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Review

Prediction of child language development: A review of literature in early childhood communication disorders

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Abstract

Recently published studies from several journals in Communication and Science Disorders were reviewed to assess the evidence for the major factors that predict child language development in the context of early childhood communication disorders. Seventy-six studies were reviewed, all published between 2004 and 2015. Keywords were developed to choose accurately eligible abstracts to be reviewed: child language development, environmental factors, communication disorders, and predictive factors. Of the 76 eligible abstracts that comprehensively addressed prediction factors of child language development, environmental factors represented the largest portion (45/76 abstracts, 59%), social and genetic factors were second (20/76 – 26%), and valid predictors of child language development delay had the smallest portion (11/76 – 14%). The review revealed the important roles of social class, family history, environmental, and genetic factors in prediction of child language development. It was established that the interplay between environmental, social, and genetic factors influence child language development; specifically, environmental exposure to toxins like lead and mercury were noted to have a complex interplay with the biological aspects of communication disorders. Our review highlighted the need for further research on the specific interplay of the prediction factors (like environmental and social class) on language development among infants and toddlers.

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Keywords: Language development; Language disorder; Childhood communication

1. Learning outcomes

This review is to summarize the evidence for major factors that predict child language development in the context of early childhood communication disorders. The factors that were considered include environmental, social, and biological, including the interplay of those factors to enhance children's language development. Language development among children is predictable, considering the environmental or social experience of the child during prenatal and early postnatal periods. Further, readers will be able to integrate findings from various studies, considering both similarities and differences in results obtained from previous studies on early childhood communication disorders. Furthermore, readers will be able to establish that very few studies reject the possibility of external influences on child language development. Therefore, further investigation is required to establish the specific roles that each factor plays in communication impairments among children, including during the prenatal period.

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2. Introduction

A child usually begins to develop communication skills prior to using words. Carroll (2007) states, “children’s construction of any given language emerges from their understanding of communication first, even before language.” A number of studies have been conducted in different disciplines over the years that imply that various fields such as psychology and linguistics are important in assessing a child’s language development. Carroll (2007) discussed the various roles of psychology in the field of early childhood communication disorders, particularly with respect to language acquisition. The development of linguistic skills varies immensely between children due to various psychological, environmental, medical, and linguistic issues. All these elements require a unique combination of linguistic and psychological theories in order to comprehensively understand language development in the child.

2.1. Overview of language; skills and development in children

Several studies have demonstrated that language is a crucial aspect in the overall development of the child (Capone and McGregor, 2004; McLeod and Verdon, 2014; Määttä et al., 2012; Jansen et al., 2013). In language learning, there are five basic domains that every child must master: semantics, phonology, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics (Capone and McGregor, 2004; McLeod and Verdon, 2014), all of which are critical for normal language development in children. Consequently, for any communication to be considered successful, there is a need for proper use of language, including production and comprehension of said language (Capone and McGregor, 2004). As a result, the study of receptive and expressive language becomes an important element in communication science, especially in children’s language development (Jansen et al., 2013; Capone and McGregor, 2004). Every stage of communication in developing children is distinct in terms of what it is that the child learns.

The three stages of language development are: First, the *perlocutionary* stage which involves the unintentional stage of communication between 8 and 10 months of age, in which infants are able to produce behaviors like vocalizations or burping that may have no intentional messages (Jansen et al., 2013). The children who experience a delay in this stage may remain longer at this stage (Jansen et al., 2013; Määttä et al., 2012). Parents play a significant role in responding to children engaging in unintentional communication. The second stage of communication is the *illocutionary*, when the infant begins to show intentional communicative behavior and communicates through gestures and nonlinguistic vocalizations, exhibiting an intention to speak. Last, there is the *elocutionary* stage of communication, which is characterized by the production of first words (Jansen et al., 2013) thus, evidence of intentional communication (Maljaars et al., 2012; Jansen et al., 2013). Successful pre-linguistic skills that are expressed before linguistic communication begins are the building blocks to language learning and development in a child (Maljaars et al., 2012).

Language involves various social standards that show comprehension of the meaning of any given word (Carroll, 2007). Consequently, the acquisition of language is a crucial aspect of the development of any human being. Although a variety of animals communicate by means of sound, humans, marine mammals and songbirds have the ability to learn through vocalizations (Rosenblatt, 2010). This argues for the importance of language as a provocative element of human development, requiring experience so as to be correctly produced (Purves et al., 2001; Siegler, 2006). Notably, linguistic experience effectively occurs in early life, a period that requires both adequate hearing and repeated practicing of language (Purves et al., 2001).

3. Methodology

3.1. Analytical framework

The initial review focused on abstracts of articles published between 2004 and 2015 in the Journal of Communication Disorders (JCD), and which focused on the prediction of child language development.

This review follows a specific methodology that begins with the development of an analytical framework together with key questions focusing on the research topic. The analytical framework includes the methodology that was used, the outcomes, and the screening process. The framework is shown in Fig. 1.

Key aspects taken from the abstracts are these Research Questions:

1. The factors that facilitate the prediction of child language development.
2. The most valid approach for predicting early language development delay.
3. The roles of social class, gender, and environment on language development and delay in early childhood communication.

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