

Review Article

A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Predictors of Expressive-Language Outcomes Among Late Talkers

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Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the literature on predictors of outcomes among late talkers using systematic review and meta-analysis methods. We sought to answer the question: What factors predict preschool-age expressive-language outcomes among late-talking toddlers?

Method: We entered carefully selected search terms into the following electronic databases: Communication & Mass Media Complete, ERIC, Medline, PsycEXTRA, Psychological and Behavioral Sciences, and PsycINFO. We conducted a separate, random-effects model meta-analysis for each individual predictor that was used in a minimum of 5 studies. We also tested potential moderators of the relationship between predictors and outcomes using metaregression and subgroup analysis. Last, we conducted publication-bias and sensitivity analyses.

Results: We identified 20 samples, comprising 2,134 children, in a systematic review. According to the results of the meta-analyses, significant predictors of expressive-language outcomes included toddlerhood expressive-vocabulary size, receptive language, and socioeconomic status. Nonsignificant predictors included phrase speech, gender, and family history.

Conclusions: To our knowledge this is the first synthesis of the literature on predictors of outcomes among late talkers using meta-analysis. Our findings clarify the contributions of several constructs to outcomes and highlight the importance of early receptive language to expressive-language development.

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Delay in expressive language is the one of the most common reasons for toddlers to be referred for neurodevelopmental evaluation (Whitehurst & Fischel, 1994). A substantial portion of these toddlers are found to be *late talkers*, a term used to describe children under age 3 years with unusually small vocabularies and no concomitant developmental disability or hearing impairment. Overall, the prognosis for late talkers is good, with the majority of children moving into the average range on language measures by preschool (Dollaghan, 2013). However, as a group, late talkers continue to perform lower than children in a control group on language measures in elementary school, and thus they are at heightened risk for language or learning disorders, such as specific language impairment (SLI; Paul, 2000; Rescorla, 2013). SLI is a developmental disorder characterized by persistent, functionally impairing language difficulties,

and is typically diagnosed after age 4 years. The present study explores the literature on predictors of expressive-language outcomes among late talkers using systematic review and meta-analysis methods. See Table 1 for a summary of the aim.

Clinical and Theoretical Significance of the Study of Late Talkers

The study of predictors of expressive-language outcomes in late talkers has both clinical and theoretical significance. From a clinical perspective, knowledge about predictors increases the accuracy with which clinicians can distinguish between late bloomers, who will catch up to their peers, and children at high risk for language or learning disorders. The importance of early identification to optimizing outcomes is supported by research indicating that younger children experience greater gains with interventions and that language disorders evident at the age of 5 years remain relatively stable throughout the school years (Aram & Hall, 1989; Long, 2013). Knowledge about predictors also allows clinicians to provide appropriate reassurance to families of children at low risk for language

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