

Critical Review: What Presenting Speech and Language Characteristics of Late Talkers Distinguish Those Who Recover from Those Who Do Not?

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This critical review examines what presenting speech and language characteristics of late talkers distinguish those who recover from those who do not. One systematic review, one randomized controlled trial and eight cohort studies are reviewed. Overall, research suggests that children may be more at risk for persistent difficulties if they have lower scores in expressive language, receptive language, symbolic gesture use and functional communication. However, models of prediction are far from perfect and the decision of whether or not to provide treatment is still largely based on speech-language pathologists' informal clinical judgments. Clinical implications for decisions regarding early intervention are discussed.

Introduction

Speech-language pathologists working in preschool settings frequently receive referrals for children under the age of three who are experiencing significant delays in the development of language skills relative to their same-age peers. These children are commonly referred to as late-talkers. Studies have estimated that of the 10% of toddlers who exhibit a delay in language acquisition, approximately 55-60% will "catch up" and exhibit age appropriate language skills by the time they enter Kindergarten (Dale, Price, Bishop, & Plomin, 2003; Thal & Tobias, 1992). Although this is encouraging, it also means that somewhere between 40-45% of these children will continue to have significant language difficulties. It is generally accepted that there are substantial benefits to providing early language intervention in the preschool period (Olswang, Rodriguez, and Timler, 1998). However, it is also generally accepted that speech-language pathologists must strive to attain the most efficient use of resources and that interventions should result in changes that would otherwise not occur on their own.

Objective

The purpose of this paper is to critically review the existing late talker literature on presenting speech and language characteristics that predict the outcome of language delay. In doing so, clinicians can make informed decisions regarding which children are most likely to catch up to their peers and in contrast, which children are most likely to have a persistent language delay or disorder and following from this distinction, make the appropriate recommendations for therapy.

Methods

Search Strategy:

Relevant articles were found by searching computerized databases, including ProQuest, Medline and PsycINFO.

A variety of different search strategies were employed using the key terms: (late talker), (language delay), (catch up), and (natural history). The search was limited to articles written in English between 1990 and 2008.

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Finally, Rescorla (2005) published an article outlining the age 13 outcomes of these children, including the variance that could be accounted for by age two predictors. Hierarchical regression analyses found that LDS vocabulary score at age two was a significant predictor of age 13 scores, explaining some of the variance in vocabulary (14%), grammar (13%), verbal memory (21%) and reading comprehension (14%). In agreement with Rescorla, Roberts, and Dahlsgaard (1997) and Rescorla and Schwartz (1990), receptive language and nonverbal ability did not explain any of the variance in age 13 outcomes. However, as mentioned previously, all children in this study had average receptive language and nonverbal IQ scores at intake.

predictors of outcome of language delay (Paul, 2000; Dale et al., 2003; and Roulstone et al., 2003)

Discussion

Considering the significant variety in the methodologies of the studies included in this critical review, it is not surprising that the results are quite variable. Factors such

