

Early-life language stimulation, skills may prevent childhood depression

September 7 2016, by Nathan Hurst

Childhood depression can lead to social, emotional and academic setbacks during childhood and later in life. However, little is known about what contributes to children's developing depressive symptoms. Researchers from University of Missouri have determined that the level of language skills young children possess early in life can predict the likelihood they may experience depression.

Keith Herman, a professor in MU's College of Education, found that [children](#) who experience low levels of language learning stimulation beginning at three years of age are more likely to experience [language delays](#) by first grade and are three times more likely to develop depression by third grade.

"It is clear that the amount of language that children are exposed to early on is very important for their development," Herman said. "Whether it is through pre-school classes, interactions with parents and siblings or through consuming media such as television and books, exposure to greater amounts of language and vocabulary will help prepare children to succeed socially and academically when they begin school. If children already are experiencing language and subsequent social and academic deficits by the first grade, chances are they will continue to fall further behind in school each year, which can lead to negative self-perceptions and depressive symptoms by third grade."

Herman and a team of researchers examined data from 587 children and households in Hawaii. The data included children's language skills and

exposure to language stimulation in the home beginning at age three. The children were tested on their language skills in the first grade and then tested for [depressive symptoms](#) in the third grade. The children who had higher language exposure and stimulation as three-year-olds were more likely to have adequate to better-than-average language skills in first grade. They also were much less likely to experience depression by the third grade. Children who did not receive adequate language stimulation early in life were much more likely to have poor language skills and ultimately experience depression.

"These findings are important because we have been able to identify key stages of child development that can help determine the mental health of children later in their academic careers," Herman said. "By understanding that the amount of language a child is exposed to early in life is important, we can create interventions and programs that can help parents and childcare providers improve [language](#) exposure during this critical development age. Also, we can identify first graders who may lack [language skills](#) and give them extra attention to help catch them up academically and socially before they develop depression."

The study, "Language Delays and Child Depressive Symptoms: The Role of Early Stimulation in the Home," was published in *Prevention Science*. The study was coauthored by Daniel Cohen, Sarah Owens, Tracey Latimore, Wendy M. Reinke, Lori Burrell, Elizabeth McFarlane and Anne Duggan. Keith Herman also is the co-director of the Missouri Prevention Center, which brings community members and researchers together to help schools and families apply techniques that promote social and academic success.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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