

# Research Snapshot

Summarising findings and their implications



NUMBER 4 MAY 2014

## Late talking: does parenting behaviour hold the key?

Language development in the pre-school years is effortless for many children. For other children, it can be characterised by variability. Some children are late talkers but then catch up, while others reach development milestones and then fall behind. Often it is unclear why this happens and which pathway an individual child will follow. We know that language is shaped by both genetics and the environment; and parenting behaviour has long been considered one of the most important environmental influences.

Many studies have shown that parenting behaviour shapes a child's development in a general sense. Recent studies have also suggested that the way a parent engages with their child's attempts to communicate can influence their child's language outcomes specifically. These studies have focused on examining responsive behaviours, such as 'imitation' (where a parent repeats what their child has said) and/or 'expansion' (where a parent repeats and adds to what their child has said) as these behaviours have been most consistently linked to language development.

Understanding the connection between responsive behaviours and language outcomes is important for two reasons. Firstly, because it may help us identify those children most at risk of persistent language impairment. Secondly, because it may help us identify which behaviours to promote through interventions.

### Aims

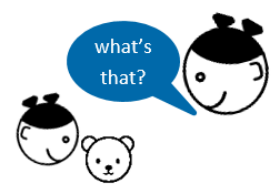
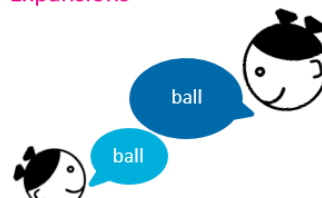
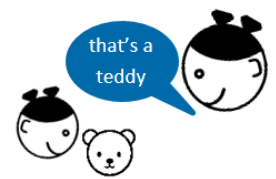
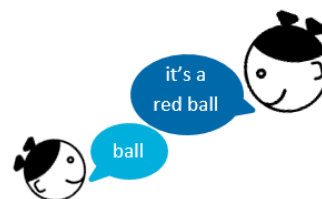
It has not previously been possible to meaningfully compare the results of existing studies of parent responsive behaviours due to the varied methods and definitions used.

The aim of our Let's Learn Language study was to determine which parenting behaviours best promote language development in toddlers who appeared to be late talkers (learn more in Research Snapshot 2).

### Key findings

This study monitored the language of 251 toddlers between 18 and 36 months. At the same time their mother's use of six types of responsive behaviours was observed.

## Types of responsive behaviours studied



'Girl' graphic courtesy of Peacock Dream, 'bear' graphic courtesy of Kim Eriksson, The Noun Project

This was achieved using a combination of face-to-face language assessments and a 15-minute video recording of play between mother and child.

We found that:

- The more a mother used 'expansion', 'imitation' or 'responsive questioning' behaviours, the more her child was able to both understand others and express themselves.
- The more a mother used 'expansion' behaviours, the greater the improvement in her child's language between two and three years.

We also found that:

- High levels of 'labelling' behaviour were associated with poorer language production at three years.

Partners:



# “Responsive behaviours could be an effective component of language promotion strategies.”



This may be because parents use ‘labelling’ when their child has language difficulties so they don’t respond well to other, more involved engagement styles and not because ‘labelling’ itself leads to poor language outcomes.

## Implications

### For policy and practice

#### **Responsive behaviours may help us identify children most at risk for persistent language problems.**

By itself, late talking is neither an accurate diagnostic marker nor a reason for intervention. However, knowing about a child’s exposure to parental responsive behaviours may help us home in on those children most likely to develop persistent language impairments. Better identification would ensure not only that those children that are most likely to need special support receive it, but also that scarce public resources are used most efficiently.

#### **Responsive behaviours could be an effective component of language promotion strategies.**

There is clear value in teaching and encouraging primary caregivers to use behaviours such as ‘expansion’, ‘imitation’ and ‘responsive questioning’ to help children develop robust language skills. This could for example, be promoted through existing early child health services such as child and family health nurse checks or through childcare practice standards. Although the particular parenting behaviour education program tested in the Let’s Learn Language trial (learn more in Research Snapshot 3) was not particularly impactful, this is not to say that these parenting behaviours are not important or that a different program, delivered in a different way, at a different time might produce different results.

### For research

#### **How reliably responsive behaviour predicts longer term language ability should be tested.**

The way primary carers respond to a child’s attempts at communication in the first 36 months shapes children’s early language abilities. However, because language development can be variable and unpredictable in the pre-school years it is important to confirm whether these behaviours have long-term effects – that is, if they reliably predict language outcomes when children are four years or older. If responsive behaviours have an enduring effect on language outcomes, this strengthens the evidence for promoting these behaviours in early intervention and prevention strategies.

#### **There is clear value in finding a model that successfully promotes certain parental behaviours.**

The Let’s Learn Language trial found virtually no difference in the language outcomes of children whose parents participated in a responsive behaviours intervention program and children whose parents did not. At the same time however, there is a distinct connection between responsive behaviours and language outcomes. Given this puzzle, there is benefit in exploring why the intervention model was ineffective and what could be modified.

## Study details

The Let’s Learn Language project involved both a prospective longitudinal study and an intervention trial. Maternal and child health nurses invited families to join the project when their child came in for their routine well-child check-up at 12 months. The project recruited 1138 children born between May and December 2006 who lived in three local government areas in Melbourne representing a mix of socioeconomic status. At 18 months of age, the children’s expressive language levels was assessed based on screening questionnaires completed by the parents. Children in the bottom 20 per cent were enrolled in the longitudinal study. When the children turned two and three, a trained research assistant visited their home to conduct an assessment of child expressive (what they say) and receptive (what they understand) language abilities. At the two year visit, the mother and child were also videotaped during 15 minutes of free-play.

## Suggested citation

Levickis, P., McKean, C. (2014) Late talking: does parenting behaviour hold the key? Centre for Research Excellence in Child Language, Research Snapshot 4.

### Published article details

Levickis P, Reilly S, Girolametto L, Ukoumunne O, Wake M. Maternal behaviors that promote early language acquisition in slow-to-talk toddlers: Prospective community-based study. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*. Epub ahead of print, 17 Apr 2014

## About us

The Centre of Research Excellence in Child Language is a collaboration of child language experts. It uses the latest approaches in molecular genetics, neuro-imaging, epidemiology, biostatistics and health economics to investigate factors that affect and improve child language and development.

The centre is funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

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