



Parental Knowledge of Speech and Language Developmental Milestones

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Background

Starting at birth, typically developing children meet various speech, language, and cognitive milestones in a fairly predictable sequence. Even though there is some individual variability, there are widely accepted benchmarks of when children should reach major milestones (e.g., a child should use a few single words at 1 year of age, combine words at 2 years of age, and so on).

Parents and caregivers are catalysts for helping to stimulate their child’s communication through interacting with the child and providing a language rich environment. Research has consistently shown that parents who are knowledgeable about developmental milestones have a positive impact on their child’s development. However, not all parents have the know-how or resources to be good consumers of accurate information about early development. They may seek information from the internet, friends and family, and other individuals, which may or may not be accurate. Accurate information about developmental milestones is critical so that parents can identify whether or not there are concerns, and to seek out services, if warranted. However, the level of parental knowledge about speech and language milestones remains largely unclear.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was answer the research question: What do expectant parents and/or parents of young children know about major speech and language developmental milestones?

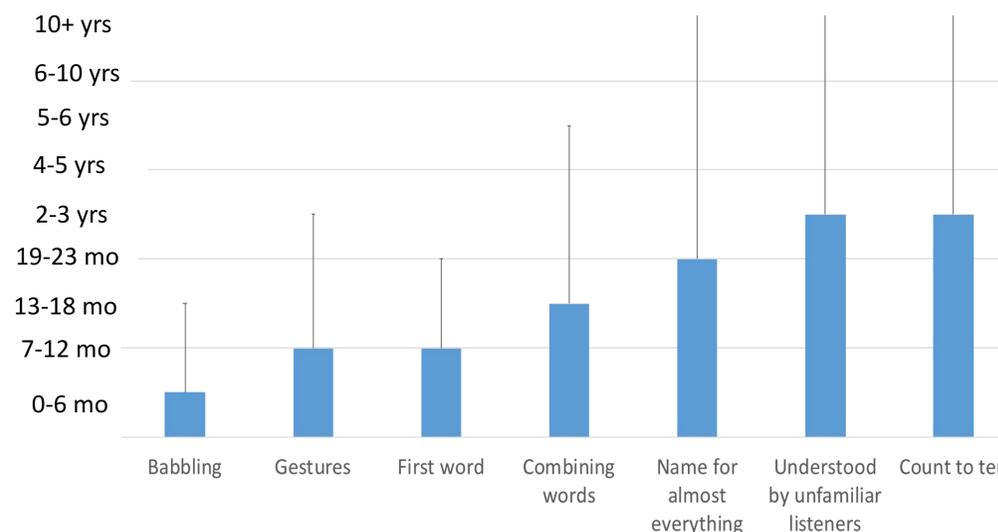
Methods

An anonymous, 24-question online survey about early childhood speech and language milestones was distributed to expectant parents and/or parents of children 10 years of age or younger.

The survey consisted of Likert-scale items (e.g., at what age should a child use a first word?), followed by a series of age-range options from 0 months to 10 years old. Additional open-ended questions were also included pertaining to where parents obtained knowledge about child development.

Results

Chart 1. Parents’ responses of when children should meet various milestones



The figure above depicts the most common answer given by participants when asked: “At what age would you expect your child to begin babbling, use gestures, say their first words, combine words, having a name for almost everything, be understood by unfamiliar listeners, and count to ten.” The maximal data markers shown in the figure represent the highest age range selected for each milestone.

One-hundred-fifty-two parents completed the survey ($N = 152$). Out of those participants, 84.75% were mothers. The majority of participants were between the ages of 26-35 years of age (58.53%). Most of the parents (70%) had 1-2 children, with most children falling in the 2-5 year age-range. Participants were also asked if they had any prior knowledge about child development. The results were divided almost evenly between “yes” and “no.” Participants reported they received knowledge about childhood development from higher education classes, professional experiences, and family experience.

Accuracy of parents’ responses were interpreted against widely accepted norms (see Bowen, 2015). Results showed that a majority of parents selected the appropriate answer for developmental milestone questions. Sixty-two percent indicated babbling should occur at 0-6 months, 69.5% indicated gestures should emerge at 7-12 months, 70% indicated that first words should emerge between 7-12 months, 52.4% indicated word combinations should occur at 13-18 months, 35% indicated that children should be able to name most things at 2-3 years of age, 56% indicated that sentences should be understood by others at 2-3 years, and 50% indicated that children should be able to count to 10 between 2-3 years.

In response to “How early can children receive speech and language service?” 60.37% ($n=99$), selected 1 to 3 years of age and only 20.73% ($n=34$) of participants selected the answer “prior to 1 year of age.”

Discussion

Overall, most parents reported accurate knowledge about early speech and language development milestones. Of concern, however, are the “outliers” who had grossly inaccurate knowledge about milestones. For example, some parents had unreasonably high expectations, such as “children should be able to count to 10 between 7-12 months.” By contrast, other parents reported children should meet milestones well after the expected age such as, “children should be able to babble at 13-18 months” and “use gestures at 19-23 months.” Although a majority of parents reported “a delay in communication could impact reading, writing, hearing, and socialization ‘a lot’, a few responded there would be “no effect.” The minority of parents who have inaccurate knowledge about speech and language milestones and who do not recognize the impact of communication on other domains may not recognize the need for early intervention, which can put the child at continued risk for communication disorders. This is further compounded by the lack of knowledge that early intervention can commence before 1 year of age.

This study is limited in that a majority of respondents were mothers, with many being from a narrow region of the US (i.e., Appalachia). In addition, the survey did not provide operational definitions of the terms, which may have impacted the overall results. Future research should obtain a more representative sample of parents. In addition, it should further elucidate the demographics of parents who have limited or inaccurate knowledge about milestones so that educational efforts can be targeted to that population.

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