



The Effect of Birth Order on Emerging Language

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“He’s a little late to talk because his older sister does all of the talking for him”.

When a child is late to talk, parents frequently attribute this to a sibling doing the talking for him or her. Is there any truth to it? Is there a relationship between birth order and delayed language development? And do later-born children really take longer to develop speech than first-born children?

What the research says about the impact of birth order on emerging language development

The effect of a child’s birth order on emerging language seems to still be under debate. Berkowitz (2000) states that while birth order, laziness, and bilingualism are all “commonly believed to lead to speech and language delay, their contributory role has never been proved” (p. 55).

Some studies that have examined the effect of birth order on language development include the following findings:

No evidence of language delays more often in later born children

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Tomblin (1990) examined the birth order of second-grade children with and without developmental language impairment in order to determine if language-impaired children were more likely to be later born or earlier born. This study controlled for family size and socioeconomic status, and *did not* find evidence that children with language impairments were more often later born.

Second born children are more advanced in use of pronouns

Oshima-Takane, Goodz & Derevensky (1996) found that the language development of second-born children overall was the same as their first-born siblings, but that second born children were more advanced than first born children in their use of personal pronouns (for example, “he”, “she”, “them” and “they”). They explain that later-born children overhear conversations between caregivers and older siblings, and are thereby exposed to more pronouns than first-born children. The authors claim that their data proves that later-born children are exposed to a different linguistic environment than first-born children, and that “the language second-borns overhear in conversations between caregivers and older siblings is more mature and complex than the language they themselves and firstborns hear in speech directed to them” (p. 631).

Later born children have more advanced conversational skills

Hoff-Ginsberg (1998) found that first-born children were more advanced in vocabulary and grammatical development than later-born children, but that later-born children were more advanced in their conversational skills. This may be attributed to “differences in early language experience” . . .that . . . “may set the stage for later developmental differences” (p. 603). It could be that later born children have to work harder to be included in multi-party conversations between parents and older siblings, which may provide motivation to learn and use the necessary social skills to be included in family conversations. In addition, multi-party conversations may expose the child to more mature language models.

No difference in vocabularies between first- and second-born children

- **Mother may not know best** - Bornstein, Leach and Haynes (2004) found that mothers report larger receptive and expressive vocabularies in their first-borns. However, standardized testing and direct observation showed that there was *no difference in either receptive or expressive vocabulary between first-borns and second-borns*. The authors hypothesize that either mothers think they know their first born children better than they actually do or they “may lack a sufficient frame of reference to be accurate reporters about their firstborn children” (p. 869).
- **After 50-word milestone, no effect of birth order** - Berglund, Eriksson and Westerlund (2005) found that first-born children reached the 50-word milestone earlier than later-born children. However, they found that after children had

reached this 50-word milestone, there were no differences in vocabulary production between first- and later-born children. The authors concluded that “it seems that the effect of birth order is limited to the onset of language production” (p. 490).

Birth order is not a risk factor for language outcomes

In a review of potential risk factors that could predict children’s preschool language outcomes, Reilly, Wake, Bavin, Prior, Williams, Bretherton, Eadie, Barrett and Ukoumunne (2007) determined that birth order (along with 11 other potential risk factors) was *not* a reliable risk factor for language outcomes at age 24 months.

So the research confirms that, while a later birth order doesn’t imply a greater likelihood of language delay, it might influence specific language and social conversational skills. And while parents may perceive that their first-born child acquired words earlier than their later-born child, differences in vocabulary acquisition are either not apparent or are “washed out” by the time children have acquired 50 words. Authors who reported differences in the language abilities of children of differing birth order attribute this to the language stimulation to which children are exposed. The thinking is that first-born children may benefit from more one-to-one attention from their caregivers, but that this stimulation may be less sophisticated in content. On the other hand, later-born children benefit from overheard conversations between caregivers and other siblings as well as multiparty conversations including the later-born child, which may offer more mature language modeling. These differing language environments may have an impact on the language strengths of each child as she or he develops.

In summary...

Based on the research, we can parents can be assured that language delays are not caused by older siblings talking for their younger siblings or by parents’ paying less attention to their later born children. Birth order likely creates different language learning environments for each child, none of which are detrimental. However, knowing the types of conversation and input that children are exposed to in families with more than one child, as well as how multiple children affect daily routines and interactions can be helpful for speech-language pathologists when planning early language intervention and implementing home programming.

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