

Topic: Build skills to promote child development and learning and lead to life and school success

Beuker, K., Rommelse, N., Donders, R., & Buitelaar, J. (2013). Development of early communication skills in the first two years of life. *Infant Behavior and Development, 36*, 71-83.

Context

It is important to understand the development of early communication in typically-developing children because it can assist in identifying anomalous patterns of development in children who show impairments in joint attention and language skills, such as children with autism spectrum disorders. Although longitudinal research has reported the emergence of joint attention and language in children as young as 9 months, the studies were limited in the frequency of assessments conducted over a period of development and in looking at the relationships between joint attention and language.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was threefold:

- (1) to establish the developmental trajectory of early communication skills in 23 children over the period of 8–24 months of age;
- (2) to investigate the interrelation of joint attention and expressive/receptive vocabulary; and,
- (3) to establish the order of development between early joint attention skills and later language skills.

Method

The children were recruited and selected by physicians of a well-baby clinic during their 6-month regular check-up. None of the children showed delays in development and all screened negative for autism spectrum disorder. Children were videotaped every month at home during a 15-minute session which included: (a) standardized tasks for following attention and directing attention to a stuffed animal placed to right and left of the child, (b) free play with a variety of toys, and (c) an assessment of

vocabulary using the *MacArthur Communicative Development Inventory*. Researchers used a standardized observation tool to score all measures of early communication including: checking behavior, sharing attention, following attention, and directing attention. A stuffed animal was used to assess following attention tasks.

Results

All joint attention skills emerged between the ages of 8 and 15 months. The order of emergence was:

- (1) Checking Behavior: the child looks at the adult without showing the adult a toy.
- (2) Directing Attention: the child gives or shows the adult a toy or points to it.
- (3) Sharing Attention: the child alternates his/her gaze from an adult to a toy and back to the adult (or vice versa) with the intention to share.
- (4) Following Attention: the child follows an adult gaze or gesture toward a toy.
- (5) Directing Attention with Gaze Alternation: the child directs the attention of the adult to a toy by gaze or gesture.
- (6) Following Attention Outside of the Visual Field: the child follows an adult gaze or gestures toward a toy placed behind him or her.
- (7) Referential Language: the child produces spontaneous one or more referential words during a home visit.

Joint attention did influence later language development, but early language did not influence later joint attention skills. Children who were able to initiate joint attention earlier (in age and order of development) had larger vocabularies between ages 10 and 18 months.

This marker appears to give children a head start in language and may influence cognitive and social skills developmental domains.

Discussion

The results of the study are important in mapping the normal development of early communications skills in children from 8 to 24 months. The study provides a detailed description of the components and developmental sequence of joint attention skills and referential language. Understanding the specific order of emergence of joint attention skills can be helpful in screening and early detection of children with developmental delays such as autism spectrum disorders.

About *Research-to-Practice Briefs*

Research-to-Practice Briefs provide summaries of key studies that inform practice related to early childhood special education. The series is designed specifically to support community college faculty who prepare candidates to work with children with special needs in the early childhood setting.

About the ACCEPT Project

The ACCEPT (Advancing Community College Efforts in Paraprofessional Training) Project is a federally-funded cooperative agreement between the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte College of Education. The focus of this effort is the inclusion of special education content in the coursework and experiences provided within the associate degree program in early childhood education at targeted state-supported community colleges in North Carolina.

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