Late Talkers: A Variation of Normal Development?

In adjusting the eligibility criteria for children receiving speech-only services in Early Intervention, the New York State Health Department frequently stated that “late talkers were a variation of normal development”. The more stringent eligibility was intended to decrease services to “late talkers” because it believed that these children would catch up to their peers over time. The following information reflects research and resources compiled by Michelle MacRoy-Higgins, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, Assistant Professor, Communication Sciences Program, Hunter College-CUNY, who has researched the topic of late talkers and presented at the 2010 American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) convention on the topic.

Who are Late Talkers?
The late talkers reflect 15% of the toddler population and are identified at approximately two years of age when children produce fewer than 50 words and do not combine words. The late talker also has normal hearing, cognitive, sensory and motor development. A typical child at two years of age would be using over 300 words and putting together 2-4 word sentences.

Why Late Talkers are Not a Variation of Normal Language Development
The language characteristics of the late talkers are not reflective of typical language development in the areas of:

- Word learning
  - Receptive language (understanding)
    - Late talkers do not learn (point to) new words as accurately as their peers. (Ellis Weismer & Evans, 2002; MacRoy-Higgins, Schwartz, Shafer & Marton, 2009)
  - Productive language (expressive vocabulary)
    - Once late talkers say words, they are slow to add more words to their vocabularies; they do not systematically add words to their vocabularies as observed in typically developing toddlers (MacRoy-Higgins et al., 2009).

- Phonology (sounds)
  - The sounds in the words that they do say show delays and disordered patterns
    - For instance, late talkers produce atypical sound errors, atypical sound patterns and show little change in development over time as compared to language-matched peers (Williams & Elbert, 2003)

- Morphology/syntax (grammar and word combinations)
  - Once late talkers begin to combine words they show delayed and disordered patterns
    - For instance, late talkers produce more errors than their language-matched peers (Thal et al., 2004)

- Social skills
  - At risk for social/behavioral disorders
    - Late talkers are less social than their peers; quality of parent-child relationships in late talkers is judged to be more stressful than parent-child relationships in typically developing toddlers (Irwin, Carter & Briggs-Gowan, 2002)
Are there long term implications for late talkers?
The research has indicated that late bloomers show improvement in language skills but that they perform significantly poorer than their peers in reading/literacy, syntax and morphology (word combinations/sentences and grammar) and vocabulary deficits are observed through 17 years of age. Toddlers with Specific Language Impairment (SLI) demonstrate significant difficulties with all aspect of language (understanding, expression and literacy/reading).

Why is it Important to Provide Speech and Language Services to Late Talkers
Approximately one-half of toddlers who are late talkers will be labeled as having Specific Language Impairment in preschool/elementary school. Those that show improvement (late bloomers) continue to perform poorer than their peers in language and literacy skills throughout elementary and secondary school. Late talkers are not a variation of normal development because at age two they show disordered patterns of

- Vocabulary acquisition (understanding and naming)
- Phonology (sound system)
- Grammar
- Social skills

Why is Early Intervention so Important for Late Talkers?
An early foundation in oral language skills is paramount for the development of literacy and reading skills. Late talking toddlers are at significant risk for academic difficulties and therefore would benefit from language intervention as early as their language disorder is identified.

Is Language Intervention for Late Talkers Effective?
Language intervention for late talkers is effective. Late talkers receiving intervention by a Speech-language Pathologist over a short period of time showed improved language skills (vocabulary, production of sentences, speech sound production) as compared with late talkers who did not receive intervention (Robertson & Weismer, 1999) and these results suggest that if untreated, late talkers will not improve their language at the same rate as their typically developing peers with the significant risk of lifelong language difficulties impacting academic achievement, reading and literacy.

References