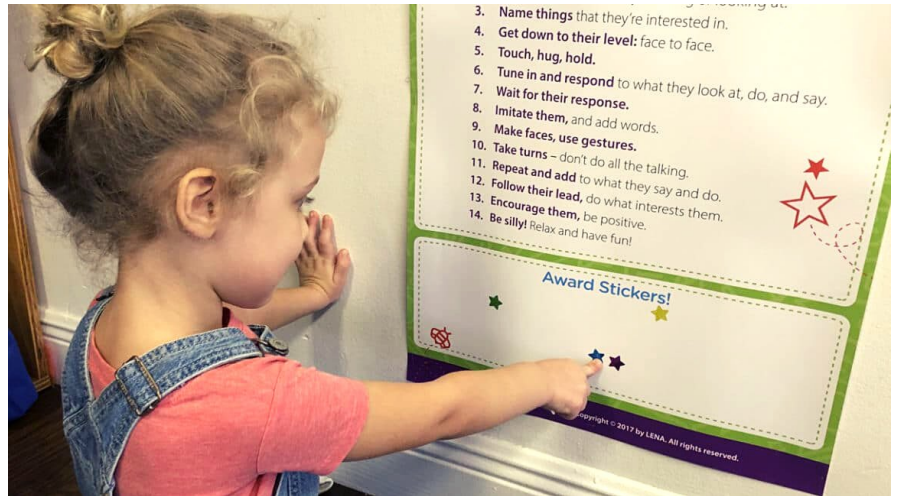


LENA Grow: Coaching for impact in Sarasota County

By LENA Team

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"I kept saying, week after week, 'Does everybody do this well?'"

That was Kathy Cestaro's reaction to the LENA Grow reports she was seeing. Kathy is an early childhood specialist with the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County (ELC of Sarasota), and her first experience with LENA came in the fall of 2020. With funds from a United Way grant, ELC of Sarasota implemented LENA Grow in five classrooms across two sites. On a weekly basis, Kathy conducted coaching sessions with each of the teachers participating in the program.

The results were remarkable, to say the least. Over the course of the 10-week program, children experienced an increase of just over 20 conversational turns per hour on average. The children who began the program with especially low conversational turn counts — below 15 per hour — saw even greater gains. In all, 79% of all children and 91% of lower-talk children experienced an increase in conversational turns.

In addition to the rise in conversational turns over the course of the LENA Grow program, children also experienced increased test scores. Specifically, there were 14 students among the 39 who began the program with TS GOLD® scores below "widely held expectations," which is a measure that "describes the range of knowledge, skills, and abilities that children of a particular age or class/grade typically demonstrate over a year of life." After the program, 11 of those 14 students had experienced an increase in conversational turns. And of those 11 students, six had improved their TS GOLD® scores from below widely

held expectations to meeting or above widely held expectations. Those six students also experienced the greatest average increase in conversational turns per hour.

“Actually seeing the numbers on the paper was eye-opening,” Kathy said. Claudia Malecki, quality services manager at ELC of Sarasota, had the same thought: “Our focus at the coalition is to prepare those children for elementary school. When you pull out those charts and they see those circles and that it’s improving, the teachers understand that.”

Going beyond the numbers: Community impact with LENA Grow

Numbers like these emphasize the multiple roles that LENA’s technology plays:

On the one hand, the reports from LENA’s “talk pedometer” tell the story of individual children’s growth. Combined with the strengths-based coaching that accompanies them, these reports help individual teachers commit to improving their conversational skills. In turn, of course, this helps children experience more back-and-forth interactions, which has lasting impact on their school readiness. On the other hand, the reports paint a bigger picture: a picture of how individual children’s growth can be scaled up to community-wide growth.

“The grant we secured was for a part of our county where the most at-risk children go to child care,” Kathy said. “They need this. They need teachers who are talking to them and having conversational turns with them.”

Sarasota County has around 180 child care centers, of which around 125 work with ELC of Sarasota to maintain a “Star Quality” rating. Claudia, for one, has been in the field since 1980. She’s seen an increased awareness of the importance of early childhood education, and she’s seen a rise in the number of parents asking questions about quality instead of just price and location.

“Back then,” she said, “child care was considered a place where the kiddos were taken care of when everyone went to work. More and more, communities have decided that we have to invest in these little guys because it influences their grade-level reading, it influences the incarceration rate later on in life, and it influences the literacy rate of our workers as they enter the workforce.”

It all comes back to the teacher

In Sarasota County, the teachers' buy-in was strong. They made a concerted effort to put LENA's Talking Tips and Conversation Starter posters into practice. Using the LENA Logs within their Teacher Workbooks, they kept track of the classroom's daily activities and made connections between different activities and spikes or valleys in conversational turns.

One tactic that worked especially well: During small group time, the teacher would leave out an object related to a book the class had read together. The children took notice, the teacher acknowledged that they had taken notice, and the LENA device reported significant upticks in conversational turns for multiple children.

"The teachers were challenging themselves," Kathy said. "I would get there for a coaching session, and they could not wait to see their reports. They were so anxious to see if they met their goal, if they did better than the prior week."

Both Kathy and Claudia have come to see the power of empowering teachers to teach. They recognize that the quality of a classroom has just as much to do with the quality of teacher-student interaction and family engagement as it does with the quantity of toys, books, and games. In line with Claudia's thoughts on how communities have made great strides in recognizing the importance of early childhood education, they think early childhood educators and child care workers deserve greater recognition of the importance of the profession.

While they continue to advocate for large-scale improvements on a policy level, Kathy and Claudia do what they can themselves. Unbeknownst to the teachers until after the LENA Grow cycle had ended, ELC of Sarasota rewarded them with stipends for having participated in the program.