LENA®

Teacher Experience, Training, and Conversational Turns
Understanding the Connection

This report explores how teacher experience, credentialing, and education may shape early childhood language environments. Specifically, we analyze data from 2,173 teachers across 1,601 classrooms to understand how these teacher characteristics may bear on the quantity of conversational turns children experience in early learning classrooms. All teachers were participants in the LENA Grow professional development program.

Quick Takeaways:

- **Experience matters.** More years of experience means more conversational turns.
- **LENA Grow has the same positive impact on teachers** regardless of experience level.
- **More education means more conversational turns,** especially in infant and toddler classrooms.


LENA Grow is a data-driven professional development program for early childhood educators. The program focuses on improving language environments and increasing teacher-child conversational turns. Conversational turns, also known as serve-and return interactions, have previously been linked to brain structure[1] and function,[2] healthy social skills,[3] higher IQ scores,[4] literacy skills,[5] and preschool vocabulary.[6]

# Years of Teaching Experience

Experience Matters — Especially in Infant and Toddler Rooms

Infant and toddler classrooms with more experienced teachers started LENA Grow with higher baseline turns per hour (TPH). Experience was less impactful for baseline turns in preschool rooms.

What this means: If there is a choice, put more experienced teachers in infant/ toddler classrooms, and newer teachers in preschool classrooms.
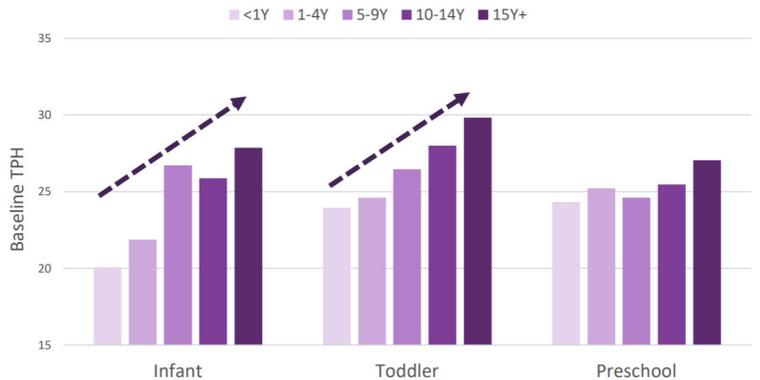
Note: Arrows represent statistically significant differences.
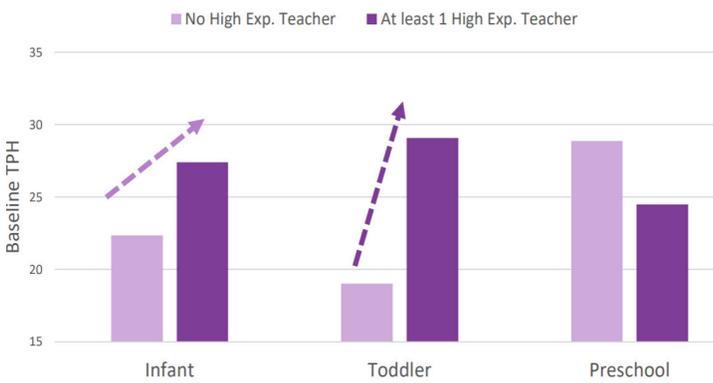
Pair Inexperienced Teachers With Experienced Ones

Infant and toddler classrooms with at least one experienced teacher (5+ years) started with significantly higher turns. In toddler rooms, this can mean a difference of more than 10 turns per hour.

What this means: When possible, pair newer teachers with veterans in infant and toddler classrooms.

LENA Grow Works the Same for All Experience Levels

LENA Grow had the same behavior impacts on teachers regardless of experience level. Teachers across all experience brackets showed similar gains in conversational turns. This was true for children whose baseline turns were below the national media ("lower talk") and for children whose baseline turns put them in the bottom third of their classroom.

What this means:

- If a teacher sees they are low on turns, they will likely make the effort to change regardless of how long they've been teaching.
- LENA Grow strategies are accessible for all teachers regardless of experience level.
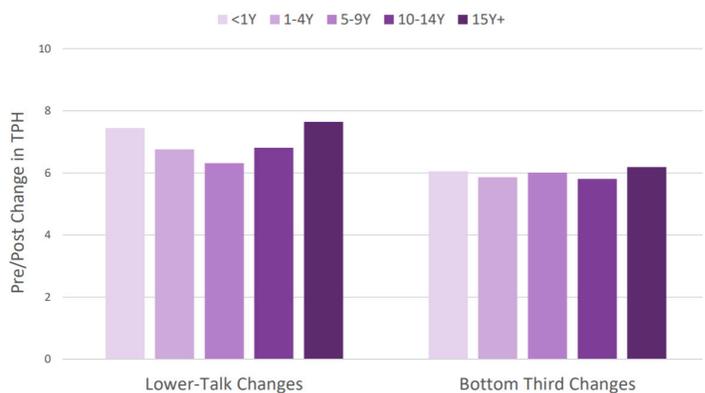
The CDA Connection in Toddler Classrooms

In this study, nearly half of the classrooms had a teacher who had completed a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. Another 14% had a teacher currently pursuing one. Only 39% had no teachers with CDA credentials.

CDA Teachers Start with Higher Turns in Toddler Rooms

Teachers with a CDA credential started LENA Grow with significantly higher turns — but only in toddler rooms. The difference was 30 turns per hour with a CDA versus 24 without.

In infant and preschool classrooms? Having a CDA didn't make a statistical difference at baseline.

What this means: Place your CDA-credentialed teachers in toddler classrooms, where their specialized training has the biggest impact. And if you're deciding which teachers to enroll in LENA Grow first, prioritize toddler teachers without CDAs.
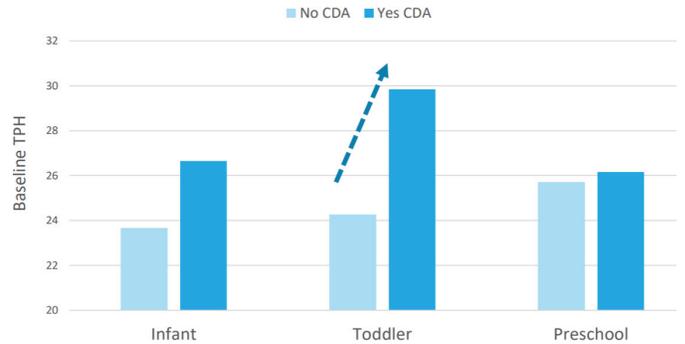

LENA Grow Works the Same Regardless of CDA Status

LENA Grow had the same behavior impacts on teachers regardless of credentialing. Teachers with and without CDAs showed almost equal gains.

What we learned:

- If a teacher sees they are low on turns, they will likely make the effort to change regardless of if they have a CDA.

- LENA Grow strategies are accessible for all teachers regardless of CDA status.
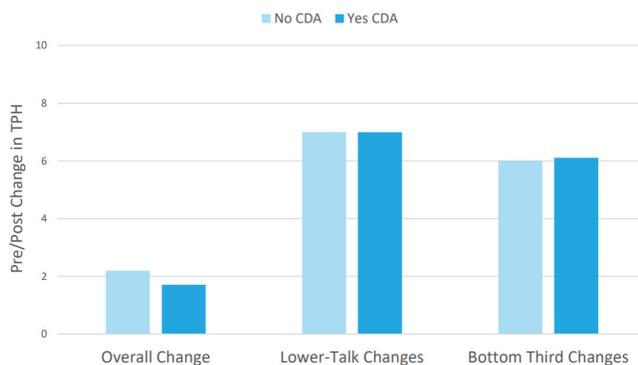
Educational Levels Tell a Similar Story

About half of the classrooms LENA Grow classrooms had teachers with an associate degree or some college experience. About one quarter had high school-only teachers, while another quarter had educators with bachelor's degrees or higher.

A college degree was associated with higher turns in infant rooms. In toddler rooms, teachers with an associate's degree/some college or a college degree began LENA Grow with higher turns. Education level did not have much bearing on baseline turns in preschool rooms.
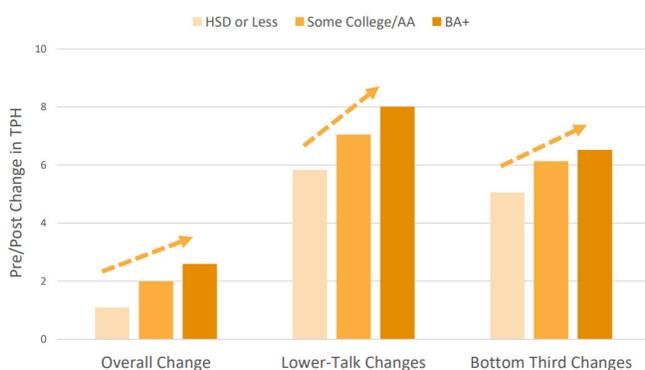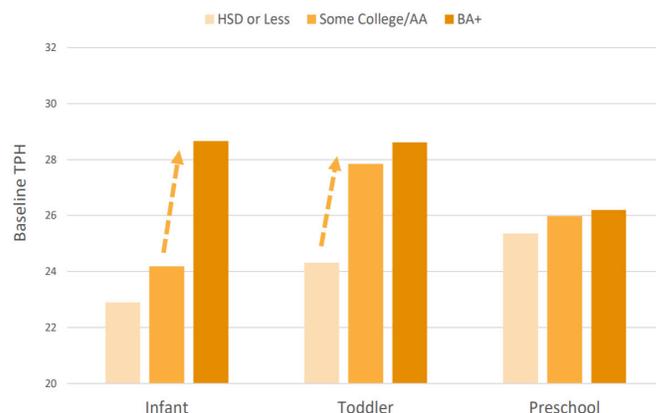
Teachers With College Experience Show Stronger Growth

Classrooms whose teachers had at least some college experience were more likely to change behaviors in response to LENA Grow. Teachers with only a high school diploma showed smaller gains across all measures.

What this means: Adjust curriculum to focus more on teachers with lower educational attainment.

LENA Grow Works for Everyone

The most encouraging finding in the entire analysis? LENA Grow produced the same behavior changes regardless of a teacher's experience or CDA status.

A teacher in their first year showed the same growth as a 15-year veteran. A teacher without a CDA made just as much progress as one with the credential. When teachers see their data and understand they can do better, they rise to the challenge.

What this means: LENA Grow's strategies work for all teachers. But programs may want to provide additional support for teachers without college experience, perhaps through extended coaching or modified curriculum.

Lessons Learned

For Baseline Conversational Turns:
- Experience, CDA credentials, and education all matter — but primarily in infant and toddler classrooms.
- Each attribute independently boosts conversational turns by 1-2 per hour.
- Teachers don't need all three strengths; one or two make a meaningful difference.

For Behavior Change During LENA Grow:
- Experience level doesn't affect how much teachers grow.
- CDA status doesn't affect how much teachers grow.
- Teachers with college experience show stronger gains than those without.

Citations

[1] Romeo, R. R., Segaran, J., Leonard, J. A., Robinson, S. T., West, M. R., Mackey, A. P., Yendiki, A., Rowe, M. L., & Gabrieli, J. D. E. (2018). Language exposure relates to structural neural connectivity in childhood. The Journal of Neuroscience, 38(36), 7870–7877. https://doi.org/10.1523/jneurosci.0484-18.2018

[2] Romeo, R. R., Leonard, J. A., Robinson, S. T., West, M. R., Mackey, A. P., Rowe, M. L., & Gabrieli, J. D. (2018). Beyond the 30-million-Word Gap: Children's conversational exposure is associated with language-related brain function. Psychological Science, 29(5), 700–710. https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.70019

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[4] Gilkerson, J., Richards, J. A., Warren, S. F., Oller, D. K., Russo, R., & Vohr, B. (2018). Language experience in the second year of life and Language Outcomes in late childhood. Pediatrics, 142(4). https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-4276

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