



Late Talkers and the Risk of Psychological & Social Challenges



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Pediatrics recently published the first peer-reviewed investigation of the long-term impact of expressive vocabulary delay *at age two* on behavior and emotional functioning into adolescence.¹ Previous studies have established a correlation between school-aged language impairment and the risk for a number of behavioral and emotional disturbances including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and internalizing problems.²⁻⁶ Data in the current study by Whitehouse and colleagues shows that late talkers identified at age 2 trend 48% more likely to have clinically significant disturbed emotions and behaviors at age 17.



Whitehouse's new data adds to the conversation about the comparative merits between early intervention and a wait-and-see approach. While many delays identified in pre-school years normalize independently, an important number of these children do not outgrow their difficulties. The long-term repercussions of speech and language delays are not limited to the psychosocial morbidity observed in the current study. Parents also rightly concern themselves with academic and career success and social challenges that do not rise to the clinical threshold.^{3,4,9} Research suggests that 20% to 60% of children with expressive language delay do not outgrow their difficulties.⁷⁻¹¹ Speech therapy has repeatedly been shown to produce short-term and long-term improvements in children with primary impairments of speech and language.¹²⁻¹⁴

In a later interview with Medscape Medical News, Michelle Macias, MD, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics section on developmental and behavioral pediatrics, responded to the new study.¹⁵ Dr. Macias states the Academy's policy is that missing vocabulary milestones at age two should trigger a hearing check, a screen for autism, and a "full language assessment with a speech language pathologist." Pediatric speech therapy proves most effective when it is early and intensive. "You actually don't want to do too much watching and waiting if they truly have a language delay," says Dr. Macias.



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