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Speech Delay in Kids Linked to Later Emotional Problems

Study Shows Language Delays at Age 5 May Lead to Mental Health Issues in Adulthood

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June 28, 2010 -- Children with speech delays may be at greater risk for developing social, emotional, or behavioral problems as adults, according to a 29-year study in the July issue of *Pediatrics*.

Researchers used a standardized test to measure receptive language skills -- the ability to understand what others are saying -- among 6,941 children at age 5. Follow-up data were available on 72% of these children when they turned 34.

Overall, children who showed signs of delays in receptive language skills at age 5 were more likely to experience [mental health](#) problems at age 34 than children who did not experience such delays. These findings were more pronounced among men than women, the study shows.

“The psychosocial consequences of early receptive language problems are pervasive and continue into adult life,” conclude the researchers, who were led by Ingrid Schoon, PhD, professor of human development and social policy at the Institute of Education of the University of London. “The needs of children with early language problems are complex, and increased awareness should be paid to the persisting social and psychological difficulties that these children may go on to experience.”

Parents Play Crucial Role

Early language delays can affect a child’s ability to socialize with peers and make friends. This social isolation can carry over into their adult years. This may manifest itself as trouble cultivating and maintaining [relationships](#) and/or holding down a job, both of which can be harbingers for mental or behavioral health problems.

Those children with language delays were more likely to be born to teenage moms or parents with low educational levels than children who did not show signs of language delays at age 5. What’s more, parents of language-delayed kids were more likely to be stressed, showed less interest in their child’s education, and did not read regularly to their child.

“These findings mirror what we see in practice,” says Carl B. Feinstein, MD, the endowed director of child and adolescent [psychiatry](#) at Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital in Palo Alto, Calif. “Delayed language is a huge risk factor for social and emotional problems, but this link doesn’t get as much attention as it should.”

“Delayed receptive language is very strongly associated with delays in learning in school, and getting behind in school is a huge risk for emotional problems and poor self-esteem,” Feinstein says. “This important and sound new study shows that it also affects how well these kids do in life.”

But “parents can do a lot,” he says. “How much you read to your children and the attention you pay to their education makes a difference. Speaking to your child and taking time to have a back-and-forth conversation is also helpful.”

The new findings represent “a call to action,” Feinstein says. “If you have concerns, go to the pediatrician and ask for a speech and language assessment, and if the child goes to school, request that the school provide an assessment,” he suggests.

Early Intervention Best



“The results from this study suggest that children who experience poor receptive language skills in early childhood are more likely to experience lower levels of mental health in adulthood than the [children] with normal [language development](#),” explains Melissa Wexler Gurfein, a speech-language pathologist in New York. “These findings are not surprising as children with poor receptive language skills often fall behind in social situations, as well as academic situations,” she tells WebMD in an email.

“With this, a language-delayed child may experience low self-esteem, which, without intervention, may impact on how this child transitions throughout childhood and into adulthood.”

This is not to say children with language delays are a lost cause, she says. “It is important to provide the right support and intervention for a child who is experiencing language delays,” she says. “The earlier a child receives proper intervention, the more successful that intervention might be.”

Wexler’s advice to parents and pediatricians? “It is important to identify a child who is suspected of having a language delay and begin treatment for the delay to hopefully not only help the child catch up to his same-age peers, but also to provide the support he needs to be successful in life.”

Joslin Zeplin-Paradise, a speech-language pathologist in New York, agrees. “A language delay is not a setup to fail,” she tells WebMD. “It is an opportunity to seek help and get to the root cause of the problem,” she says, adding that there are many, many potential causes for speech delays.

“When parents go the extra step, their children can -- and often do -- catch up,” says Zeplin-Paradise.

That said, “I have not seen a direct correlation between children who are language delayed and children who have psychosocial/emotional issues.”

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SOURCES:

Schoon, I. *Pediatrics*, 2010; vol 126.

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