

New study finds toddler 'talk time' is a case of follow the leader

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Credit: Murdoch Children's Research Institute

Dr Laura Conway, from the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), is studying how children aged four years and under learn language, with a focus on the one in five children who are slow to talk.

"There is evidence that language develops through a mixture of nature and nurture. Children's [early brain development](#) and [genetic makeup](#) play a part, and how parents interact with their children, particularly in the first few years, also has an influence," Dr Conway said.

She said that talking about what your child is playing with and following

their lead in conversation helps them to learn language.

"For example if you are both playing with toy farm animals and your child is playing with a cow and talking about the cow, you don't want to then turn their attention to the sheep," Dr Conway said.

"Focus on their cow and talk about what it is doing using rich vocabulary. By expanding on your child's area of interest, you are helping them learn new words and also how to combine words into sentences."

As part of MCRI's Language for Learning study, Dr Conway has examined 200 videos of parents and toddlers playing together, studying how they take turns, give commands and share attention.

"By analysing which behaviours are related to children's [language skills](#) at ages two, three and four years, I found that talking about what your child is playing with and following their lead in conversation positively contributes to their [language learning](#)."

Dr Conway says she thinks about how parents and children interact and talk to each other in those early crucial years of [language development](#) as a game of tennis.

"I think about this as serve and return interactions, and like tennis players, they influence each other's communications and fine-tune their game as the toddler's skills improve."

Many children who are slow to talk catch up, but some might go on to have Developmental Language Disorder (DLD).

"These children have problems expressing themselves and understanding what others are saying," said Dr Conway.

"Not surprisingly, they can have difficulties in the classroom, learning to read, and making friends."

Through her work, Dr Conway is trying to identify child and parent behaviours that can be trialled in programs for children with [language](#) difficulties.

"Working with families on these behaviours has the potential to make a real difference to the lives of these [children](#)," she said.

Dr Conway has had two research papers published in global health journals. She has a paper in the March-April edition of the *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* and another in the latest edition of the *Journal of Child Language*.

Provided by Murdoch Children's Research Institute

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