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## Prediction and persistence of late talking: A study of Italian toddlers at 29 and 34 months

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the communicative, linguistic and symbolic skills in Italian Late Talking (LT) toddlers. Thirty-five participants were identified through a language-screening program at 29 months by using the Italian version of MB-CDI W&S Short Form. Cognitive, communicative and linguistic skills were evaluated 5 later, with indirect and direct tools. The MB-CDI WS Short Form revealed, in LT children, weakness in gesture production, decontextualized comprehension, verbal imitation, symbolic play, and phonological accuracy. Our results confirmed lexical size at 29 months is the predictive factor to identify language delay at 34 months. The clinical assessment at 34 months confirmed that 89% of the LT children had a vocabulary size below the 10th percentile on the MB-CDI Complete Form. On a structured task, LT children showed lexical comprehension more preserved than lexical production, and more advanced skills in nouns than in predicates. Weakness in socioconversational abilities emerged. Correlation among maternal education, expressive vocabulary and socio-conversational competence in LT children was evidenced. Strong association among cognitive, communicative and linguistic skills were documented.

### 1. Introduction

The term “Late Talkers” (LT) refers to young children aged 18–35 months who are slow to develop expressive language in the absence of any known primary cause (Hawa & Spanoudis, 2014; Rescorla, 2011). Although these children have a limited expressive vocabulary and/or receptive language, no cognitive, neurological, socio-emotional, or sensory deficits are present (Rescorla, 1989; Thal, 2000). Late Talkers have been described using a variety of terminology, for example “Developmental language delay”, “Early expressive language delay”, “Early language delay”, “Specific expressive language impairment”, “Slow expressive language development”, “Late language emergence” (Cable & Domsch, 2011). The primary criterion for defining LT is delayed expressive vocabulary (Desmarais, Sylvestre, Meyer, Bairati, & Rouleau, 2008). In effect, according to parental report, a toddler is considered a LT if the average number of words included in her/his expressive vocabulary is equivalent to the 10th percentile or below (Dollaghan, 2013).

The prevalence of late-talking children varies in studies. In large population-based cohorts, the percentage of LT ranges from 13% to 20% at 2 years of age (Horwitz et al., 2003; Reilly et al., 2010; Zubrick, Taylor, Rice, & Slegers, 2007). Collisson et al. (2016) have recently reported a lower prevalence in children aged 24–30 months (12.6%) relative to that estimated in previous studies. Korpilahti, Kaljonen, and Jansson-Verkasalo (2016) estimated a percentage of LT of 9.6% for children at 2 years, based on the MB-CDI questionnaire, and 8.8% for children at 3 years, based on direct standardized tests.

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