



## A Closer Look at the Late Talker Study: Why Parents Should Beware of a 'Wait and See' Approach

The results of a recent [Australian study on the emotional outcomes of late talking toddlers](#) have been reported under headlines such as, "[Late Talkers Do Fine as They Grow Up.](#)" The Hanen Centre cautions that such headlines might give false assurance to parents who notice that their child is late to talk.

The new study, led by psychologist Andrew Whitehouse at the University of Western Australia in Perth, showed that there were no lasting behavioral or emotional problems associated with late talking (the study showed that behaviour problems had disappeared by age 5 and were not seen in any of the follow-up assessments). However, news headlines such as "[Late-Talking Toddlers Likely to Be Fine by Age 5](#)" may be misleading because the study measured behavioral and emotional outcomes *only*; the children were **not** assessed for *language* outcomes, so we cannot make the assumption that they went on to be "fine" in the area of language development.

We know that 70-80% of late talking toddlers will outgrow a language delay *if it is an expressive delay only* (i.e. involves only spoken language, with no delays in comprehension and/or social use of language) [1]. While this is encouraging, it still means that a significant proportion (20-30%) will **not** catch up to their peers. Research shows that when children don't catch up in their language skills, they have persistent language difficulties, as well as difficulty with reading and writing when they get to school [2].

Elaine Weitzman, speech-language pathologist and Executive Director of The Hanen Centre, says that while a 'wait and see' approach for late talkers may be appropriate in the area of behavior, it is not advised in the area of language development.

"It's very difficult to predict which late talkers will catch up and which will fall into the 20-30% group who don't," [3] Weitzman cautions. "A 'wait and see' approach simply delays treatment that can make a huge difference to a child who needs it." When parents notice that their toddler isn't reaching the appropriate language milestones for his age, Weitzman recommends that they get an assessment from a licensed speech-language pathologist, who will help them decide whether intervention is necessary.

Research clearly shows that the earlier a child with a delay receives help, the better his or her outcome will be [4]. In Ontario, the Ministry of Children and Youth has recognized this urgency by significantly increasing its funding for speech and language services in an effort to lower the age of referral to age two and to ensure that every child arrives at school ready and able to learn.

It is also important that parents *take part* in their child's speech and language therapy to ensure the best possible outcome. Speech therapy for late talking toddlers does not involve "treatment" for the child as much as *support* and *guidance* for the parents. A study on the outcomes of late-talking toddlers (with significant expressive

*"Research shows that when children don't catch up in their language skills, they have persistent language difficulties, as well as difficulty with reading and writing when they get to school."*

*"A 'wait and see' approach simply delays treatment that can make a huge difference to a child who needs it."*

delays), whose parents participated in It Takes Two to Talk® – The Hanen Program® for Parents showed that these children started talking and moved into using short sentences, whereas a no-treatment group did not show the same improvement [5]. ([Click here](#) for a research summary on It Takes Two to Talk® – The Hanen Program® for Parents). This study shows that parents can learn to help their own children if they are taught how. Based on these positive findings, The Hanen Centre developed a program for parents of late talking toddlers, called Target Word®, in which parents learn to use language building strategies that increase their child’s expressive vocabulary during everyday family activities.

“We know that the window of opportunity is greatest when a child is very young”, says Weitzman. “If a toddler is late in his or her language development, parents will never regret acting early. They might, however, regret acting too late.”

For more information on Late Talkers, [click here](#).

---

## References

1. Ellis EM, Thal DJ. (2008) Early language delay and risk for language impairment. *Perspect Lang Learn Ed.*, 15(3): 93-100.
2. Sharma M., Purdy, S.C. & Kelly, A.S. (2009). Comorbidity of auditory processing, language, and reading disorders. *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, 52(3),706-22.
3. Dale, P., Price, T., Bishop, D., & Plomin, R. (2003). Outcomes of early language delay: I. Predicting persistent and transient language difficulties at 3 and 4 years. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 46, 544-560
4. Rosetti, L.M. (1996). Communication intervention: Birth to three. San Diego: Singular Publishing.
5. Girolametto, L., Pearce, P. S., & Weitzman, E. (1996). Interactive focused stimulation for toddlers with expressive vocabulary delays. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, 39, 1274–1283.

### 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](http://www.hanen.org).*

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)