

Third BIRTHDAY Report

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**Progress Report
For Healthcare and
Childcare Providers of
Infants and Toddlers**



FIRST
WORDS
Project

About FIRST WORDS Project

Our Mission

The FIRST WORDS Project is a model early identification and intervention program based in the Department of Communication Disorders at Florida State University. Staffed by speech-language pathologists and interdisciplinary consultants, we are funded to evaluate the communication development of children from 6 to 24 months of age in Leon County and surrounding counties. For children who are delayed in communication development, we offer families a menu of service options. Services are offered at no charge to families or service providers, based on availability of grant funds. In addition to services provided in Leon County, we are developing educational materials for training of healthcare and childcare providers to build their capacities for earlier detection of communication problems in young children.



Why Is Earlier

Identification a Critical Need?

Developmental delays in infants and toddlers are significantly under-identified, prohibiting early intervention for many children and families in need of services. Early intervention can prevent or decrease developmental delays in preschoolers, enhance school readiness, and increase academic success in school-age children.

- Every dollar spent on early intervention is estimated to save \$7.16 in later special education, crime, and welfare costs.
- Language development is one of the most critical school readiness skills. Children with language problems in preschool are very likely to have academic and behavior problems at school age.
- If a child does not have adequate emotional, physical, cognitive, and language stimulation early in life, neurons can be lost permanently, because the brain operates on a “use it or lose it” principle.

How Can We Find

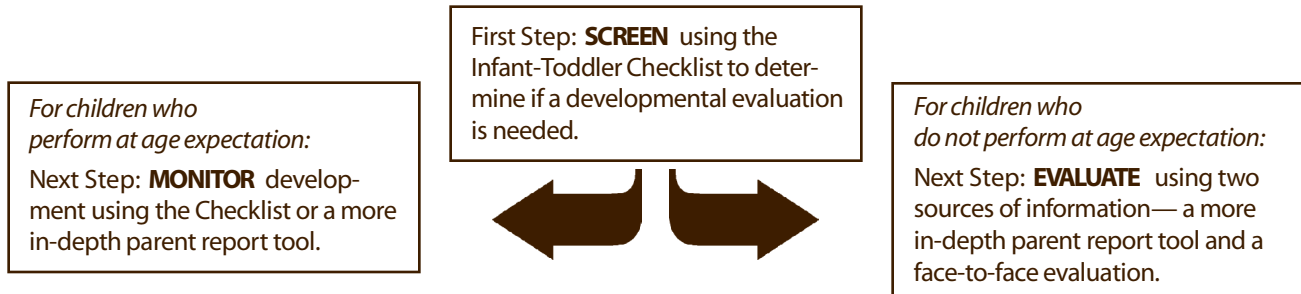
Children Who Need Services Earlier?

A child's level of communication development may be the best indicator of the presence of a developmental delay.

- When serious health or physical impairments are not present, the first evident symptom that a child may not be developing typically is delayed language.
- Most children develop their first words between 12 and 15 months, and it is common practice to wait until a child is 18 to 24 months and still not talking to refer the child for an evaluation. To complicate this referral decision, some children who are not talking at 24 months will outgrow their language delay while others will have persisting language problems and associated academic problems.
- Research over the past two decades has identified the following 7 prelinguistic predictors that are indicators of later language development and promise earlier and more accurate identification:
 - 1) emotion and use of eye gaze,
 - 2) communication,
 - 3) gestures,
 - 4) sounds,
 - 5) use of words,
 - 6) understanding of words, and
 - 7) use of objects.
- Children who are delayed in use of words only are very likely to outgrow their language delay. Children who are delayed in the use of words and several other predictors are likely to have persisting language problems.
- Instead of waiting for children to start using words, measuring these prelinguistic predictors is a promising solution to improve early identification.

Our Evaluation Model

The FIRST WORDS Project evaluation model for identifying children under 24 months of age at risk for developmental disabilities uses the CSBS Developmental Profile (Wetherby & Prizant, 2001) to measure the 7 prelinguistic predictors. It is a three-step process, designed to maximize the role of the family and minimize the time required by healthcare or childcare providers, enhancing effectiveness and cost-efficiency.



What We Learned From Last Year

The FIRST WORDS Project is finishing its third year of funding and has established a liaison relationship with over 200 healthcare and childcare agencies and providers in Leon County who are distributing the Checklist. We have gathered over 2,500 Checklists and conducted follow-up evaluations on over 500 children. We have offered a menu of service options to families and over 100 families have attended our parent education workshops, about 200 families have participated in our infant-toddler play groups, and about 50 families have participated in individualized intervention.

- We have studied the relationship between our parent report and face-to-face evaluation measures of prelinguistic communication. The results indicate highly significant correlations between the Infant-Toddler Checklist and our follow-up evaluation measures. This group includes a culturally diverse population with over 25% African American children, the largest minority residing in Leon County. We also found high, significant correlations with our prelinguistic measures and the size of a child’s vocabulary at age 24 months. The strongest correlations were observed for sounds, use of words and understanding of words. These three measures, which were gathered between 12 and 21 months, were effective at predicting a child’s relative performance on vocabulary production at 24 months of age.
- We have completed follow-up evaluations on subgroups of children at 24 and at 36 months. We studied the validity of three measures: a parent report measure of vocabulary production at 24 months, the Infant-Toddler Checklist completed between 6 and 24 months, and our face-to-face evaluation gathered between 12 and 24 months. We compared these three measures to the Mullen Scales of Early Learning, which is a standardized measure of gross motor, fine motor, visual reception, receptive language and expressive language.

Measure	Sample	Sensitivity	Specificity	Overreferral	Underreferral
		True Positives	True Negatives		
Vocabulary Production with 24-month Mullen	99	68%	78%	16%	8%
Infant-Toddler Checklist with 24-month Mullen	143	84%	78%	17%	4%
Face-to-Face Evaluation with 24-month Mullen	90	89%	79%	14%	3%
Face-to-Face Evaluation with 36-month Mullen	89	81%	84%	11%	6%

These findings indicate that our prelinguistic evaluation measures and vocabulary production are more accurate for early identification of young children than commonly used tools. Furthermore, both the Checklist and face-to-face evaluation, which were collected under 24 months of age and up to a year before the standardized testing, had more precision than the vocabulary production measure, which was collected within a month of the standardized testing. **These findings strongly support the validity of our evaluation measures and the importance of using a collection of language predictors, rather than the use of words alone, to improve early identification efforts.**

Menu of Services Offered to Families by FIRST WORDS Project

FIRST WORDS Project offers a menu of service options to families to support communication development in children who may need extra help to reach their potential:

- **Parent Education Workshops** are offered in the community to provide information about communication with specific ideas about how to support children's development.
- **Infant-Toddler Play Groups** are offered in the community to give caregivers the opportunity to talk to a speech-language pathologist about their child's development in a relaxed, informal, child-friendly setting with time for discussion, coaching, and play. Sessions focus on how their child communicates, how to respond in ways to promote their child's communication development, how to address communication development in everyday activities in the home, and how to deal with special issues such as behavior problems related to limited communication or oral/motor issues.
- **Individualized, Family-Guided Intervention Programs** are offered for families whose children have been evaluated by *FIRST WORDS* and are eligible for early intervention services. Sessions focus on individualized goals identified with families to enhance their child's communication development in everyday activities in the home.
- **Referrals for Services in the Community** are made for children who need more specialized evaluation or who may qualify for services that are offered in the community.
- **Monitoring Communication and Language Development** with our evaluation tools is offered to families who are concerned about their child's development and want to find out how their child is progressing. For children under 24 months of age, we usually monitor development in 3-month intervals to detect growth. A child's growth rate is the best predictor of prognosis.



Visit our website for updated information about our project, and a current calendar of parent education workshops and infant-toddler play groups being offered in Leon County.

<http://firstwords.fsu.edu>

A Parent's Perspective

Contributed by Laura M. Johnson

"Einstein didn't speak until he was four."

"Boys are just slower to develop than girls."

"You are worrying too much. Everything is fine."

But everything did not feel fine. The complete lack of baby babble and the paucity of sounds coming from my 15-month-old child perplexed me and, yes, worried me. That is what brought me to the front steps of the FIRST WORDS Project in February 2000.

I learned about the FIRST WORDS Project playgroups from my pediatrician's office and thought that it sounded like a great idea. First, I was looking for a way to expand my child's social interactions. Maybe the limited peer influence was affecting my child's speech development? Second, I thought that I might learn some new techniques to stimulate speech and language development. Maybe I just was not doing the right things? Third, I thought that the speech-language pathologist on the FIRST WORDS staff might provide some insight into my child's lack of speech.

The playgroup was absolutely terrific. I learned new ways to interact and play with my child. I gained enormous insight into my child's language developmental processes. I also had the opportunity to learn some wonderful techniques to encourage speech and language development. Above all, I was introduced to some fantastic individuals who tirelessly answered my endless barrage of questions.

After observing my child in the playgroup setting, Lori Allen, a speech-language pathologist and the Coordinator of Clinical Services for the FIRST WORDS Project, suggested that my son have his hearing evaluated. While my son could evidently hear, it was not clear whether or not he could hear well. It seemed logical and certainly easy enough to assess. In the end, the evaluation showed that our son's hearing was fine.

And yet he continued to be verbally inexpressive. He clearly understood our words but he was not using any of his own. Above all, he was exhibiting increasingly negative behavior in response to his inability to effectively communicate his needs to us. Tantrums were becoming more frequent.

At this crucial point, the FIRST WORDS Project was the most amazing resource for my family. They pointed us in the direction of the Early Intervention Program (EIP), a service provided by the Children's Home Society. There we were introduced to a case manager. This case manager scheduled our initial evaluation with EIP, where it was confirmed that our son clearly had a speech developmental delay. Our son was then referred to a speech-language pathologist, whom he now adores, for tri-weekly sessions. The diagnosis was "phonological process disorder." We learned that a more definitive diagnosis could not be established until our son is about three.

We had begun to introduce sign language at home and his speech-language pathologist continued to work on expanding his sign vocabulary. Having our precious little boy ask for milk or juice using his new signs - instead of the all too familiar escalation of "whine-to-scream" when we were hard-pressed to guess correctly - was extraordinary.

"He clearly understood our words but he was not using any of his own."

Over the next few months, our son's ability to communicate increased exponentially. First with signs, then with words so much that most of the signing has since faded away (I think "red" will always be accompanied by his finger to his mouth!). His speech-language pathologist is now working hard with him on prepositions, conjunctions, and larger sentences, and he's getting there. He tries very hard, and although there are occasional lapses - he recently lost his "ch" sound and is busily looking for it in his room as I write this - the gains are phenomenal. Every word he utters is still magic.

I do not know where we would be without the FIRST WORDS Project early identification, intervention, encouragement and support. Their assistance, advice and efforts have made a tremendous impact on our lives. I will remain deeply grateful and forever indebted to the entire FIRST WORDS Project staff.

What's New for Next Year?

Research Grant from the U.S. Department of Education

About one in three children in the U.S. enter kindergarten unprepared to learn, with most lacking the vocabulary and sentence structure that would allow them to participate fully in the educational environment. About one in three children experience significant reading difficulties in school. Finding children with preschool language problems may improve early identification of children with reading difficulties. We have received a new field-initiated research grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, titled *Improving Early Identification of Young Children At-risk for Language and Reading Difficulties*, to address this need. Dr. Amy Wetherby is the Principal Investigator and Drs. Chris Lonigan, Juliann Woods, and Howard Goldstein are Co-Investigators. The FIRST WORDS Project will be conducting a longitudinal study to investigate the relationship between prelinguistic communication and measures of language and emergent literacy. The children in this study will be selected from children who were evaluated on prelinguistic measures between 12 and 24 months of age. Measures of language



and emergent literacy will be gathered between 3 and 5 years of age to evaluate language and reading abilities. Data gathered over the 3 years of longitudinal research are likely to advance the field by offering a cost-efficient system for early identification of children at risk for language and reading difficulties. The project will contribute new knowledge linking prelinguistic communication with emergent literacy and language outcomes through 5 years of age.

Replication to Wakulla and Gadsden Counties

We will begin replication of the FIRST WORDS Project in Wakulla and Gadsden Counties next year. We have identified project partners in each County and plan to begin gathering Checklists on children in the Fall, 2001.



In Wakulla County, Dr. Kary Kublin, the Family Literacy Coordinator with the Wakulla County Public Library will spearhead our replication. Dr. Kublin served as the Project Coordinator for the FIRST WORDS Project during our first year, and we are so excited to be collaborating with her in our replication. Other partners in Wakulla County include: Richard Ingraham, M.S.W., Program Director for Healthy Families Wakulla; Marie Walker, the Dick Howser Center; Rebecca Denham, M.S.W., Early Intervention Program, Children's Home Society; and Ashley Anderson, Child Find Specialist, Wakulla County Schools.

In Gadsden County, we will be coordinating with Early Head Start and the Dick Howser Center. Partners include: Patricia Armstrong, B.S., Early Head Start Home-based Supervisor; Mimi Graham, Ed.D., Director, Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy, Florida State University; and Renee Holland, Speech-Language Pathologist with the Dick Howser Center in Quincy.



We Moved:

We are now located off-campus at 625 North Adams Street on the corner of Brevard, just diagonal to the Governor's mansion. Our new location is much more convenient for families and staff.

How Can Healthcare and Childcare Providers Help?

We need your help in detecting communication problems earlier in young children. You can help by giving our Checklist to parents of young children. Contact us and we will send you Checklists as needed. We are eager for you to give the Checklist to parents of any young child in Leon or surrounding counties, even if there are no concerns. With our grant funding, we are interested in gathering information about communication development from as many families as possible in this region. We are interested in both young healthy children and children whose families or service providers have concerns.

When should you be concerned if a child is not talking?

There is wide variation in the age that children begin talking and the rate that children learn to talk. This makes it difficult to decide when to be concerned if a child is not talking. The sounds and gestures children use to communicate and the ability to understand words and to play with objects provide important clues about the development of language.

Following are some important milestones as children develop gestures, sounds and words:

- ❖ 9 months
Children express pleasure by smiling and laughing while looking at an adult. They use gestures and sounds to get help or attention.
- ❖ 12 months
Children respond by looking when an adult calls their name. At this age they use a variety of sounds and gestures to communicate and begin to use a few words. They are interested in doing things with objects like trying to drink out of a cup, eat with a spoon, and brush with a hairbrush.
- ❖ 15 months
Children use lots of sounds, gestures, and a few words to communicate. Many will ask for help, show off, and point out interesting things to adults. They can follow simple directions and can stack 2-3 blocks.
- ❖ 18 months
Words are becoming the primary way many children at this age communicate. They can make more than 5 different consonant sounds (like m, n, p, b, t and d) and are using more than 10 different words. They are beginning to pretend with objects. For example, pretending to feed a doll or stuffed animal.
- ❖ 24 months
Children usually use more than 50 words and are combining words together to make simple sentences. They can put several actions together in their play, like stirring, scooping, and feeding a doll with a spoon.



What if families have concerns?

Families are often the first to raise concerns about their child's development. Concerns raised by the majority of families are warranted, and therefore, it is important to give the Checklist to any family that has any concern about their child's communication development. Some families have concerns about their child, but their child is developing typically. It is important to reassure those families and answer questions that they may have about their child's development. For these families, we can monitor their child's development with our Caregiver Questionnaire to make sure their child is progressing as expected and provide information about typical development.

What if families are not yet concerned?

Some children are delayed but families are not yet concerned. It can be difficult for parents to learn that their child is not developing as expected. It is important not to alarm families and to offer support as concerns are raised. It can be confusing to families if one professional tells them that their child is doing fine and another indicates concern. You can help by becoming familiar with early indicators of communication problems. We will try to obtain a release of information from families who you refer and/or serve so that we can send you a copy of our written reports. In this way you can know which children you refer need monitoring and/or intervention. If we can provide intervention early, the child's chances for improvement are much greater.



FIRST WORDS Project

PROFESSIONAL STAFF:

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Juliann Woods, Ph.D., Project Faculty

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Coordinator of Community Services

Lori Allen, M.S., CCC-SLP,
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Technology Specialist

Laura M. Johnson, Family Liaison

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Nurse Practitioner

Cindy Evers, L.C.S.W.,
Social Worker

Mary E. Seay, M.D.,
Developmental Pediatrician

Referral Sources in Our Community

If you have concerns about a child's development, refer that child for a screening or developmental evaluation. These services are publicly funded and therefore are at no charge to families.

- ❖ For screening and evaluation of children 6 to 24 months, refer to:

FIRST WORDS Project

625-B North Adams Street
Tallahassee, FL 32301
Phone: (850) 488-5780

- ❖ For evaluation of children birth to 36 months, refer to:
Children's Home Society

Early Intervention Program

820 E. Park Avenue, Building A
Tallahassee, FL 32301
Phone: (850) 921-0330

- ❖ For screening and evaluation of children 3 to 5 years of age, refer to:

Child Find

Leon County Schools Pre-K Diagnostics
2757 W. Pensacola St.
Tallahassee, FL 32304
Phone: (850) 921-5407



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Visit our website for updated information on our project and findings and a current calendar of parent education workshops and infant-toddler play groups being offered in Leon County.

<http://firstwords.fsu.edu>

For comments, questions, or
information, call us at (850) 488-5780



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