

# Slow vocabulary growth linked to teen behaviour and emotional issues

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Children whose vocabulary skills develop slowly are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural issues in adolescence, according to new research published in the journal *Child Development*.

The research is the first to model how children's [language development](#) influences changes in mental health problems over a 10 year period, from [early childhood](#) to adolescence.

Dr. Cristina McKean from Newcastle University UK's School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, was involved in the study. "We were interested in how children's language, their ability to pay attention and concentrate and their emotional wellbeing link together," says the Senior Lecturer. "Our experience and previous research suggested that these relationships are likely to change over time into the teenage years."

The research used the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, which has gathered data from almost 5,000 Australian children, on six occasions between four and 15 years of age.

Dr. McKean adds: "What was really important about this study is that crucial aspects of children's development, such as their vocabulary, literacy development, and emotional development and hyperactivity-inattention are measured at repeated times."

## Monitoring children

The research was led by Dr. Elizabeth Westrupp, from Deakin University in Australia. "We found new evidence that lower growth in vocabulary over [primary school](#) was associated with increased child hyperactivity-inattention at eight to nine years, and more rapid increases in hyperactivity-inattention over early to middle teenage years, up to 14 to 15 years," she says. "These findings show the importance of monitoring children through middle childhood and adolescence as they develop."

The study also investigated possible reasons for the association between language development and [behavioural issues](#). The authors found academic experience in primary school explained the link between early vocabulary and development and teenage emotional and behavioural problems.

One theory is that youngsters with lower vocabulary skills struggle more in the classroom with reading and literacy, which then leads to the development of behavioural and emotional problems in teenage years. The academics believe [oral language](#) and literacy-based interventions may alleviate declining academic, emotional and behavioural functioning in adolescence.

## Whole class approaches

Dr. McKean said "After the early primary years schools have so many competing demands that keeping a focus on oral language development can be difficult. We need to find ways to support class-teachers to keep the development of oral language at the forefront of what they do throughout children's schooling.

"Whole class approaches that support children and [young people](#) to discover word meanings, understand word structures and use them in new contexts are important. Also the opportunity to learn about a wide range of topics through discussion and debate and to hear and read stories and poetry are vitally important."

**More information:** Elizabeth M. Westrupp et al. Vocabulary Development and Trajectories of Behavioral and Emotional Difficulties Via Academic Ability and Peer Problems, *Child Development* (2019).  
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