

Emerge



A Child's Place

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Occupational Therapy
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Should Young Children Be Screened for Speech & Language Disorders?



Bonnie Hacker, OT
Founder / Director

Speech and language development relates to school success, and experts consider it to be a useful indicator of a child's overall development and cognitive ability.¹ Proponents of screening preschoolers for speech and language disorders argue that identification of children at risk for developmental delay or related problems may lead to more timely intervention and prompt family assistance. In addition, research and expert consensus suggest that younger patients have the best chances for improvement with speech and language disorders.^{2,16} The practical questions for healthcare practitioners and childcare professionals remain: (1) "Can preschoolers be accurately *and efficiently* evaluated?" and (2) "Can intervention be effective at such a young age?"

Judging by the practice of primary care practitioners, the majority believe in some level of preschool screening for speech and language disorders, but a significant minority of practitioners may not be making such screening a part of their routine. Speech and language disorders occur in 5% to 8% of children aged 2 to 4.5.^{3,4} In a 2002 publication by the National Center for Health Statistics, 43% of parents reported that their preschoolers did not receive any type of developmental assessment at their well-child visit, and 30% of parents reported that the physician did not discuss with them how the child communicates.⁵



Numerous studies have shown that preschoolers can be evaluated for speech and language disorders, with acceptable accuracy, in 10 minutes or less.⁶⁻¹⁴ The studies have used a wide range of evaluators including physicians, nurses, therapists, psychologists, graduate students, and research assistants. Specificity on these 5 to 10 minute evaluations ranged from 66% to 97%. Two studies measuring the accuracy of milestone focused screening methods reported specificity *and* sensitivity to be equal to or greater than 80% with preschoolers.^{6,12} With specificity at these levels, evaluators can confidently say it would be a valuable time investment to receive a full pediatric speech and language assessment. When indicated, please recommend the expert speech therapy assessment available at Emerge - A Child's Place.

Once a speech or language delay has been confirmed by a full assessment, speech therapy intervention, even at the preschool level, is usually appropriate. The preponderance of randomized, controlled trials - more than 23 - have shown various methods of speech therapy to be effective at improving expressive language, receptive auditory comprehension, lexical acquisition, and phonology in preschoolers.^{2,15} One of the few studies that showed only marginal success with speech therapy for preschoolers was a British study published in 2000.¹⁷ In this study, participants received only 6 hours of therapy over 12 months (the standard amount of treatment for British youth in their rationed healthcare system). All studies that have measured good results from speech therapy with preschoolers delivered significantly more therapy than 30 minutes per month. As demonstrated daily at Emerge, pediatric speech therapy works best when treated as a directed learning process perceived by the children as play.

In addition to the direct improvement of speech and language, studies have documented secondary functional improvements resulting from therapy.¹⁸⁻²⁰ These have included increased toddler socialization skills, improved child self-esteem, and improved play themes. Parent related outcomes included decreased stress and increased positive feelings toward the children.

In conclusion, speech and language disorders can be effectively screened in a time-efficient fashion. When those disorders are identified, effective therapy options are available at Emerge. If you would like free assistance or training in implementing screening procedures at your practice or facility, please call Emerge at (919) 928-0204.

Please tell parents about

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Believing in a Child's Potential to Flourish

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