



Do Late Talkers “Grow Out of It?”

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A [“Late Talker”](#) is a toddler under 30 months who has a small vocabulary for his or her age, but is developing typically otherwise. It’s easy to assume that these children don’t need extra help because many of them seem to catch up on their own. However, a look at the research tells us that this may not be the case.

Two paths for Late Talkers

Research has shown us that Late Talkers follow one of these paths:

- **Between 20–30% of Late Talkers do not grow out of their language delay.** These children have ongoing difficulties and need intervention to help them with their language and literacy skills [1]. They may receive a diagnosis of language disorder.
- **Between 70–80% of Late Talkers seem to catch up to their peers by the time they enter school.** Sometimes these children are called “late bloomers” because they eventually seem to catch up to other children their age. When their “general language skills” are tested, they score in the average range, which might tell us not to worry anymore. But research tells us that these children still have difficulties that we should not ignore [1].

Late Talkers who seem to catch up continue to have some weaknesses

“Late bloomers” who seem to catch up actually show weaknesses in these areas:

- **Some language and literacy skills** – these include vocabulary, grammar, phonology (rules about the sounds used in a language), reading, understanding and creating stories, writing, and listening comprehension [1]. These subtle weaknesses can continue through adolescence.
- **Other skills that are related to language** – these are skills that rely on language, such as social skills, behaviour, and executive function skills (skills like planning, organizing, paying attention, and controlling impulsive behaviour) [2]
- **How the brain processes speech** – researchers have studied 3 to 5-year olds who had a history of late talking, and noticed that they don't process the speech they hear as easily as other children do. This means that they have immature or less developed speech processing skills, which can interfere with their progress with language and literacy development [3].

While these differences might seem small, it means that Late Talkers who seem to “grow out of it” are working at a disadvantage when it comes to developing later language and literacy skills [3].

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What can we do to help Late Talkers?

We can make a difference for Late Talkers by helping them as early as possible. Early language intervention can increase their odds for long-term success in language, literacy and other important areas [3].

There are several [risk factors](#) which put a late talking child at greater risk for having ongoing difficulties. If a late talker has some of these risk factors, it's recommended that he or she receives some early intervention [4, 5, 6].

The Target Word™ program is one intervention that can help parents learn how to help their child. The program is designed to help parents of Late Talkers learn how to boost their child's communication skills. Parents choose 10 motivating “target words” based on their child's interests, and learn how to repeat and stress these words in a natural way while interacting with their child. By following their child's lead and giving them the words that match their messages, parents create situations in which it's more likely their child will pay attention to the target words and try to say them. This program has been shown to help Late Talkers start to talk as well as use more words and short phrases.

You can learn more about the Target Word™ program [here](#).

You may be interested in our other articles about late talking children:

- [“Late Talkers...What We Know, and What We Don't”](#)
- [“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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2. Boaden, D. & Koochi, 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>.
3. Capone Singleton, N. (2018). Late talkers: Why the wait-and-see approach is outdated. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 65(1), 13-29.
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5. Olswang, L. B., Rodriguez, B., Timler, G. (1998). Recommending Intervention for Toddlers with Specific Language Learning Difficulties: We May Not Have All the Answers, But We Know a Lot. *American Journal of Speech- Language Pathology*, (7)1, 23-32.
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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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