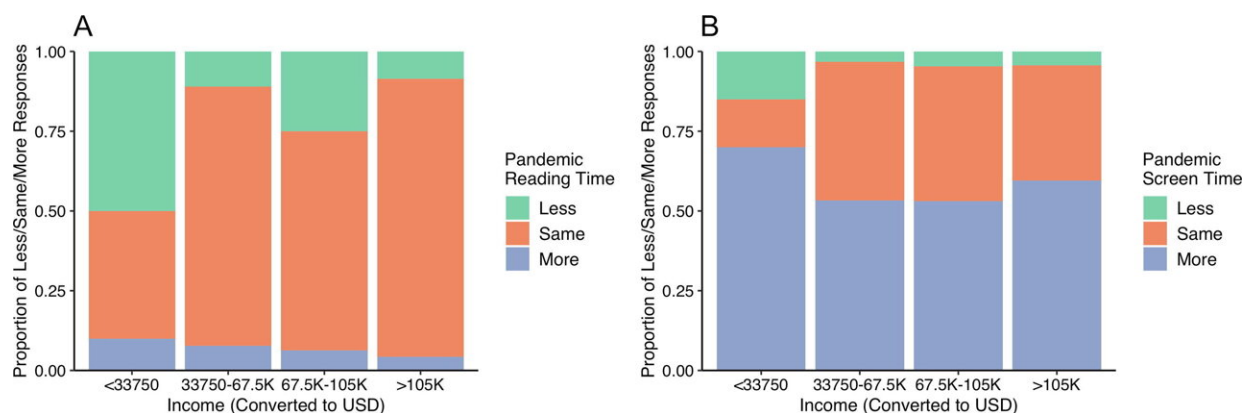


# Pandemic posed vocabulary challenges for preschoolers, study reveals

October 4 2023, by Kate Martin



(A) Caregivers were asked whether their children engaged in less, the same, or more reading time during the pandemic. This panel shows the proportion of responses by family income collapsed across age. Note that because many children were missing out on reading activities that normally take place in daycare, even children who experienced no change in the reading times at home likely experienced a net overall reduction in reading time during the strictest lockdowns. (B) Caregivers were asked whether their children received less, the same, or more overall screen time during the pandemic. This panel shows the proportion of responses by family income collapsed across age. USD, U.S. dollars. Credit: *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (2023). DOI: 10.1016/j.jecp.2023.105744

When it came to learning language, money mattered for pandemic preschoolers, according to a new study out of U of T Mississauga's Child

## Language and Speech Studies (CLASS) Lab.

Priscilla Fung, a fifth-year Ph.D. student, was in the midst of studying the vocabulary development of pre-schoolers when Ontario implemented a COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.

Rather than abandon the research, Fung and the CLASS team—Thomas St. Pierre, Momina Raja and Fung's supervisor, psychology professor Elizabeth Johnson—pivoted to a new question: How would the lockdown affect the children's language skills?

The team published their findings in a new report entitled "[Infants' and toddlers' language development during the pandemic: Socioeconomic status mattered](#)" in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*.

"Since we already had the pre-pandemic information, we thought it would be interesting to compare," says Fung, who followed the test group of 365 pre-schoolers (ages 11-34 months) and their parents with Zoom meetings and standardized vocabulary assessments.

"Ontario had one of the longest lockdowns in the world, which meant [young children](#) were at home more, but their parents faced unprecedented difficulties and had to juggle work and household duties, with no daycare or grandparents available to look after the kids," says Fung, who holds both master's and bachelor's degrees in psychology from University of Toronto. "Stress went up, but reading time went down as parents had to leave children in front of the TV for hours and hours while they worked."

Fung said the researchers hypothesized the children's vocabulary would take a hit as screen time was already known to be a factor that negatively affects [language development](#).

"It does make a difference, though, whether the screen time was passive, like TV, or interactive like a Zoom call where people were speaking with them," says Fung, whose research interests also include early childhood bilingualism.

The data showed, however, that the fallout was fairly mild.

"Overall, there was no real change for most kids before and after the pandemic," says Fung, noting there was only one exception: children 19- to 29-months-old from lower [socioeconomic status](#) (SES) families showed delays in vocabulary development. This was also the group which reported the highest amount of passive [screen time](#).

Participants reported [household income](#) ranging from \$45,000 to \$140,000, and Fung says the study showed those with higher income were able to access resources to provide enrichment activities which helped mitigate language delays.

"We are very interested in following up, and hope to keep monitoring this group to see how they progress after this," she says, explaining early language development is known to be critical to later cognitive and literacy success, with delays linked to psychosocial and behavioral problems

The research should encourage parents to interact and read more with their children, Fung says, and spur policymakers to pay more attention to children from lower socioeconomic families during times of crisis and stress.

"We hope society, especially government, will be aware of these findings, to continue to monitor children's language development, especially in lower SES families," says Fung.

**More information:** Priscilla Fung et al, Infants' and toddlers' language development during the pandemic: Socioeconomic status mattered, *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jecp.2023.105744](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2023.105744)

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