

Class in session: Upper middle class preschoolers silence less fortunate peers

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Research indicates that young children are aware of class. Upper-middle class children used their increased willingness to speak, interrupt and talk to adults as conversational equals. In doing so, they inadvertently but effectively silenced working-class preschoolers, who use fewer words and do not use language to call attention to themselves.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Preschool upper middle class children tend to ask for help and argue their points effectively -- sometimes to the detriment of their classmates from working class families.

A new University of Michigan study finds that 4-year-old, upper middle class kids use their strong verbal skills to engage teachers in more conversations and to draw upon reasoning that appears to be fair to get their way. This behavior often silences working class children who feel less confident or willing to express their views, thus giving them less

power and fewer opportunities to develop their own [language skills](#).

The study's author Jessi Streib, a graduate student in the U-M Department of Sociology, defined the children as upper middle class if their parents were college educated and worked in occupations such as upper level managers, doctors, engineers and professors. Working class parents were construction workers, short-order cooks or were temporarily unemployed, and did not have four-year college degrees.

Upper middle class kids tended to have larger vocabularies, spoke more often to "take a stand" to gain the teachers' attention, interrupted more, and felt more entitled to speak to teachers than working class children.

"There is a subtle division made between those which advanced vocabulary skills, the confidence to speak up, and the cultural idea that interrupting adults is expected or at least acceptable," Streib said.

The research involved an eight-month analysis of social class inequality at a Midwest preschool.

"The teacher-student interactions meant that the advantaged children received more advantages, despite teachers' best intentions," she said.

The working class children's needs go unmet for much longer because they take more time to approach teachers and then use fewer words to explain problems. "Meanwhile, upper middle class children often demand the teachers' attention by talking more and treating [teachers](#) as equals," she said.

The different levels of power also affected who was able to play with toys. Upper [middle class](#) students argued more often over toys and won the majority of the disputes with working class children. They were often first to suggest a solution and quickly take steps to implement the

plan, while working class students were more likely to go along with their counterparts' suggestions without proposing their own solutions, Streib said.

The gap between the classes could have lasting implications for the children. Streib speculated that the differences could appear in standardized test scores and college entrance exams, all of which compound existing disparities by routing children of different classes into paths that produce various life outcomes.

The findings appear in *Qualitative Sociology*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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