

What we know about: Early childhood language development

Learning to use and understand language is a component of the business of childhood. In our society, language competence is required for success in learning and, ultimately, to support optimal economic participation, social engagement and life-long health outcomes. There is increasing awareness of the importance of 'on-track' language skills development, and a focus on identifying children whose language skills lag behind that of their peers.

In recent years there has been an increased investment in longitudinal studies that look how language develops throughout childhood. Evidence emerging from these studies challenges some prevailing views on early language development and our approach to intervention. Consideration of this evidence is crucial in determining how we allocate resources to support young children's language development.

What we now know about early language development:

- The first five years of life are critically important for the development of language
- Language learning is effortless for the vast majority of children
- Language development is dynamic and does not necessarily follow a predictable pathway. Language development can accelerate, plateau and sometimes even go backwards.
- The development of intelligence, language, emotions and social skills is highly interrelated
- Language development (and impairment) is informed by both genetics and a child's environment. Nurturing caregivers and a rich social context are critical for optimal development, starting right from birth.
- Late talking is not a reliable predictor of later language difficulties.
 - Late talkers make up about 20% of two year olds
 - Most late talkers (75%) will have appropriate language at 4yo
 - A significant percentage of children (6% of all children) will have appropriate language at 2yo but language impairment at 4yo.
 - Multiple longitudinal studies from different countries (including Australia, Norway and the United Kingdom) are consistent with this message.
- It is difficult to predict which children are likely to have a persistent language impairment but we know that language impairment is more likely when there is:
 - a family history of language or learning difficulties
 - other developmental impairments
 - socio-demographic vulnerabilities
- Risk factors are not predictors of individual outcomes
- Persistent language impairment that is likely to impact on learning and health outcomes may only become evident as children transition to school and/or as they progress through the primary years

Early intervention for late language development in the early years:

Early Intervention is generally seen as being highly desirable. However there may be some assumptions made about the practice of early intervention that are challenged by emerging evidence.

Common assumptions might be that:

1. We know what language impairment in the early years is
2. We can correctly identify language impairment early in life
3. We know the developmental trajectory of language impairment when diagnosed early
4. We know that a specific intervention will improve the outcome for a child, beyond what is expected by developmental trajectory

What this means for practice:

- Late talking is not a reliable predictor of later language difficulties. The high rate of variability of language development at two years of age means that it is inaccurate to use late talking in-and-of-itself as a diagnostic measure and inefficient to use it as the basis of treatment
- At this time, we can't reliably predict how a child's language will track (that is if they will stay the same, catch up or fall behind)
- Those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are least likely to catch up
- Late talking may be an indicator of broader developmental difficulties so must be considered alongside other aspects of early development, particularly if known risk factors are evident
- Developmental service providers need to become more skilled at identifying those children destined for lasting language impairment, and
- Intervention and support needs to be understood broadly. Alternative service models need to be tested to meet the demand for language support in a way that is evidence-based and equitable. This includes using universal platforms to support early language development in and across real life settings.

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