



## Should Parents “Wait and See” When it Comes to Language Intervention?

Keya is 23-months old and she seems to be developing typically in every way, except for her speech. She uses only about 50 words, and doesn't put words together into little sentences like other children her age. She loves going to the park, being read to and playing with her toys, but her Mom and Dad are a bit worried because much younger children talk more than she does. Grandma dismisses their concerns, saying that Keya will talk when she's ready. Their pediatrician agrees that Keya's speech is a little bit behind, but tells Mom and Dad that this is fairly common, and suggests that they wait and see if she catches up on her own in the next few months.

Ben is 16-months old. He says only about 3 words, but only when he needs or wants something. For example, he says “Tuck” when he can't reach his toy truck on a shelf. He doesn't respond to his name and never points to things or looks where his parents point. He's hard to play with because he seems to prefer to spend time alone with his cars and trucks. The doctor says that, because Ben has started to use words, he may catch up if they give it some time.

What should Keya and Ben's parents do? Should they wait and hope that their children catch up or should they ask for a referral to a speech-language pathologist or some other professional?

### Using Milestones to Guide Decisions to Seek Help

Keya's parents would be helped by knowing that, by 24 months, most children can say about 100-150 words and

are putting words together to make short sentences of 2-4 words.

Ben's parents may pursue a referral to a speech-language pathologist or a developmental pediatrician if they knew that babies respond to their names and play social games like “Peek-a-boo” with their parents by 9 months of age. In addition, by 12 months, babies point out things to their parents, as well as being able to follow someone else's point.

*Note: For the complete developmental milestones checklists at six, nine, twelve, eighteen, twenty-four and thirty months, [click here](#).*

When parents know what to expect in terms of the timeline for their child's developmental milestones, they are more likely to recognize when their child is a bit behind and seek out the help of a professional. Parents who know what to expect (and know generally *when* to expect it) are also better able to discuss their concerns with their child's pediatrician.

Do parents instinctively know what to expect in terms of their children's development?

A recent study by doctors Heather Paradis and Joseph Gigante suggests that many parents, even those who have children who went through these stages very recently, are not sure what to expect when it comes to their child's developmental milestones. The study goes on to suggest that many pediatricians do not take enough time to educate parents about what to expect and, as a result, children are not being identified as needing some

help and getting treatment at a time when treatment has been proven to be most effective – as early as possible.

### Helping Parents Know What to Expect

With the Paradis and Gigante study's findings in mind, pediatricians are now being advised to take a more active role in educating parents about their child's development. Parents should ask for this information if it is not provided. All things considered, the more information parents have about "typical" and healthy child-development, the better.

Given what we know about the effectiveness of early intervention for children with language delays, our advice to parents of young children who aren't meeting developmental milestones or seem to be delayed in their speech and language development is loud and clear: Don't wait! Seek help!

### Why parents shouldn't "wait and see"

The Early Intervention Canada project says that,

"[child] learning and development is most rapid in the preschool years and thus intervention *should begin as early as possible to enhance the child's development*, and provide support and assistance to the family and to maximize the outcomes for the child and family's opportunities in Canadian society."

The first few years of a child's life are critical for language and communication development and it is easier to help a child catch up if intervention starts early than it is once he or she gets older. Research done at the University of Iowa suggests that children who fall behind during this period will have a much harder time catching up later on, and this can affect

the child's ability to learn to read and write.

### What makes a good early intervention program?

Early Intervention Canada points out that successful early intervention programs have some things in common:

- The age of the child at the beginning of the intervention
- The intensity of treatment
- Parent involvement

Parents may wonder how two-year olds can participate in speech therapy. Well, they don't participate in individual sessions with a speech-language pathologist. Early language intervention is generally provided by speech-language pathologists working with the most important people in a young child's life – their parents.

### Did You Know?

Effective early language intervention programs teach parents to build language intervention into their daily interactions with their children, so that children and parents don't even realize that therapy is, in fact, taking place!

And parents can, and do, learn to become very effective interventionists. In fact, studies on intervention with young children with difficulties with expressive (spoken) language have found that, "There was no difference in the effectiveness of interventions administered by clinicians as compared to trained parents" (Law, Garrett & Nye, 2003).

Hanen programs like It Takes Two to Talk®, More Than Words®, and Target

Word<sup>®</sup> are well-known, and provide early language intervention by helping parents understand how their child's language develops, and how to turn everyday interactions into fun, enjoyable language learning opportunities.

In addition, the Hanen approach can also be used with any clinical service a child receives from a speech-language pathologist. At their core, Hanen programs are about making the most out of *every* parent-child interaction in supporting a child's

language and communication development.

May is "Better Speech and Hearing Month", and what better time to highlight the importance of getting help as early as possible for young children whose language seems to be delayed. Some children outgrow these delays, but many don't. So, considering the well-known benefits of early intervention, along with the risks of delaying treatment, there is, quite simply, no time or reason to wait.

## References

[http://www.earlyinterventioncanada.com/early\\_intervention.html](http://www.earlyinterventioncanada.com/early_intervention.html)

Law J, Garrett Z, Nye C. (2003) Speech and language therapy interventions for children with primary speech and language delay or disorder. *The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2003, Issue 3. Art. No.: CD004110. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD004110.