Early screening alone is not enough to give children language boost

June 18 2012

(Medical Xpress) -- Pre-school children should be more closely monitored by health and early years professionals to try and identify potential language problems, new research suggests.

A study led by Newcastle University, has found it is possible to predict if three year olds would go on to have language problems by the age of five - but only if a range of factors were taken into consideration.

Professor James Law, wholed the study, said: “Research shows that young children with early language problems may be more likely to suffer mental health problems, be unemployed and have poor literacy levels in adulthood which is why it’s so important to monitor those at risk and give them the help needed early in life."

“Our study has shown this is not an easy thing to do but more monitoring by health and early years professionals could help to identify and support children who may be most at risk.”

The team, which included researchers from Queen Margaret University, the University of Edinburgh and the NHS, looked at language skills data from more than 13,000 children from theMillennium Cohort Study – a birth cohort of all the children born in the UK in 2000. They examined the language abilities of the youngsters when they werethree and tried to predict what their language skills would be at the age of five. The children were asked to identify objects in pictures.

The researchers found that if they just relied on the children's test results, they could identify the children who did not have language problems. However, to try and spot those who already had problems and those who would go on to develop them, they found they needed to add in other factors including the level of the child's mother's education, the child's behaviour and whether concerns about the child's language development had been previously raised.

Professor Law said: "We found testing the children's language skills was useful for identifying children who would not have difficulties later on in life. However, it was not necessarily as good at identifying those who had problems or those who seemed to be developing normally and then started to experience difficulties later on.

"We believe that there is a good case for risk groups to be monitored by early years workers, health visitors or paediatricians to try and enable these children and their families to get the help and support they need. The problem is that many children's development is not routinely monitored after the age of two.

"We need to better understand why some children's language seems to falter after apparently developing normally."

The study looked at data from 13,016 children. The researchers first looked at vocabulary test scores and tried to predict language ability at age five. They then analysed the data by including other factors including maternal education level, if the child was small when it was born and hearing concerns. In the second phase of analysis, the data was split into four groups:

· typical language group(12, 066 children) whose scores were normal at age three and five;

· increasingly vulnerable language group (177 children) whose

language was normal at age three but deteriorated by age five

· resilient language group (572 children), where language was delayed at age three but was normal by age five

· consistently low language group (201 children) where there was language delay at both ages.

More information: The paper Predicting language change between three and five years and its implications for early identification is published in the latest edition of *Pediatrics* Journal at pediatrics.aappublications.org … content/early/recent

Provided by Newcastle University