Vocabulary: A Research Update

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For Better Speech and Hearing Month, we are discussing a favorite topic: vocabulary development!

This article will:

✔ Provide you with the latest evidence confirming the importance of vocabulary in young children

✔ Connect you with other Hanen resources related to vocabulary development

New Research on the Importance of Vocabulary

We know that supporting children’s vocabulary development is extremely important. Recently, two studies have added to the literature on the importance of building children’s vocabularies. Morgan, Farkas, Hilleimeir, Hammer and Maczuga (2015) and Hammer et al. (2017) looked at the outcomes that vocabulary predicts, as well as the factors associated with vocabulary development from a large data set. The studies analyzed data from over 8,000 children and their families who were part of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study.

Study 1

Morgan and colleagues wondered: Is expressive vocabulary in the preschool years predictive of academic and behavioural functioning at kindergarten entry? They asked this research question because greater academic and behavioural functioning at kindergarten entry has been associated with better long term outcomes. For example, children entering kindergarten with better reading and math achievement were more likely to attend college, own homes, and be married (Chetty et al., 2011 as cited in Morgan et al., 2015). So then the question becomes, how do we enhance academic and behavioural functioning before children enter school? Could vocabulary be the answer?
To address their research question, Morgan and colleagues looked at:

- children’s expressive vocabulary at 24 months of age
- academic and behavioural functioning at kindergarten entry
- numerous personal characteristics over time (to investigate if there were other factors contributing to the children’s achievement at kindergarten entry)

**Study 1: Results**

Morgan et al. found that 24-month-old children with **large expressive vocabularies** had the following outcomes at kindergarten entry:

- better reading achievement
- better mathematics achievement
- increased behavioural self-regulation and fewer externalizing behaviours (behaviours that focus outwards, e.g., bullying) and internalizing behaviours (behaviours that focus inwards, e.g., social withdrawal)

These academic and behavioural outcomes could not be explained by anything other than vocabulary. Morgan et al. found that children’s vocabulary scores were related to some of the traits they measured.

Having a **large expressive vocabulary** was associated with:

- Having parents who were responsive and supportive
- Being female
- Being from families with higher socioeconomic status (SES)

Children with **small expressive vocabularies** were more likely to:

- Be born with very low birth weight
- Have mothers who had mental health difficulties

**Study 2**

Hammer and her colleagues looked at children who had **small vocabularies** using the data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study in more detail (2017). They investigated if children who were late to talk at 24 months-of-age continued to have small vocabularies at 48 months. They also looked at the impact of low vocabulary on school readiness. They analyzed data collected as early as 9 months of age and compared it to 24, 48 and 60 months-of-age.

**Study 2: Results**

Hammer et al. found that being a late talker increased children’s risk of having low vocabulary at 48 months. In fact, one quarter of children who were late talkers at 24 months had a low vocabulary at 48 months.
It was also found that low vocabulary predicted poor school readiness in the following ways:

- Children who were considered late talkers at 24 months (including the children who did not have low vocabulary scores at school entry) had an increased risk of low reading achievement at 60 months
- Being late to talk was significantly associated with low math scores
- Having a low vocabulary count at 24 and 48 months was correlated with externalizing behaviour problems at 60 months
- Having low vocabulary scores at 48 months (but not 24 months) was correlated with internalizing behaviour problems at 60 months

Hammer et al. identified the following factors that placed children at risk of being late talkers at 24 months-of-age:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Characteristics</th>
<th>Family Characteristics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lower SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately low birth weight</td>
<td>Siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In day care for less than 10 hours/week</td>
<td>Mother’s age: over 35 years when the child was born</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attentional difficulties</td>
<td>Less responsive, involved parenting</td>
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Interestingly, being in child care for more than 10 hours per week decreased the odds of low reading and math performance at kindergarten entry.

The results of the studies by Morgan et al. and Hammer et al. indicate that vocabulary predicts early school achievement and functioning. These outcomes underscore the importance of building vast vocabularies in the preschool years.

**Vocabulary Resources**

Target Word™ – The Hanen Program® for Parents of Children who are Late Talkers supports parents of young children who have expressive vocabulary delays. The articles discussed above describe general risk factors for having a small vocabulary. In Target Word, the factors that put children at risk for ongoing speech and language delays are considered. Learn more about Target Word.

We can help parents increase their child’s vocabulary by sharing resources, like the parent friendly version of this article and the 2018 Hanen Preschool Calendar. The 2018 Hanen Preschool Calendar on language and literacy skills has practical tips for parents to use with their children who are typically developing, at risk of having delays or who have language delays. The calendar offers strategies around monthly themes that promote language and literacy skills, including vocabulary development (i.e., build children’s everyday vocabulary and expose children to rare and unusual vocabulary).
Summary

Research continues to identify vocabulary as a very important foundation for communication and academic success. Supporting families of children who have small vocabularies is an important role we play. I hope that you have found the connections to other vocabulary resources helpful!

References


About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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