



Late Talkers...What We Know, and What We Don't

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What do we mean by a "Late Talker?" This is a toddler who is late to start using words despite what seems to be otherwise typical development. Late talking children are puzzling because they understand much of what is said to them, have good play skills, and interact well with their caregivers. Despite these skills, their vocabulary is limited compared to other children their age.

Looking at what research tells us about Late Talkers can help us decide if a late talking child needs some help. Here's a summary of what we know, and don't yet know, about late talking children.

What we *don't* know about Late Talkers

- **We don't know why Late Talkers are late to start using words**
 - No one has been able to figure out why these children are late to start talking. There's no obvious reason for their language delay. Researchers are looking into the role that genetics may play.
- **We don't know which late talking children might catch up to their peers**
 - Many Late Talkers seem to catch up to their peers by the time they begin school [1]. However, 20-30% of late talking children continue to have problems with language development. At this point, we can't tell for sure which late talking children will have ongoing problems with language. We can only tell which toddlers may be *more likely* to have continued difficulties.

What we *do* know...and it's a lot!

While it might seem like we don't know a lot about Late Talkers, researchers have actually discovered many things about this group of children that help us make decisions about how to help them.

- **Late Talkers who catch up continue to have subtle difficulties with language**
 - While many Late Talkers seem to catch up to their peers by the time they start school, these children continue to have weaker language skills in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, and listening comprehension [1]. This means that even late talkers who appear to catch up are working at a slight disadvantage when it comes to developing later language and literacy skills.

- **Several factors place a child at greater risk for ongoing language delay**
 - Although we don't know for sure which children will go on to have language difficulties, we do know that [certain factors](#) may make it more likely that a child will experience ongoing issues. For example, Late Talkers who don't use many sounds or gestures, or who have difficulty understanding language, may be at greater risk. Late Talkers who have a family member with a history of language delay are also more likely to have ongoing difficulties.
 - Researchers suggest that late talking children who have some of these risk factors should receive help with their language development as early as possible [1, 2].

- **Early intervention can make a difference!**
 - Researchers strongly suggest that we help all late talking children who have risk factors as soon as possible [2]. When we help toddlers early on, not only does their language improve, but it also helps them develop other skills that depend on language, like reading, social skills, behaviour, and executive function skills (such as planning, organizing, paying attention, controlling impulsive behaviour) [4]. Overall, helping Late Talkers early prevents future difficulties and encourages the skills they need to be successful at school and in their social interactions [2].

- **“Parent implemented intervention” is recommended for Late Talkers [1,2]**
 - “Parent-implemented intervention” is the kind of support for young children in which the parent plays the most important role in helping their child. When parents learn strategies to help their late talking child, it is [as effective - and often more effective -](#) than when speech language pathologists deliver the therapy [5]. This makes sense when you think about how much time parents spend with their child and how many more opportunities they have to support their child's language.

 - Based on research about Late Talkers, the [Target Word™ program](#) is a parent-implemented intervention that helps families promote their late talking toddlers' communication. Two recent studies showed that children make big improvements in their communication skills after attending Target Word™ [6, 7]. For more information about this research, please see the [Target Word™ Research Summary](#).

 - You might also be interested in our other articles about late talking toddlers:
 - [“How to Tell if Your Child is a Late Talker – And What to Do about It”](#)
 - [“A Closer Look at the Late Talker Study: Why Parents Should Beware of a 'Wait and See' Approach”](#)

References

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4. Boaden, D. & Koohi, A. L. (2018). Strengthening Your Child's "Control Centre": How Bilingualism Boosts Executive Functioning. Available online: <http://www.hanen.org/Helpful-Info/Articles/strengthening-childs-control.aspx>.
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6. Annibale, A. (2015, March). Predicting Change In Parent Perceptions Of Children's Communicative Participation Using The FOCUS© Tool. Oral presentation to the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Hamilton, Ontario.
7. Kwok, E. & Earle, C. (2018, November). *A parent-implemented intervention for preschoolers identified as late talkers – Program overview and intervention outcomes*. Presentation at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's annual convention, Boston, MA.

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.

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