communication and language learning (Shue & Dunst, 2005).

### Child Learning Opportunities

Everyday activities can only have positive effects on learning and development if children have enough *opportunities* to participate in different kinds of settings having development-instigating and development-enhancing qualities (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Development-instigating means those child and environmental characteristics and features that invite, encourage, and sustain child interactions with people and objects, and development-enhancing means the consequences of those interactions, including, but not limited to, child communication and language behavior and competence.



**Figure 2. Model for depicting the flow of influences associated with interest-based everyday child language learning opportunities.**

Table 2  
*Examples of Everyday Activities That Are Contexts for Communication and Language Learning*

Family Activities		
<p><i>Parenting Routines</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doing laundry with mom or dad</li> <li>Family mealtimes</li> <li>Helping feed/care for pets</li> <li>Helping make a shopping list</li> <li>Helping with household chores</li> <li>Getting ready for bed</li> </ul> <p><i>Child Routines</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diaper changing/toileting</li> <li>Dressing/undressing</li> <li>Picking up toys</li> <li>Bath time</li> <li>Washing hands/face</li> </ul> <p><i>Physical Play</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Playing in water (sprinkler, backyard pool)</li> <li>Playing with balls/balloons/ bubbles</li> <li>Riding in wagon</li> <li>Roughhousing</li> </ul>	<p><i>Parent/Child Play</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening to music/songs</li> <li>Looking at books/catalogs</li> <li>Looking at family photo album</li> <li>Listening to bedtime stories</li> <li>Playing lap games/finger games</li> <li>Playing rhyming or naming games</li> <li>Playing parent/child vocal games</li> <li>Singing songs/nursery rhymes</li> <li>Snuggling with parent</li> <li>Watching TV/videos</li> </ul> <p><i>Play Activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drawing/scribbling on paper</li> <li>Having pretend phone conversations</li> <li>Playing with dolls/action figures</li> <li>Playing with playhouse toys</li> <li>Playing with talking toys</li> <li>Playing with musical toys</li> </ul>	<p><i>Family Rituals</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening to family talks</li> <li>Listening to family prayers or spiritual readings</li> <li>Participating in family meetings</li> <li>Saying grace at meals</li> <li>Saying bedtime prayers</li> </ul> <p><i>Family Celebrations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having a family birthday party</li> <li>Having holiday dinners</li> <li>Helping decorate for holiday</li> </ul> <p><i>Socialization Activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having family gatherings</li> <li>Having family visitors</li> <li>Having friends over to play</li> <li>Play dates</li> <li>Talking on the phone</li> </ul> <p><i>Gardening Activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helping plant flowers</li> <li>Working in vegetable garden with mom or dad</li> <li>Helping with yard work</li> </ul>
Community Activities		
<p><i>Family Excursions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doing errands with parent</li> <li>Going on family car/bus rides</li> <li>Picking out foods at grocery store</li> <li>Picking up siblings from school or child care</li> </ul> <p><i>Family Outings</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eating out</li> <li>Going on picnics with family</li> <li>Shopping at the mall</li> <li>Taking neighborhood walks</li> <li>Visiting friends and neighbors</li> </ul> <p><i>Play Activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Going on a play date</li> <li>Going to a parent/child class</li> <li>Playing at an indoor play land</li> <li>Playing on park/playground equipment</li> </ul>	<p><i>Community Activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attending a children’s festival</li> <li>Going to a community fair</li> <li>Helping celebrate community events</li> <li>Watching a parade</li> </ul> <p><i>Outdoor Activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Camping with mom or dad</li> <li>Going on a hike/nature walk with parent</li> <li>Going on a bike trip with parent</li> <li>Helping family at a community garden</li> <li>Playing in a stream/creek</li> </ul> <p><i>Children’s Attractions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeding ducks at a pond</li> <li>Visiting animals at a pet store</li> <li>Visiting a nature reserve</li> <li>Watching animals at a zoo/animal reserve</li> </ul>	<p><i>Recreational Activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Going fishing with mom or dad</li> <li>Going to a ball game with parent</li> <li>Playing at a community recreation center</li> <li>Sledding with mom or dad</li> <li>Swimming at a community pool</li> </ul> <p><i>Art/Entertainment Activities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attending a children’s theater</li> <li>Choosing books at a library/ bookstore</li> <li>Going to children’s concerts</li> <li>Going to children’s museums</li> <li>Listening to storytellers</li> </ul> <p><i>Organizations/Groups</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Going along to parents’ community chorus practice</li> <li>Going to sister’s club meeting</li> <li>Being in a gymnastics/ movement class</li> </ul>

*Opportunity* refers to the variety of everyday experiences and activities where children can practice existing abilities and learn new competencies. Child learning opportunities include both *participation in different kinds* of interest-based everyday activities (breadth) and the *number of learning opportunities afforded within any one activity* (depth). Take, for example, a child who enjoys playing in water. Getting to play in water during bath time, using a hose to water plants and flowers, splashing in a puddle of water, and dropping pebbles in a stream or pond, are examples of interest-based participation in different kinds of everyday activity. Splashing in a

wading pool, floating things in the pool, filling and emptying a bucket of water, and pretending to swim, are examples of different kinds of interest-based learning opportunities in the same activity setting.

The opportunity to participate in everyday activities is now generally recognized as an important aspect of effective early childhood intervention and therapy practices (e.g., Duchan, 1995; Duchan, 1997; Dunst, 2001; Dunst et al., 2001; Kellegrew, 1998; Law et al., 1998). Duchan (1997), for example, noted that the “goals of a situated [contextual] approach to [speech and language therapy and intervention]

focuses on increasing opportunities for...a child to participate in everyday-life activities” (p. 10).

### Caregiver-Mediated Child Learning

Caregiver-mediated child learning involves the *intentional* use of different methods and strategies for: (a) recognizing, identifying, and acknowledging child interests; (b) using this information for engaging children in interest-based everyday learning activities; and (c) encouraging and supporting children’s learning and competence expression in the context of the everyday activities. These abilities taken together are the key characteristics of a caregiver-mediated approach to interest-based everyday communications and language learning.

Responsive teaching is the primary instructional strategy used to promote child communication and language development in the context of interest-based everyday family and community activities (Hart & Risley, 1982; Raab, Wortman Lowe, & Dunst, 1991). Responsive teaching is characterized by the timing, type, and appropriateness of a caregiver’s response to child behavior and the extent to which a caregiver supports and encourages child communication and language behavior (Jennings & Connors, 1989; Kim & Mahoney, 2004).

A number of research syntheses of studies of parental responsiveness to child behavior identified the caregiver characteristics that *matter most* in terms of having optimal positive consequences (Dunst & Kassow, 2008; Nievar & Becker, 2008; Trivette, 2007). These include the ability to perceive child signals accurately, interpretation of the signals as intents to communicate, responsiveness to the child’s behavior in ways that are prompt and appropriate to the child’s behavior, and the ability to engage the child in interactive episodes in a reciprocal, your turn--my turn manner. Responsive teaching has been found especially effective in promoting communication and language development (e.g., Kaiser et al., 1996; Roper, Iauch, & Gurley, 2005; Yoder & Warren, 2002).

### Conclusion

This paper included brief descriptions of the key characteristics of each component of a caregiver-mediated model of early communication and language learning. The components taken together are the foundations for an evidence-based approach to promoting young children’s communication and language skills in the contexts of interest-based everyday family and community activities.

The research and practice that are the foundations of the model were conducted with a specific focus on which child and environment factors were associated with optimal positive consequences. The consequences were defined as a child’s acquisition and use of communication and language interactive competencies to influence the behavior of other people in prosocial ways and to interact with the physical environment in constructive ways. The major lesson learned from our research and practice is that interest-based learning was in almost every case associated with more positive

child consequences compared to non-interest-based learning (Bruder, Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2000; Dunst, 2000; Dunst, 2005; Dunst et al., 2001; Dunst, Trivette, & Cutspec, 2002).

There has recently been a resurgence in attention to the role children’s interests play in their learning and development (Liszkowski, Carpenter, Henning, Striano, & Tomasello, 2004; Silvia, 2005, 2006). Studies of children with (e.g., Boyd, Alter, & Conroy, 2005; Boyd, Conroy, Mancil, Nakao, & Alter, 2007; Vismara & Lyons, 2007) and without (e.g., DeLoache, Simcock, & Macari, 2007; Johnson, Alexander, Spencer, Leibham, & Neitzel, 2004; Leibham, Alexander, Johnson, Neitzel, & Reis-Henrie, 2005) disabilities now indicate that when learning opportunities use or build on children’s interests, a host of positive effects are likely to be realized (see especially Renninger et al., 1992). The positive consequences include children’s acquisition and use of both nonverbal communication and language skills (Laakso, Poikkeus, Eklund, & Lyytinen, 2004; Liszkowski et al., 2004; Pruden et al., 2006; Roper & Gurley, 2006). These findings, as well as those from our own studies (e.g., Bruder et al., 2000; Dunst et al., 2001), are the basis and foundation for using children’s interests as a way of promoting communication and language learning and development.

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## Authors

Carl J. Dunst, Ph.D., and Carol M. Trivette, Ph.D., are Co-Directors of the Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute in Asheville and Morganton, NC, and Principal Investigators of the Center on Everyday Child Literacy Learning (CECLL). Melinda Raab, Ph.D., and Tracy L. Masiello, Ph.D., are Associate Research Scientists at the Puckett Institute and CECLL.