**FIRST WORDS Project:**
A Community-Based Approach to Early Identification of Communication Disorders

Presentation at the 1998 National Training Institute
ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

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**ABSTRACT**

This session will describe a model for early identification of 9- to 15-month old children who are at-risk for developing communication problems. Participants will learn how prelinguistic predictors of language development can be used to evaluate communication development in infants and toddlers and how these prelinguistic predictors can also be used to provide information to caregivers about what to expect as their children learn to use words. Videotaped case studies and discussion will illustrate how children’s emotion, eye gaze, gestures, sounds, understanding of words, and use of objects contribute to their communicative competence. A community-based referral process will be presented that involves pediatricians, nurse practitioners, childcare providers, social workers, audiologists and speech-language pathologists. Participant will receive data from a community-wide early identification effort. Handouts and slides will be used to share the materials developed for communication-based prevention and intervention efforts. Specific attention will be given to the materials most useful for community education and parent support.

**OUTLINE**

I. Problem of Under-Identification

A. According to recent Department of Education statistics, developmental delays in infants and toddlers are presently under-identified (US DOE, 1996).
   1. Percentages of children receiving special education services:
      12% of school age children
      4.4% of preschool children
      1.4% of infants and toddlers
   2. Prevalence of communication impairments across disability categories
   3. Factors contributing to under-identification
      a. professional guidance
      b. risk of over-identification
      c. family factors
      d. availability of services
B. Pediatricians, nurse practitioners, and childcare providers often find it difficult to know when to refer children for communication assessments.
   1. Wide range of emergence of first words in typically developing children
   2. Practitioners’ reliance on child’s use of words or lack of words for referral decision
      a. distinguishing between late talkers who will catch up spontaneously from those who will have persisting language problems (Paul, 1991; Paul, Looney & Dahm, 1991)
      b. the need for more sensitive measures to detect potential communication problems in infants and toddlers

II. **FIRST WORDS Project: Early Identification Referral and Evaluation System**

A. **FIRST WORDS Project** is a grant-funded research and demonstration project designed to develop, implement, and evaluate a system for the early identification of children at-risk for developmental disabilities.
   1. Evaluations using multiple measures of communication development
   2. Referrals organized through partnerships with practitioners in childcare and healthcare facilities
   3. Community involvement that is multidisciplinary: speech-language pathologists, audiologists, nurse practitioners, social workers, pediatricians, childcare providers

B. Current research offers a collection of prelinguistic predictors of later language development that have become useful in distinguishing between children who will catch up spontaneously from those whose communication problems are likely to persist (McCatheren, Warren & Yoder, 1996; Wetherby & Prizant, 1992; 1993).
   1. Communication and symbolic parameters (Wetherby & Prizant, 1993; in press)
      - emotion and use of eye gaze
      - use of communication
      - use of gestures
      - use of sounds
      - understanding and use of words
      - use of objects
   2. Using knowledge of “best practices” when evaluating young children
      a. planning for active participation of caregivers & allowing for multiple roles
      b. use of meaningful context & opportunities for children to initiate
      c. profiling young children’s relative strength
      a. issues of communication and behavior
      b. how parents self-refer

C. Drawing on prelinguistic predictors of later language development a referral and evaluation protocol was developed for **FIRST WORDS Project** that could be flexible, individualized, and responsive to community and family needs (Wetherby & Prizant, in press).
   1. Referral Checklist
   2. Follow-up Caregiver Questionnaire and Behavior Sample
   3. Coordination with community agencies
   4. Videotape presentation of case studies
   5. Slide presentation of data collected from Summer, 1997 to Fall, 1998
III. Providing Services to Infants, Toddlers, and their Families

A. Preventive services were organized to respond to families desire for information and the need for more family education and support in the local community (Eggbeer, Lerner Litman & Jones, M, 1997; Moss & Gotts, 1998).
   1. value of preventive services for those having at-risk status who are not yet eligible for community early intervention services
   2. creating family-friendly, useable education materials & adapting published materials
   3. using play groups, home visits, and parent meeting formats to offer a range of services

B. Individualized, family-guided intervention offered to families needing more one-on-one support.
   1. experience of children and families involved
   2. presentation of videotaped case studies

IV. Implications and Discussion

A. Systematic efforts to address early identification of communication problems must be paired with a range of service delivery options to meet family and community needs where infants and toddlers are concerned.

B. There is a need for more research to address the outcomes of not just “late talkers” but all children who are determined to be at-risk in their prelinguistic stage of language development.

C. The relationship between regulatory disorders and communication problems should be further explored now that tools are allowing more reliable early identification of both.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


FIRST WORDS Project
Parent-Guided Menu of Service Options

Preventative Family Education/Support Services:
- Parent programs
- Infant/toddler play groups
- Resource and referral database
- Information on supporting communication and language development (one page format)

Intensive, Individualized Early Intervention
- Family-guided assessment of the child’s communication and the communicative environment
- Family-guided identification of specific concerns, intervention planning, and evaluation of outcomes
- Collaborative intervention and support focusing on communication opportunities in daily routines

Services Provided to the Local Community
- Newsletters to local healthcare and childcare providers
- Inservice presentations to nurses, early childhood educators and childcare providers
- Development of materials to be used by childcare provider trainers

High risk indicators for persisting language disabilities in young children:

Emotion and Use of Eye Gaze
- limited ability to share attention and affective states with eye gaze and facial expression
- limited use of gaze shifts between people and objects
- delay in comprehending and following others’ points and eye gaze

Use of Communication
- low rate of communicating with gestures and/or vocalizations
- limited range of communicative functions, particularly lacking in the joint attention function

Use of Gestures
- limited repertoire of conventional gestures (i.e., giving, showing, reaching, pointing)
- limited use of symbolic gestures (i.e., waving, nodding head, depictive gestures)
- reliance on gestures and a limited use of vocalizations to communicate

Use of Sounds
- limited consonant inventory
- immature syllable structure

Understanding and Use of Words
- delay in both language comprehension and production

Use of Objects
- a delay in the spontaneous use of action schemes in symbolic play
- limited ability to imitate actions on objects