

## Correlation Between Language Acquisition and Joint Attention in Delayed Talkers

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### Abstract

The correlation between language acquisition and joint attention in delayed talkers is a critical area of study in developmental psychology and early childhood intervention. Joint attention, the shared focus between two individuals on an object or event, is essential for facilitating early language development. Children known as late talkers, who experience delayed expressive language but have otherwise typical development, often show impairments in joint attention skills. This abstract reviews the existing research on the relationship between joint attention and language acquisition in late talkers, examining how difficulties in responding to and initiating joint attention may hinder language learning. The mechanisms linking joint attention to language acquisition include social interaction, symbolic understanding, and cognitive development, all of which are foundational for successful word learning. The article also discusses intervention strategies, such as parent-mediated and play-based therapies, which target joint attention to improve language outcomes in late talkers. These findings suggest that enhancing joint attention may be an effective approach for mitigating language delays, providing new avenues for early intervention and support for late talkers.

**Keywords:** Language acquisition; Joint attention; Late talkers; Delayed speech; Early intervention; Word learning

### Introduction

Language acquisition is one of the most critical aspects of human development, providing the foundation for communication, learning, and social interaction [1]. While most children typically follow a developmental trajectory that allows them to learn language efficiently, some experience significant delays in this process. These “late talkers” often present with limited vocabularies and slower speech development compared to their peers. In recent years, research has explored the possible underlying factors contributing to delayed language acquisition, with one area of focus being the role of joint attention. Joint attention refers to the shared focus of two or more individuals on an object or event, and it is widely recognized as a pivotal skill in early social and communicative development [2,3].

### What is joint attention?

Joint attention occurs when two individuals, typically an infant and a caregiver, focus on the same object or event and recognize that they are sharing the experience. This can be initiated in various ways, such as through gestures (pointing or looking at an object), vocalizations, or verbal cues. Joint attention typically emerges in infancy, usually between 9 and 12 months, and is considered an essential skill for the development of communication, language, and social cognition [4,5].

### Types of joint attention

There are two primary types of joint attention:

**Responding to joint attention (RJA):** This refers to the child’s ability to follow another person’s cues to focus on an object or event. For example, if a caregiver points to a toy, the child looks in the direction of the toy, establishing shared attention.

**Initiating joint attention (IJA):** This is when the child attempts to direct another person’s attention to an object or event. This might involve pointing, showing an object, or vocalizing while looking at an item to engage the other person. Both RJA and IJA are crucial for language development, as they help the child connect words with objects, events, and people in their environment [6]. Children who

develop joint attention skills typically also demonstrate strong language acquisition, as they learn to engage in meaningful communicative interactions.

### Language acquisition in late talkers

Late talkers are children who exhibit delayed expressive language development but do not typically have other developmental delays. These children might not use as many words as their peers by 18 to 24 months, often producing fewer than 50 words and showing limited ability to combine words into phrases. However, most late talkers catch up to their peers by the time they enter school [7,8]. The reasons for delayed language acquisition can be multifactorial, ranging from genetic predispositions to environmental influences, but an increasing body of research has focused on the role of joint attention in this process.

### The correlation between joint attention and language acquisition

#### Joint attention as a predictor of language development

Research consistently shows that joint attention is a strong predictor of later language abilities. Children who exhibit better joint attention skills tend to acquire language faster and have larger vocabularies as they grow. This correlation is particularly relevant for late talkers, as difficulties in establishing joint attention can compound delays in language acquisition [9]. Several studies have demonstrated that children with delayed language often show impairments in joint

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**Received:** 02-Sep-2024, Manuscript No: jspt-24-147006; **Editor assigned:** 05-Sep-2024, PreQC No: jspt-24-147006 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 18-Sep-2024, QC No: jspt-24-147006; **Revised:** 25-Sep-2024, Manuscript No: jspt-24-147006 (R); **Published:** 30-Sep-2024, DOI: 10.4172/2472-5005.1000262

**Citation:** Dennis S (2024) Correlation Between Language Acquisition and Joint Attention in Delayed Talkers. J Speech Pathol Ther 9: 262.

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attention. These children may struggle to follow the gaze or gestures of others, making it more challenging for them to associate words with objects and events in their surroundings. Similarly, late talkers might exhibit limited initiation of joint attention, meaning they are less likely to engage others in shared experiences, which further restricts opportunities for language learning [10].

### Mechanisms behind the correlation

The relationship between joint attention and language acquisition can be understood through various mechanisms:

**Social interaction and engagement:** Joint attention provides a foundation for social interaction, allowing children to engage with caregivers in meaningful exchanges. Through these interactions, children are exposed to language and can learn the meanings of words in context. When joint attention is impaired, these learning opportunities are reduced.

**Symbolic understanding:** Establishing joint attention requires the child to understand that the caregiver's gestures, words, or gaze are directed toward an object or event. This symbolic understanding is crucial for language learning, as it allows the child to map words onto objects and actions. Without joint attention, this symbolic mapping process is hindered.

**Cognitive development:** Joint attention is also linked to cognitive skills such as memory and problem-solving, which play a role in language acquisition. Children who engage in joint attention are more likely to develop stronger cognitive abilities, which in turn supports language development.

**Word learning:** Joint attention facilitates word learning by providing a context in which children can link words to their referents. For example, when a caregiver points to a ball and says, "ball," the child can more easily make the connection between the word and the object. Without joint attention, word learning becomes more difficult, as the child may not be able to focus on the correct referent.

### Joint attention in late talkers: challenges and interventions

#### Challenges faced by late talkers

Late talkers often experience difficulties with both responding to and initiating joint attention. This can create a cycle in which language development is delayed, leading to fewer opportunities for communicative interactions, which in turn hinders further language learning. Additionally, late talkers may struggle with other social-communicative behaviors, such as turn-taking in conversations, which can further impede their ability to engage in meaningful language learning experiences. In some cases, late talkers might also exhibit traits associated with developmental disorders, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), where joint attention difficulties are a common feature. However, not all late talkers will have an underlying developmental disorder, and many will eventually catch up to their peers with appropriate support.

#### Interventions to support joint attention and language development

Intervention strategies that target joint attention can be highly effective in promoting language development in late talkers. These interventions often focus on enhancing the child's ability to engage in shared attention with caregivers and other communication partners.

**Parent-mediated interventions:** Parents play a crucial role in

fostering joint attention and language development. By using strategies such as following the child's lead, using exaggerated gestures and facial expressions, and engaging in play-based interactions, parents can help facilitate joint attention and create rich language-learning environments.

**Modeling and prompting:** Therapists and caregivers can model joint attention behaviors, such as pointing or looking at an object, and prompt the child to follow their gaze or gesture. Over time, this can help the child develop the ability to engage in joint attention more independently.

**Play-based interventions:** Play is a natural context for joint attention and language learning. Therapists may use play-based interventions to encourage joint attention by incorporating objects of interest to the child and using them as a focus for shared attention.

**Interactive storytelling and reading:** Books and storytelling provide an opportunity for joint attention and language development. Caregivers and therapists can use books to encourage the child to focus on pictures, words, and actions, while engaging in conversations that promote language skills.

### Conclusion

The correlation between language acquisition and joint attention in delayed talkers highlights the critical role that joint attention plays in early communication development. For late talkers, difficulties with joint attention can exacerbate language delays, creating challenges in word learning and social interaction. However, with appropriate interventions that target joint attention, many late talkers can make significant progress in their language development.

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