



CONTEXT & OBJECTIVE

- Child neglect is defined as a parent's inability to adequately meet their child's basic health, physical, or educational needs. It is the most common form of child abuse among preschool-aged children [1].
- Recent studies by our research team confirmed that many neglected children aged 3 to 5.5 years present with lower developmental trajectories compared to their non-neglected peers [2], (see poster from Julien et al., SAC Congress - 2024).
- The disruptions of parent-child relations that are characteristic of neglect are likely to compromise several proximal factors that are robustly associated with children's language development [3,4,5,6,7], specifically high-quality parent-child interactions and the quantity and quality of linguistic input provided by parents. These characteristics are seldom documented in context of neglected children.
- This study aims to document the characteristics of parent-child interactions in context of neglect regarding both their interactive and linguistic quality for language development and compare them to that of non-neglectful parent-child dyads.**

METHOD

DESIGN & PARTICIPANTS

This cross-sectional study is part of a longitudinal study on the language development of neglected French-speaking children aged 3 to 5 years (Early Longitudinal Language and Neglect [ELLAN] Study). Participants for the current study were:

- Neglect group: **21 neglected children** recruited in four youth centers (YC) in Quebec (Canada), living with their biological parents at the time of data collection
- Comparison group: **95 non-neglected children** recruited in early childhood centers
- Age: 42-months ($M = 42.35$, $SD = 0.46$)
- Monolingual French speakers, with no other conditions associated with language difficulties

MEASURES

1. Interactive features of input quality

15 minutes of parent-child free-play with preselected toys was recorded during home visits. Interactions (central 7 minutes) were coded using the *Coding Observations of Parent-Child Interactions (COPi)* [8], which documents the following ten aspects of parent-child interaction that foster early language development on a 4-point Likert scale.

- Response to the child** (*sensitivity to child's interests, responsivity, reciprocity, inventiveness*): detecting and reacting to child's communication cues and engaging in serve and return interactions.
- Control** (*directiveness, rhythm*): tendency to control the child's behaviors and play.
- Developmental support** (*stimulation*): extent to which the parent's behaviors encourage learning.
- Affect** (*enjoyment, warmth, acceptance*): manifestations of affection and appreciation of the child.

2. Linguistic features of input quality

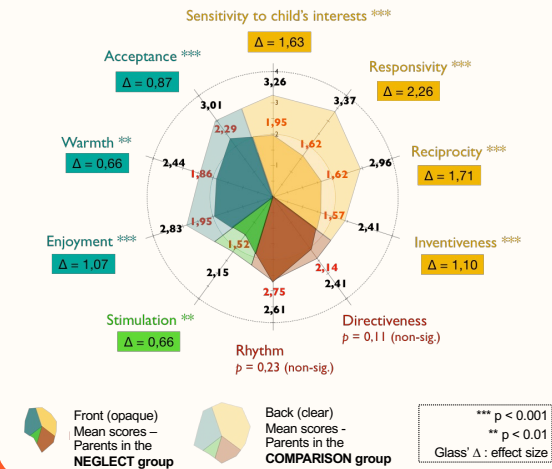
A portion (central 7 minutes) of the parent-child free-play session was transcribed following the CHAT conventions of the *CLAN Software* [9]. The *FREQ* and *MLU* programs (MOR French Grammar) were used to analyze the following variables related to parental input :

- Number of utterances produced
- Number of words produced (word tokens)
- Number of different words produced (word types or lexical diversity)
- Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) in words and morphemes

RESULTS

INTERACTIVE features

Results of Mann-Whitney U intergroup comparisons on the ten dimensions of parent-child interactions (COPi)



LINGUISTIC features of parental input

Sample descriptives using *t*-test for equality of means and effect size (Cohen's *d*)

Variables (parental input)	Neglect N = 20*		Comparison N = 95	
	M (SD)	M (SD)	t	d
Number of utterances	136.9 (31.2)	152.4 (38.9)	-1.68 *	.41
Number of words (tokens)	604.1 (182.6)	755.5 (214.2)	-2.94 **	.72
Different words (types/diversity)	143.6 (28.4)	181.7 (32.1)	-4.92 ***	1.2
MLU (words)	4.33 (.61)	4.93 (.64)	-3.87 ***	.95
MLU (morphemes)	4.90 (.69)	5.59 (.73)	-3.89 ***	.96

Note: *Missing data for one participant
*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$. M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation.

TAKEAWAY & DISCUSSION

Children in context of neglect are much less likely than their non-neglected peers to be exposed to the features of parent-child interactions and parental linguistic input that are known to contribute to early language development.

INTERACTIVE FEATURES

- Parents in the neglect group obtained lower scores on all interactive dimensions associated with language development except those related to "control" (directiveness and general pace of the interaction). These are important, salient, and clinically observable intergroup differences (effect sizes 0.66 to 2.26).
- These differences in responsiveness, affect and developmental support were expected since neglect is mainly characterized by absent or inadequate responses to the child, emotional disturbances between parent and child, and lack of knowledge about child development.
- The most significant differences are in responsive behaviors (**sensitivity** to the child's communicative signals, **responsivity** characterized by prompt and relevant responses to such signals, **reciprocity** characterized by balanced conversational turns and serve and return interactions). These parental behaviors are unequivocally associated with early language skills [9] which may be central in exploring the links between neglect and language difficulties.

LINGUISTIC FEATURES

- Neglected children are exposed to language input that is lower in quantity and quality than that of their non-neglected peers. Intergroup differences with large effect sizes are observed within a 7-minute parent-child interaction session, with children in the neglect group exposed to around 16 fewer utterances, 150 fewer word tokens, and 40 fewer word types than children in the comparison group.
- Differences related to linguistic input quality (lexical diversity and complexity of utterances) reveal larger effect sizes than those related to input quantity (number of words and utterances).

Early interventions should aim to help parents in situation of neglect to 1- provide language-promoting communicative interactions for their child by tackling both interactive and linguistic features of parental input, and 2- offer their children numerous and sustained opportunities to be exposed to rich language learning environments outside the home.

