

Why learning to talk can be difficult

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Problems in learning to talk are fairly common in young children. Sometimes these difficulties are a consequence of a known disease or of hearing loss, but usually there is no obvious explanation.

New evidence suggests that language disorder results when a child has a set of minor weaknesses, none of which would be particularly detrimental on its own, but which together cause significant problems, reports Professor Dorothy Bishop from the Department of Experimental Psychology in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

Professor Bishop said: 'For many years, there was a tendency to assume that poor language development in children was caused by poor parenting, but over the past few years it has become clear that genes play a major role.'

In some rare cases researchers can identify a specific genetic mutation linked with language impairment. In most cases, however, the child's problems arise from a combination of several small difficulties – caused by both genes and environment – that affect skills such as short-term memory, the ability to hear fine differences between sounds, and the ability to retain verbal information.

Professor Bishop said: 'Rather than blaming parents, we need to recognize that children can vary widely in the ease with which they learn to talk. These problems are not easy to fix, but as we come to understand them better, we can devise more effective interventions, tailored to the individual child's underlying problems.'

Source: University of Oxford

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