

# Late Talkers... What We Know, and What We Don't

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What do we mean by a “Late Talker?” This is a toddler who is late to start using words despite what seems to be otherwise typical development. Late talking children are puzzling because they understand much of what is said to them, have good play skills, and interact well with their caregivers. Despite these skills, their vocabulary is limited compared to other children their age.

Looking at what research tells us about Late Talkers can help us decide if a late talking child needs some help. Here’s a summary of what we know, and don’t yet know, about late talking children.

## What we *don’t* know about Late Talkers

- **We don’t know why Late Talkers are late to start using words**

No one has been able to figure out why these children are late to start talking. There’s no obvious reason for their language delay. What we do know is that boys are more likely to be late talkers than girls and children with a family history of late talking are more likely to be Late Talkers themselves [1].

- **We don’t know which late talking children might catch up to their peers**

Many Late Talkers catch up to their peers by the time they begin school [2]. However, 20-30% of late talking children continue to have significant difficulties with language development. It is difficult to tell which late talking toddlers will catch up and which may be more likely to have continued language difficulties.

## What we *do* know...

- **Late Talkers who catch up continue to have subtle difficulties with language**

While many Late Talkers seem to catch up to their peers by the time they start school, some of these children continue to have weaker language skills in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, and listening comprehension [2]. This means

that even Late Talkers who appear to catch up are working at a slight disadvantage when it comes to developing later language and literacy skills.

- **Early language intervention can make a difference!**

Offering support to families of children who are Late Talkers can be helpful if parents are concerned and looking for ways to support their child's language development. When we help parents learn how to support their child's language development within everyday activities and interactions, this not only builds the child's language skills but also their social skills, which are very important in enabling them to engage in back-and-forth interactions with others. Overall, helping Late Talkers early may prevent future difficulties and encourages the skills they need to be successful at school and in their social interactions [1].

- **Parents are the key to helping Late Talkers improve their language skills [1,2]**

Parents play a major role in facilitating their child's language skills. Speech-language pathologists can teach parents to use research-based strategies that build a child's ability to use language. When parents learn to use language-building strategies within everyday activities and interactions with their child, research shows that this [is as effective – and often more effective](#) – than when speech-language pathologists deliver the therapy directly to the child [3]. This makes sense when you think about the strong relationship parents have with their child and how many opportunities they have to support their child's language development during everyday life.

- Because we cannot predict which Late Talkers will outgrow their language delay, we recommend that parents of Late Talkers who are concerned consult a speech-language pathologist, who can assess their child and provide them with guidance as to how to support their child at home.

## Helpful resources

- **Find a Hanen SLP:** If you are concerned about your child's language development, you may search for a Hanen certified speech-language pathologist who is certified in It Takes Two to Talk® to assess your child and provide support as needed.

- ***It Takes Two to Talk* guidebook:** This practical guidebook gives you many research-based ideas for supporting your child’s language development during fun, everyday interactions with your child.
- **Additional article:** “How to Tell if Your Child is a Late Talker – And What to Do about It”

## References

1. R Capone Singleton, N. (2018). Late talkers: Why the wait-and-see approach is outdated. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 65(1), 13-29.
2. Hawa, V. V. & Spanoudis, G. (2014). Toddlers with delayed expressive language: An overview of the characteristics, risk factors and language outcomes. *Researchers in Developmental Disabilities*, 35, 400-407.
3. Roberts, M., & Kaiser, A. (2011). The Effectiveness of Parent-Implemented Language Intervention: A Meta-Analysis. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 20, 180-199.

### About The Hanen Centre

*The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization committed to supporting all the important adults in young children’s lives to build the best possible social, language and literacy skills. This includes children with or at risk of language delays/disorders, autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.*

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