

Early vocabulary delays suggest therapy needs later in life

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A toddler's vocabulary delays may indicate a future need for speech language therapy, but race and home language can play a role in obtaining these services, according to a recent Penn State study.

The study, published last month in the *American Journal of Speech-*

Language Policy, includes analysis led by a Penn State researcher Paul L. Morgan, associate professor of education policy studies. Morgan said there is an ongoing debate in the speech and [language](#) pathology field about whether being a late talker is a risk factor for later development.

"We analyzed data from a nationally representative sample of 10,000 children born in the U.S. in 2001. The data included surveys of the size of the children's oral vocabularies at two years of age, as well as untimed, individualized assessments of their reading and mathematics achievement at four and five years of age," Morgan explained.

Morgan and his research team found that vocabulary delays by two years of age were predictive of a child receiving speech and language services between two and five years. When comparing identification data by race and ethnicity, [minority children](#) were consistently less likely to receive those services compared to otherwise similar white children at the same ages.

"Our analysis indicates that the likelihood of black children receiving speech or language therapy services was about 45 to 60 percent lower than white children who were otherwise similar across many other background characteristics, including in their oral vocabularies, academic achievement, behavior, and family income," said Morgan.

The researchers observed sizeable disparities in services received, whether the children were two, four, or five years old. Hispanic children's lower likelihood of receiving speech or language therapy services was statistically explained by a language other than English being used in the home.

"Our research suggests that one way to reduce children's need for costly services later in life, including special education services, may involve preventing or remediating vocabulary gaps as early as two years of age,"

said Morgan. "Our findings also suggest the need to increase culturally sensitive or language specific practices to ensure that minority children with speech or language impairments are being appropriately identified and remediated."

Additional research by Morgan indicates children who receive services for speech and language impairments benefit from improved communications abilities, particularly if the therapy starts before school entry. "We've found that children are helped even further as they progress through the educational system if the therapy is ongoing," Morgan explained.

Early screenings and intervention efforts can also reap other benefits. "We've shown that the size of two-year-old [children](#)'s oral vocabularies uniquely predicts their academic and behavioral preparation for kindergarten," said Morgan. "Children with larger oral vocabularies at age two were better at both reading and math, and excelled in other areas such as self-regulation, attention span, and task persistence."

More information: Paul L. Morgan et al. Who Receives Speech/Language Services by Five Years of Age in the U.S.?, *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* (2015). [DOI: 10.1044/2015_AJSLP-14-0201](#)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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