

W-words, Words, Words (with apologies to Shakespeare)

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There has been much debate around whether there is a link between stuttering and language ability in children. Past research has given us conflicting results: some studies report that children who stutter score *lower* on language assessments than children who do not stutter, while others report that children who stutter demonstrate *developmentally appropriate* language. Other literature states that children with *advanced language skills* may be at greater risk of stuttering! Who is right? New Australian research has produced some interesting findings that give parents and speech pathologists some preliminary answers...

Since 2002, researchers at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute in Melbourne have been following a group of almost 2000 children from low, middle and high socio-economic areas as part of the Early Language in Victoria Study (ELVS) and ELVS-Stuttering Study. Children with significant disabilities and developmental delays (eg. Down syndrome, cerebral palsy) and parents with insufficient English to participate were excluded.

Five of the ELVS researchers (four of whom are speech pathologists) set out to determine whether communication and language skills of children who have a history of stuttering are, overall, different from those who do not stutter. The researchers compared data from nearly two hundred children who stuttered and over 1400 children who did not stutter. At the ages of two and three years, each child's vocabulary and communicative behaviours were assessed. At four and five years, assessments of each child's receptive language (understanding) and expressive language (production)* were completed.

In this study, the children who stuttered performed better on all communication and language assessments at two, three, four and five years than the children who did not stutter. This remained true even when variations between participants such as gender, non-English speaking background and level of disadvantage were taken into account.

The researchers designed a strong study using robust research methods, which means that we can be fairly confident in their results. Their study provides support for the theory that children who stutter have stronger language and communication skills overall than children who do not stutter. However, it is important to note that the average assessment scores for both the stuttering and non-stuttering groups were within normal range for their age.

The findings from this research suggest that the early communication skills of children who stutter, as a group, are developmentally appropriate. Another finding was that stuttering does not appear to have a negative impact on language development in the preschool years. While we can find relief in learning that the language skills of a child who stutters is, on average, likely to be appropriate for his or her age, **it is crucial that parents take their child to a speech pathologist if they suspect that their son or daughter is stuttering.** Evidence shows us that stuttering is best managed early, and speech pathologists have specialist training in this area.

By Nicola Anglin (Speech Pathologist)



Vince Borg, Sarah Young, Vicky Andrews and Emma Lorenzin all have a special interest in speech development and language difficulty. Book your child an appointment with a speech therapist at Box Hill Speech Pathology Clinic on (03) 9899 5494 or direct your child speech therapy questions to enquiries@speech-therapy.com.au.

*Expressive language refers to the ability to use words and grammar according to rules of a particular language, eg. English. When speech is assessed, the child's ability to produce speech sounds correctly is evaluated.

Reference:

Watts, A., Eadie, P., Block, S., Mensah, F., & Reilly, S. (2015). Language ability of children with and without a history of stuttering: A longitudinal cohort study. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 17(1), 86-95.