Analysing the effect of sibling number on input and output in the first 18 months

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Abstract

The 'sibling effect' has been widely reported in studies examining a breadth of topics in the academic literature, suggesting firstborn children are advantaged across a range of cognitive, educational and health-based measures compared with their later-born peers. Expanding on this literature using naturalistic home-recorded data and parental vocabulary report, we find that early language outcomes vary by number of siblings. Specifically, we find that children with two or more older siblings - but not one - had smaller vocabularies at 18 months, and heard less input from caregivers across several measures. We discuss implications regarding what infants experience and learn across a range of family sizes in infancy.

Keywords: Siblings, Lexical Development, Input Effects, Language Acquisition

Word count: X

21   Analysing the effect of sibling number on input and output in the first 18 months

22   Many studies assume a theoretical "optimum" environment for early language

23 development, whereby the input is tailored to a single infant's needs, changing over time as

24 language capacity develops (e.g. Soderstrom, 2007; Stern, Spieker, Barnett, & MacKain,

25 1983). However, for many infants and for many reasons, language acquisition occurs amid

26 various domestic and social factors that can influence the learning environment, including

27 the presence of older siblings in the home (Fenson et al., 1994). According to the United

28 States Census Bureau (2010), around one third of children are born into households with at

29 least one other infant present, and one in every five infants is acquiring language in a

30 household shared with two or more other children. Similar statistics are reported for

31 British infants (Office for National Statistics, 2018), where the average household has 1.75

32 children, and 15% of households have three children or more. In this paper, we consider the

33 role of siblings in the early language environment of English-learning infants. We use

34 naturalistic home-recorded data to measure input in earlier- and later-born infants in

35 relation to their lexical development over the first 18 months of life.

36   Prior research suggests that infants born to households with older children may be

37 slower to learn language. Fenson and colleagues (1994) found that by 30 months of age,

38 children with older siblings performed worse than those with no siblings across measures of

39 productive vocabulary, use of word combinations, and mean length of utterance (MLU).

40 This 'sibling effect' may be manifested in input differences between first- and later-born

41 children: some research finds that infants with older siblings hear less speech aimed

42 specifically at them, and what they do hear is understood to be linguistically less

43 supportive of early language development (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998; Oshima-Takane &

44 Robbins, 2003). Contrastingly, some studies have noted linguistic *advantages* for

45 later-borns, who may have stronger social-communicative skills (Hoff, 2006), better

46 understanding of pronouns (Oshima-Takane, Goodz, & Derevensky, 1996), and better

47 conversational abilities (Dunn & Shatz, 1989). Overall, while the particulars differ across

48 studies, prior work suggests that the presence of siblings in the home leads to differences in

49 infants' early linguistic experience.

50   Numerous studies have attempted to better understand how siblings affect the

51 language development trajectory, with comparisons of language acquisition across first- and

52 later-borns, and analyses of mothers' input in dyadic (infant + mother) and triadic (infant

53 + mother + older sibling) situations. Findings are mixed, but overall two general

54 conclusions can be drawn. First, analyses consistently show that infants with older siblings

55 generally have slower *vocabulary development* (Berglund, Eriksson, & Westerlund, 2005;

56 Fenson et al., 1994; Pine, 1995; Zambrana, Ystrom, & Pons, 2012), but this is often

57 marginal, and typical of the earliest stages of language learning. Hoff-Ginsberg (1998)

58 shows first-borns to have better lexical and syntactic skills up until 2;5, but later-born

59 infants had better conversational abilities during the same time-period. Some of these

60 differences may relate to insufficient power to detect relatively small effects or simultaneous

61 contributing factors. For instance, using a large longitudinal dataset of french-learning 2-5

62 year olds, Havron and colleagues (2019) find no effect of age gap between siblings but lower

63 standardized language scores in children with older brothers (but not sisters) relative to

64 those without siblings, based on parental report and direct battery assessments.

65   The second general finding pertains to sibling-related differences in the early

66 linguistic *environment*: infants with no siblings receive more input overall, and this more

67 closely reflects what is typically considered to be 'high quality' input in the extant

68 literature. Indeed, the very presence of a sibling in the linguistic environment changes the

69 way language is used. When siblings are present (i.e. triadic interactions), mothers' input

70 is more focused on regulating behaviour, as opposed to the language-focused speech that is

71 common in dyadic contexts (Oshima-Takane & Robbins, 2003). Reports show that MLU is

72 longer in the input of first-born infants (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998; but see also Oshima-Takane

73 & Robbins, 2003 for a comparison of dyadic and triadic contexts), who also hear more

questions directed at them than later-borns. Both Jones and Adamson (1987) and

Oshima-Takane and Robbins (2003) report no difference between the overall number of

word types produced by mothers in dyadic and triadic settings, but the proportion of

speech directed at the target infant is drastically reduced when input is shared with

siblings.

As Hoff (2006) explains, infants with siblings have less experience of speech directed

at them, but they do have an advantage over their first-born peers in that they are subject

to more overheard speech. Indeed, the input of first-borns may be explicitly tailored to

their needs, but equally this means it might be less varied. Barton and Tomasello (1991)

show that by as early as 19 months, infants with siblings are already able to take part in

triadic conversations, which were almost three times longer than dyadic conversations. The

authors suggest that the presence of siblings may shift the learning context, and facilitate

infants' participation in communicative interactions: infants are under less pressure to

participate in a triadic interaction, meaning the conversation can continue even when the

infant is unable to respond. As a result, the infants in Barton and Tomasello's study took

more conversational turns in triadic interactions than dyadic ones.

There thus may be a trade-off in development between highly supportive one-to-one

input from a caregiver (cf. Ramírez-Esparza, García-Sierra, & Kuhl, 2014) and the

potential benefits drawn from communicating with a sibling. In the present study, we test

the extent to which having more versus fewer siblings in the home environment may lead to

differences in vocabulary development and the early linguistic environment over the course

of the first 18 months of life.

In analyzing infants' lexical development in relation to the presence of older siblings

in their household, the present work expands on the extant literature in two key ways.

First, prior work generally considered birth order as a binomial factor (i.e. comparing

first-born infants with second-borns, e.g. Oshima-Takane & Robbins, 2003), or

'later-borns' (e.g. Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998), potentially missing graded effects. Instead of this approach, we consider the number of siblings, i.e. how having *more versus fewer siblings* is linked to an infant's lexical development and their early linguistic environment. Second, much of the existing literature in this area is drawn from questionnaire data or brief interactions recorded in the lab (but see Dunn & Shatz, 1989 for a study of naturalistic home-recorded data), rather than naturalistic day-to-day interactions in the home. In contrast, we analyze an existing corpus of daylong audio- and hour-long video-recordings in concert with vocabulary checklists. Based on work summarized above, we expect that both the language environment and infants' early vocabulary will vary as a function of how many older siblings they have.

Hypotheses

Research has already shown that early lexical development is more advanced among first-born infants (e.g. Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998). We expect to see the same effect in our data, but we hypothesize that the closer granularity of this analysis will show a gradient decline in infants' lexical abilities in relation to an increasing number of siblings. With regard to the infants' linguistic environment, we hypothesize that increased sibling number will have a negative effect on factors of the early input that are known to support language development. To test this, we adopt two input measures, established in the literature as being important for early language learning. The measures and our specific predictions are as follows:

1) **Amount of input** will be lower for children with more siblings. Following previous studies that show infants with siblings to receive less speech directed at them (Jones & Adamson, 1987; Oshima-Takane & Robbins, 2003), we expect to see the same effect in our sample. Given the link between amount of one-to-one input from the caregiver and vocabulary size (Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2014), we expect that infants

₁₂₅ who hear less input overall (i.e. by our predictions, those with more siblings) will

₁₂₆ have smaller productive vocabularies.

₁₂₇ 2) **Amount of object presence** (word + object co-occurrence, e.g. mother says 'cat'

₁₂₈ when there is a cat in the room) will decrease as sibling number increases. As

₁₂₉ caregivers' attention is drawn away from one-to-one interactions with the infant, we

₁₃₀ expect there to be less opportunity for contingent talk and joint attention. The

₁₃₁ co-occurrence of words alongside their referents is thought to contribute to the earlier

₁₃₂ learning of nouns over verbs (Bergelson & Swingley, 2013), as it supports the word

₁₃₃ learning process through the concrete mapping of word to referent (Gleitman,

₁₃₄ Cassidy, Nappa, Papafragou, & Trueswell, 2005). We thus expect that increased

₁₃₅ sibling number will be associated with less object presence in caregiver speech, and

₁₃₆ subsequently a smaller productive vocabulary.

Methods

₁₃₇

₁₃₈ We analyze data from the SEEDLingS corpus (Bergelson, Amatuni, Dailey,

₁₃₉ Koorathota, & Tor, 2019), a longitudinal set of data incorporating home recordings,

₁₄₀ parental reports and experimental studies from the ages of 0;6 to 1;6. The present study

₁₄₁ draws on the parental report data to index child vocabulary size, and annotations of

₁₄₂ hour-long home video recordings, taken on a monthly basis during data collection, to index

₁₄₃ input. We also ran our input analysis using day-long audio recordings taken on a different

₁₄₄ day from the video data reported below; unless reported otherwise, all results were

₁₄₅ consistent with those outlined below (see Supplementary Materials).

Participants

₁₄₆

₁₄₇ Forty-four families in New York State completed the year-long study. Infants (21

₁₄₈ females) were from largely middle-class households; 33 mothers had attained a B.A. degree

149 or higher. All infants had normal birthweight with no reported speech- or hearing-relevant

150 diagnoses. Forty-two infants were Caucasian; two were from multi-racial backgrounds.

Materials

152 **Parental report data** To index each child's language abilities, we draw on data

153 from vocabulary checklists [Macarthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventory,

154 hereafter CDI; Fenson et al. (1994)], administered monthly from 0;6 to 1;6, along with a

155 demographics questionnaire. Because the majority of infants did not produce their first

156 word until around 0;11 according to CDI reports (M=10.70, SD=2.22)[1], we use CDI data

157 from 0;10 onwards in our analysis. CDI production data for each month is taken as a

158 measure of the infants' lexical development over the course of the analysis period.

159 **Home-recorded video and audio data** Every month between 0;6 and 1;5, infants

160 were video-recorded for one hour in their home, capturing a naturalistic representation of

161 each infant's day-to-day input. Infants wore a hat with two small Looxcie video cameras

162 attached, one pointed slightly up, and one pointed slightly down; this allowed us to record

163 the scene from the infants' perspective. In the event that infants refused to wear the hats,

164 caregivers wore the same kind of camera on a headband. Additionally, a camcorder was set

165 up in the home. On a different day in the same month, the infants were recorded for upto

166 16 hours using a LENA recorder (*LENA Research Foundation*, 2018) hidden in a small vest

167 worn by the infant. Object words (i.e. concrete nouns) deemed to be directed to or

168 attended by the child were annotated by trained coders. Here we examine annotations for

169 speaker, i.e. who produced a word, and object presence, i.e. whether the word's referent

170 was present and attended to by the infant.

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[1] Note that reported word production began earlier than observed word production (i.e. in the video
recordings) but this difference was not statistically significant (see Moore, Dailey, Garrison, Amatuni, &
Bergelson, 2019).

Procedure

We analyzed number of siblings based on parental report in the demographics questionnaires completed at 0;6 (R: 0-4). Siblings were on average 4.05 years older than the infants in this study (Mdn days: 1477, SD: 1477, R: 0-17 years).[2] All siblings lived in the household with the infant, and all were older than or of the same age as the infant in question.[3]

Input measures

Two input measures were derived based on the annotations of concrete nouns in this corpus, each pertaining to an aspect of the input that is established as important in early language learning: **overall household input** (how many concrete nouns does each infant hear?) and **object presence** (how much of this input is referentially transparent?). Each is described in further detail below.

Household Input reflects how many nouns infants heard in the recordings from their mother, father and (where relevant) siblings. Other speakers' input was relatively rare during video recordings, accounting for 11.42% of input overall (SD=22.82%), and is excluded from our analysis. This measure of the early language environment is based on evidence showing strong links between the amount of speech heard in the early input and later vocabulary size (Anderson, Graham, Prime, Jenkins, & Madigan, 2021). This analysis considers only nouns produced by speakers in the child's environment; concrete nouns are acquired earlier in development in English and cross-linguistically (Braginsky, Yurovsky, Marchman, & Frank, 2019), and for this corpus of data, noun production correlates

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[2] For six infants, siblings' exact birthdates were not provided, and so age difference was estimated by subtracting the infant's age (6 months) from the sibling's age in years, as listed on the questionnaire (e.g. if a sibling was 5 years old, they were classed as being 4.5 years older than the infant).

[3] Two infants in the dataset were dizygotic twins; our pattern of results holds with or without these infants.

strongly with automated adult word count estimates (Bulgarelli & Bergelson, 2020). Higher noun count in this data thus indicates higher input across the board.

Object Presence was coded for each object word in the home recordings based on whether or not the annotator determined the object in question as present and attended to by the child. This is a metric of referential transparency, which has been suggested to aid in learning (Bergelson & Swingley, 2013). Bergelson and Aslin (2017) found that word-object co-presence in the home correlated with infants' ability to recognise the same words in an eye-tracking experiment, suggesting an advantage for object labeling in word learning. This is consistent with findings from Cartmill and colleagues (2013), who found that more referentially-transparent interactions with the caregiver (as judged by adult speakers observing videos where target words were blanked out) predicted larger vocabulary size at 54 months. Indeed, presence of the labelled object decreases the ambiguity of the learning environment (Yurovsky, Smith, & Yu, 2013), and may be a crucial component of supportive contingent talk (McGillion, Pine, Herbert, & Matthews, 2017).

In the following analyses, we consider infants' productive vocabulary alongside our two input measures – amount of household input and extent of object presence in the input – as a function of sibling number. These measures index both input quality and quantity (though we make no distinction between quality/quantity of input here), and will be analysed in relation to infants' productive vocabulary (all word types included) as our dependent measure. Since the raw data are highly skewed, log-transformed data[4] and/or proportions are used for statistical analysis. All figures display non-transformed data for interpretive ease.

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[4] 1 was added to the raw infant production data of all infants before log-transformation to retain infants with vocabularies of 0.

Results

²¹⁴

²¹⁵   Vocabulary development was highly variable across the 44 infants. By 18 months, 2

²¹⁶ infants produced no words, while mean productive vocabulary was 60.28 words (SD=78.31,

²¹⁷ Mdn=30.50). One female infant had a substantially larger reported vocabulary (3SDs

²¹⁸ above the mean monthly vocabulary score) between 1;1 and 1;6 and was classed as an

²¹⁹ outlier. We removed her from our data, leaving 43 infants (20 females) in the present

²²⁰ analysis. Infants had one sibling on average (M=0.86, Mdn=1, SD=1.09). See Table 1.

Table 1

Sibling number by female and

male infants.

n Siblings	Female	Male	Total
0	9	12	21
1	7	6	13
2	2	3	5
3	2	0	2
4	0	2	2
Total	20	23	43

²²¹ **Model structure for fixed and random effects**

²²²   All reported models were generated in R (R Core Team, 2019) using the *lmerTest*

²²³ package to run linear mixed-effects regression models (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, &

²²⁴ Christensen, 2017). P-values were generated by likelihood ratio tests resulting from nested

²²⁵ model comparison. All models include infant as a random effect. All post-hoc tests are

²²⁶ two-sample, two-tailed Wilcoxon Tests; given that all but one of our variables differed

²²⁷ significantly from normal by Shapiro tests, we opted to run non-parametric tests for all

228 post-hoc comparisons. Where multiple post-hoc comparisons are run on the same dataset,

229 Bonferroni corrections are applied with an adjusted threshold of a=0.02, accounting for

230 two between-group comparisons (no siblings vs. one sibling, one sibling vs. multiple

231 siblings; see below).

232   Before considering sibling status, we first modeled infants' productive vocabulary at

233 18 months (taken from CDI questionnaires) as a function of age, sex, and mother's

234 education. There was no effect of sex (p=.632)[5], and no correlation with mothers'

235 education level (across five categories from High School to Doctorate; r = -0.01, p=.139).

236 As expected, age had a significant effect on productive vocabulary (p< .001), and so we

237 include age as a fixed effect in all subsequent models. Because we expected that maternal

238 age and education might have an effect on both sibling number and infant productive

239 vocabulary, we ran further correlations to test these variables. There was no correlation

240 between mother's education and number of siblings (r = -0.01, p=.928), and a marginal

241 positive correlation between mother's age and number of siblings (Spearman's r = 0.28,

242 p=.069); older mothers tended to have more children. However, no correlation was found

243 between mothers' age and productive vocabulary at 18 months (r = -0.04, p=.822).

Effect of siblings on infants' productive vocabulary

245   We next modeled the effect of siblings on reported productive vocabulary. We tested

246 three variables representing the sibling effect: a binary variable (0 vs. >0 siblings),

247 aggregated groups (None vs. One vs. 2+), and discrete sibling number (0 vs. 1 vs. 2 vs. 3

248 vs. 4 siblings) using the following nested model structure, where (1) is the baseline model,

249 and (2) includes siblings as the variable of interest:

250   1. vocabulary size (log-transformed) ~ age (months) + (1|subj)

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[5] Though note that Dailey and Bergelson (under review) find a sex difference in the number of word types produced in the home-recorded data between 6 and 17 months.

Table 2

Output from likelihood ratio tests comparing regression models that predict the effects of sibling number (binary, grouped and discrete variables) on vocabulary size. Month was included in each model as a fixed effect; subject was included as a random effect.

Model	Df	Chisq	p value
0 vs. >0 siblings	1.00	2.27	0.13
Sibling group	2.00	7.96	0.02
Sibling number	1.00	6.24	0.01

251   2. vocabulary size (log-transformed) ~ siblings [binary, group or discrete] + age

252   (months) + (1|subj)

253   In our sample, the simple fact of having siblings (i.e. as a binary variable) did not

254 affect reported CDI vocabulary size, while both discrete sibling number and sibling group

255 did. See Table 2.

Table 3

Full model output from linear mixed effects regression model comparing language development over time in relation to sibling group. Age in months was included as a fixed effect; subject was included as a random effect.

Effect	Estimate	Std. Error	df	t value	p
Intercept	0.70	0.20	68.30	3.43	0.001
SibGroupOne	-0.05	0.29	43.10	-0.17	0.863

SibGroup2+	-0.94	0.33	43.88	-2.83	0.007
month11	0.38	0.14	321.34	2.69	0.007
month12	0.77	0.14	321.64	5.39	<0.001
month13	1.07	0.14	321.58	7.60	<0.001
month14	1.39	0.14	321.45	9.93	<0.001
month15	1.69	0.14	321.54	11.96	<0.001
month16	2.03	0.14	321.54	14.40	<0.001
month17	2.45	0.14	321.79	16.96	<0.001
month18	2.82	0.15	322.13	19.07	<0.001

Having more siblings was associated with a smaller vocabulary size over the course of early development. This is consistent with previous findings (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998; Pine, 1995). Moreover, for each additional sibling, infants were reported to have acquired % fewer words. The 'sibling effect' is thus present in our data. The grouped sibling variable (0 vs. 1 vs. 2+) was selected as our measure of siblings as it allows analysis across more equal group sizes. However, note that all results reported below were consistent when discrete sibling number was analysed, unless reported otherwise.

According to CDI reports, infants with one sibling acquire only % fewer words than firstborns over the course of our analysis, while infants with two or more siblings produce % fewer words. See Tables 3 and 4, and Figure 1. Post-hoc Wilcoxon Rank Sum tests comparing reported productive vocabulary at 18 months revealed significantly larger vocabularies for infants with one sibling compared to those with two or more siblings ($W=5$, $p = .004$), but no difference between infants with one sibling and those with no siblings ($W=79.50$, $p = .631$).
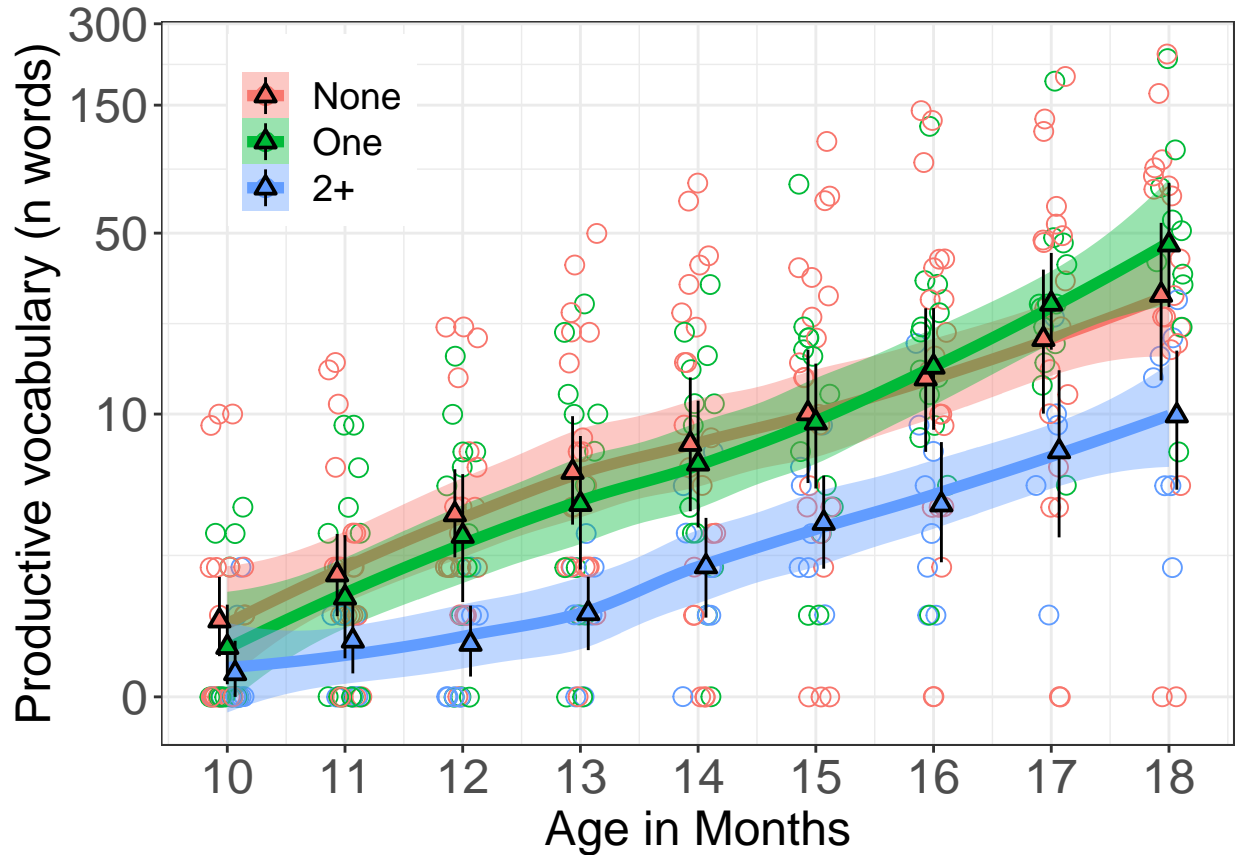
Figure 1. Reported productive vocabulary acquisition (CDI) over time. Colors denote sibling group; line with grey confidence band reflects local estimator (loess) fit over individual infants' vocabulary at each month. Triangles indicate mean with bootstrapped CIs computed over each month's data. Points (jittered horizontally) show individual infants' vocabulary size at each month. Y-axis utilizes log-transformed vertical spacing for visual clarity.

Effect of siblings on infants' input

Having established that infants' productive vocabulary varied as a function of how many siblings they had, we turn to our input measures to test whether input varied by a child's sibling status. To keep relatively similar Ns across groups we used the 0 vs. 1 vs. 2+ siblings division. That said, with the exception of household input (see Supplementary Data) all reported model outcomes hold if we model discrete sibling number as a fixed effect instead.

277   As with our previous analysis, we first modeled infants' input (maternal input only)

278 as a function of age, sex and maternal education. This time, there was no effect for age,

279 nor sex or maternal education (ps all>.260) on the amount of input produced by mothers.

280 We therefore excluded all three variables from our models.

Table 4

Data summary of all three input variables and reported vocabulary size at 18 months.

	No siblings		1 sibling		2+ siblings	
Variable	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
% object presence in input	0.67	0.15	0.56	0.15	0.46	0.18
N Input utterances, 10-17 months	180.63	124.85	184.43	84.76	100.19	52.80
Productive Vocabulary 18m (CDI)	58.89	60.76	92.64	111.42	13.00	9.49

281   **Parental Input.**   Mothers provided the largest proportion of the infants' overall

282 input across the sample (80%, M=146.10 object words, Mdn=125, SD=119.97). Fathers

283 accounted for an average of 14% (M=22.13, Mdn=0, SD=48.31), while infants with siblings

284 received around 6% of their input from their brothers and sisters (M=16.18, Mdn=11,

285 SD=18.51). See Table 4 and Figure 2. We tested overall quantity of input (aggregated

286 across mothers, fathers, and siblings) in our model, and a significant effect was found

287 ($\chi^2(2) = 18.48$, $p<$ .001). We then ran post-hoc tests to compare mean amount of input

288 across sibling groups; these showed a significant difference in average input received

289 between infants with one sibling versus those with two or more siblings (W=7, $p<$ .001,

290 (a=0.02)) while amount of input did not differ between infants with no siblings and those

291 with one sibling (W=120, $p =$ .576). On average, in any given hour-long recording, infants

292 with no siblings heard -4 more object words in their input than those with one sibling, and

293 89 more than those with two or more siblings. Infants with one sibling heard 94 more

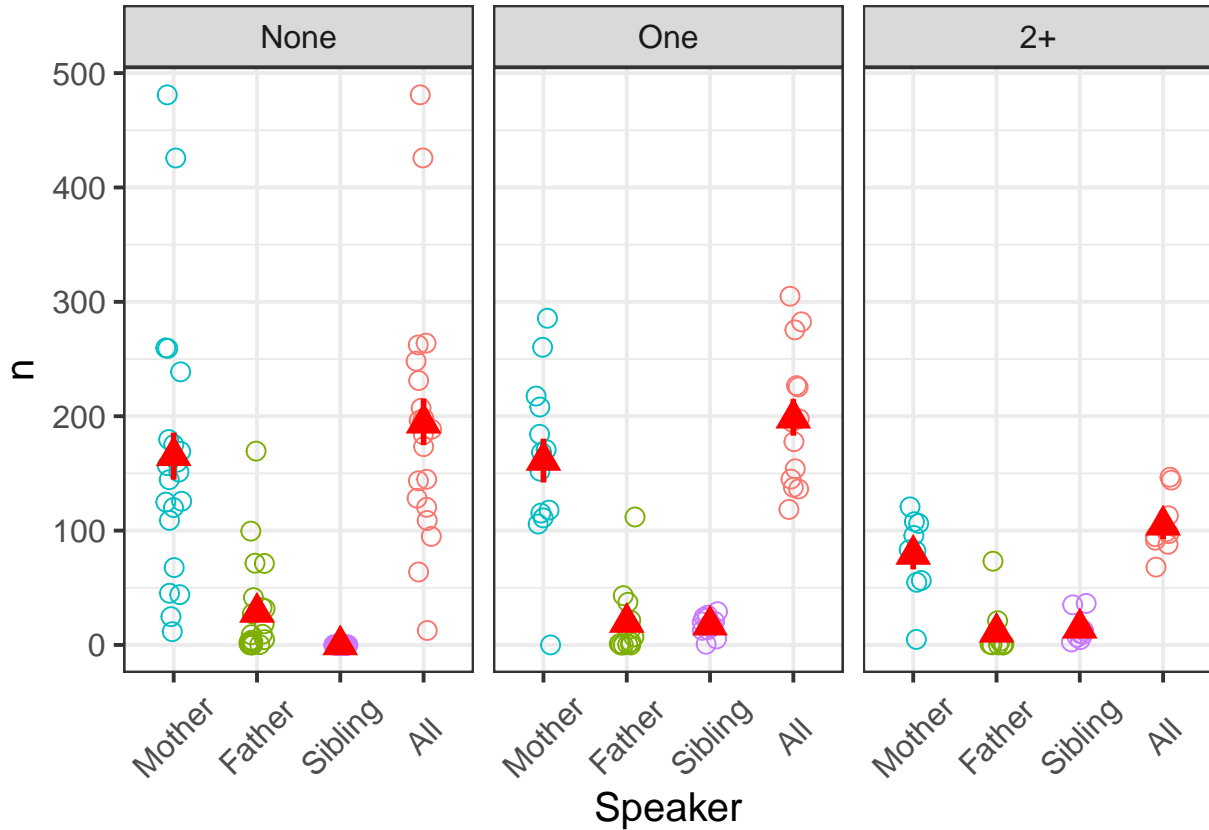294 object words than those with two or more siblings.

Figure 2. Mean number of words produced by Mothers, Fathers and Siblings across sessions recorded between 10-17 months. Circles represent values for individual infants; red triangles show group means.

Next, we tested how much of that input came from siblings (for infants who had them). Overall, for infants who had siblings, at least one other child was present in 72.16% of recordings (n = 176). Wilcoxon Rank Sum tests showed no difference between the amount of sibling input received by infants with one sibling compared with those with two or more siblings ($W=40$, $p=.235$), contrasting with predictions set out in our first hypothesis. Looking at caregivers individually, infants with two or more siblings heard significantly less input from their mothers than those with one sibling ($W=15$, $p=.003$), while there was no difference between those with one vs. no siblings ($W=126$, $p = .727$). Finally, amount of paternal input did not differ between groups (one vs. none: $W=152$, p

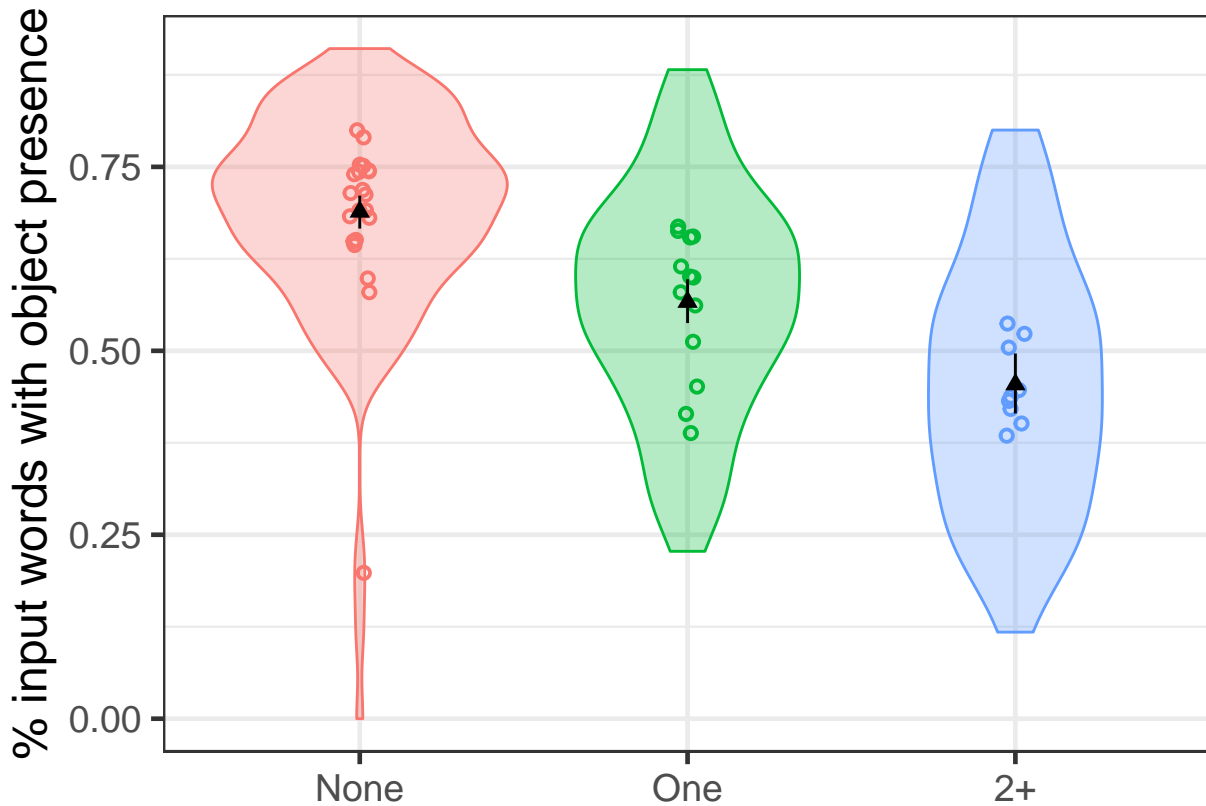304 $= .606$; one vs. 2+: $W=42$, $p=.296$).

Figure 3. Proportion of input words produced with object presence in the input across sibling groups. Error bars and black triangles show 95% CIs and mean proportion of object presence across sibling groups. Dots indicate mean proportion of object presence per infant, collapsing across age and jittered horizontally for visual clarity.

305   **Object presence.**   On average, 60% of utterances were produced in the presence of

306   the relevant object (Mdn=0.60, SD=0.12). We hypothesized that infants with more

307   siblings would hear fewer words in referentially transparent conditions (i.e. they would

308   experience lower object presence) than those with fewer siblings. Indeed, modelling the

309   quantity of object present tokens that infants heard, we find a significant effect for sibling

310   group on object presence $(\chi^2(2) = 26.09$, $p< .001)$. See Figure 3. Infants with no siblings

311   experienced 23% more object presence in their input than those with two or more siblings,

and 12% more than those with one sibling. Post-hoc comparisons revealed significant

between-group differences: infants with no siblings experienced significantly more object

presence than those with one sibling (W=234, $p<$ .001, (a=0.02)). Likewise, infants with

one sibling experienced significantly more object presence those with two or more siblings

(W=20, p=.009). See Table 4.

Discussion

We investigated the nature of infant language development in relation to number of

children in the household. Previous research found a delay in lexical acquisition for

later-born infants (Fenson et al., 1994; Hoff, 2006), with differences in input across birth

order reported as a root cause. Our results add several new dimensions to this, by testing

for differences across more vs. fewer older siblings, and by looking at input during

child-centered home recordings. Infants with more siblings were reported to say fewer

words by 18 months, heard fewer nouns from their parents and siblings, and experienced

less 'object co-presence' when hearing them. However, controlling for amount of input, all

groups heard around the same proportion of typically early-acquired words.

Importantly, and in contrast with some previous research (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998;

Oshima-Takane & Robbins, 2003), infants with one sibling showed no delay in lexical

production and minimal reduction in input in comparison to first-born infants. That is, our

results suggest that simply having a sibling does not contribute to input or vocabulary

differences across children (as measured here), while having more than one siblings seems

to do so. Indeed, infants with zero and one sibling had similar results for productive

vocabulary, parental noun input overall, and early-acquired nouns in the input (but not

object presence, which we return to below). In contrast, infants with two or more siblings

said fewer words, and also heard fewer input words with proportionally less object

co-presence, compared with their peers.

337   When we considered the effect of sibling status – that is, whether or not infants had

338 any siblings, disregarding specific sibling number – our findings showed that having siblings

339 made no difference to infants' lexical production capacities. This contrasts with

340 Hoff-Ginsberg (1998), who found that, by 18 months, laterborns exhibit lower language

341 skills. However, Oshima-Takane and colleagues (1996) found no overall differences between

342 first- and second-born children across a range of language measures taken at 21 months.

343 Our finer-grained results suggest a greater role for *sibling quantity* over first- vs. later-born

344 status. The more older siblings a child had, the lower their reported productive vocabulary

345 at 18 months. This adds to findings from Fenson and colleagues (1994), who found a weak

346 but significant negative correlation between birth order and production of both words and

347 gestures. Controlling for age, our model showed that for each additional older sibling,

348 infants produced more than 30% fewer words by 18 months. While infants with more

349 siblings heard less input speech overall, having one sibling did not significantly reduce the

350 number of nouns in an infant's input. This is in direct contrast with reports from the

351 literature; Hoff (2006) states that "when a sibling is present, each child receives less speech

352 directed solely at…her *because mothers produce the same amount of speech whether*

353 *interacting with one or two children*" (p.67, italics added). While this does not appear to

354 be the case in the present dataset, it may be due to the circumstances of the

355 home-recorded data: while siblings were present in many of the recordings (72.16% of

356 recordings in which the target child had a sibling), given the focus of the data collection,

357 parents may have had a tendency to direct their attention - and consequently their

358 linguistic input - more towards the target child. Alternatively, our results may diverge from

359 those of Hoff (2006) due to the nature of our input measure, which only took nouns into

360 account. However, Bulgarelli and Bergelson (2020) show that nouns are a reliable proxy for

361 overall input in this dataset, thus suggesting that this measure provides an appropriate

362 representation of overall input directed at the target child.

363   Moreover, infants with siblings did not hear much speech from their older brothers

364 and sisters. This is contrary to our hypothesis, as having more siblings did not predict

365 more sibling input. Similar findings are reported in a lab-based interaction study by

366 Oshima-Takane and Robbins (2003), who found that older siblings rarely talked directly to

367 the target child; instead, most input from siblings was overheard speech from

368 sibling-mother interactions. However, results from Havron and colleagues (2019) indirectly

369 suggest that speech from siblings may affect language development, and not necessarily in

370 a negative direction. They found that children with older brothers had lower verbal skills

371 than children with no siblings; children with older sisters did not show this effect. The

372 authors propose that this differential effect could be due sisters having positive effects on

373 language development (i.e., the effect is derived from supportive sibling input), or perhaps

374 due to brothers' additional demands on caregiver time and attention, thus directing

375 caregiver attention away from the target child (i.e., the effect is derived from changes to

376 caregiver input). We did not analyse sibling sex in our data, but future analyses could

377 consider input speech in relation to sibling sex.

378   The 'sibling effect' was most marked in our analysis of object presence. In this case,

379 even having one sibling led to fewer word-object pairs presented in the input. Presence of a

380 labeled object with congruent input speech is known to be supportive in early word

381 learning: Bergelson and Aslin (2017) combined analysis of this home-recorded data with an

382 experimental study to show that word-object co-presence in naturalistic caregiver input

383 supported comprehension of nouns when tested using eye-tracking. Gogate and colleagues

384 (2000) state that contingent word production supports the learning of novel word-object

385 combinations, as "multimodal motherese" - whereby a target word is produced in

386 synchrony with its referent, often involving movement or touch of the object - supports

387 word learning by demonstrating novel word-object combinations. Indeed, lower rates of

388 referential transparency in children's input have also been proposed to explain why

389 common non-nouns like *hi* and *uh-oh* are learned later than concrete nouns (Bergelson &

390 Swingley, 2013).

391   The one measure that did not generate any kind of sibling effect was infants'

392 exposure to early-acquired (CDI) words; infants heard roughly the same proportion of CDI

393 nouns in the input regardless of how many siblings they had. This may be due to

394 limitations of our analysis, which take into account only nouns, accounting for 224 word

395 types in total. This may not be enough to account for input differences between groups.

396 Alternatively, proportion of CDI nouns may not have differed because when speech was

397 directed at the infant, the nouns produced by the caregiver were those we would expect in

398 speech directed at a baby. As reported above, input from siblings was low overall, and so

399 perhaps unlikely to affect the lexical characteristics of the input.

400   Object presence varied more linearly across sibling quantity, suggesting it may be a

401 less critical driver of early word production. Given that infants with one sibling heard

402 approximately the same number of object words in the input than those with no siblings,

403 this may be the most crucial factor in predicting a child's vocabulary size by 18 months.

404 Alternatively, the reduced object presence for children with one sibling may have been

405 compensated for in other ways we did not measure here, which in turn resulted in the

406 indistinguishable vocabulary difference in the 0 and 1 sibling children at 18 months.

407   More generally, one possibility raised by these results is that perhaps parents are able

408 to compensate or provide relatively similar input and learning support for one or two

409 children, but once children outnumber parents, this balancing act of attention, care, and

410 time, becomes unwieldy. While the current sample is relatively limited and homogenous in

411 the family structures and demographics it includes, future work could fruitfully investigate

412 this possibility by considering whether (controlling for other potential contributors like

413 SES, Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998) the presence of more caregivers (whether parents, relatives, or

414 other adults) helps foster language development.

415   Alternatively, second-borns might 'even out' with children with no siblings due to a

416 trade-off between direct attention from the caregiver and the possibility of more

sophisticated social-communicative interactions. For these infants there is still ample opportunity to engage with the mother in one-to-one interactions, allowing a higher share of her attention than is available to third- or later-borns. Furthermore, triadic interactions can benefit the development of a number of linguistic and communication skills (Barton & Tomasello, 1991; Dunn & Shatz, 1989). Second-borns may also benefit from overheard speech in their input, supporting the acquisition of nouns and even more complex lexical categories (Floor & Akhtar, 2006; Oshima-Takane et al., 1996). For infants with one sibling, the benefits of observing/overhearing interactions between sibling and caregiver, as well as the possibility for partaking in such interactions, may outweigh the decrease in some aspects of the input (i.e., in our data, only observed in object presence). Having more than one sibling may throw this off-balance.

Importantly, the present results make no claims about eventual outcomes for these children: generally speaking, regardless of sibling number, all typically-developing infants reach full and fluent language use. Indeed, some research suggests that sibling effects, while they may be clear in early development, are not always sustained into childhood; e.g. twins are known to experience a delay in language development into the third year, but are quick to catch up thereafter (Dales, 1969; Tomasello, Mannle, & Kruger, 1986). This demonstrates the cognitive adaptability of early development, which brings about the acquisition of language across varying and allegedly 'imperfect' learning environments. Infants' capacity to develop linguistic skills from the resources that are available to them – whether that is infant-directed object labels or overheard abstract concepts – highlights the dynamic and adaptable nature of early cognitive development, and a system that is sufficiently robust to bring about the same outcome across populations.

Of course, the 'success' of early language development is defined by how success is measured. Here we chose word production as our measure of linguistic capability; we did not consider other equally valid measures such as language comprehension or early social-interaction skills. Similarly, our input measures focused on nouns; other lexical

classes may reveal different effects, though they are generally sparser until toddlerhood. There is also some imbalance in group sizes across our data; our sample was not pre-selected for sibling number, and so group sizes are unmatched across the analysis. Including a larger number of infants with 2+ siblings may have revealed a different pattern of results. Finally, more work across wider and larger populations is necessary to unpack the generalizability of the present results. Our sample is refelective of average household sizes in middle-class families across North America and Western Europe (Office for National Statistics, 2018; United States Census Bureau, 2010), but it is not unusual in some communities and parts of the world for households to include between three and six children on average (Institute for Family Studies & Wheatley Institution, 2019). Adding to this, it is also necessary to consider cross-cultural differences in the way children are addressed by their parents. Casillas, Brown and Levinson (2019) found that almost all of Tseltal Mayan children's input came from speech directed at other people (21 minutes per hour, compared with just under 4 minutes/hour of specifically child-directed input), while Shneidman and Goldin-Meadow (2012) found that 69% of speech directed at Mayan children came from siblings (in comparison with 10% for children in the USA).

In conclusion, our results support the general findings from the literature showing that later-born infants have slower lexical acquisition than their first-born peers. However, we highlight an important difference from previous findings, namely that in the present sample, second-born infants show no such effect, while infants with more than two siblings have significantly smaller vocabularies at age 18 months. We related this directly to the infants' input over a period of one year. Future studies should consider the granularity of more versus fewer siblings, and how this relates to language abilities over the course of development.

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