



# Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders OAFCCD

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## Young Adult Outcomes of Children with Communication Disorders: Social and Behavioural Skills

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Carla Johnson opened the OAFCCD Annual Conference by reviewing the results of a remarkable 20 year study, which has followed a group of children from Kindergarten to age 25. This study is unique because the researchers have been able to track a group of children, some with a speech and/or language disorder, through school and into their adult lives. This study has been able to test the groups' speech and language skills at regular intervals, and review their development in many areas, including cognition, psychosocial, education, and employment.

The study of Kindergarten children in Ottawa-Carleton was started by Joseph H. Beitchman in 1982. At that time the speech and language skills of a large number of kindergarten children were assessed and two groups of children were identified. One group consisted of children identified with a speech or language disorder and the second group of children who did not have any identified impairments. The two groups were matched on characteristics of age, sex and school. With parent agreement, and later their own consent, this group has been re-tested and interviewed at 7 year intervals, in 1982, 1989, 1996, and 2003.

This study was not able to evaluate the impact of speech and language intervention services, although the families of all identified children were informed about services in Kindergarten. Rather the focus of the study was on the differences between the two groups in terms of their academic, social, and behavioural development over time. At each time frame the individuals were assessed in several areas, and the results for the two groups compared. The most recent testing of 85% of the original participants was completed earlier this year. Although analysis is still underway, Carla was able to share some of the initial results.

The results presented were for the whole group and did not look at the outcomes for individuals. Of the children identified with a communication disorder, the majority had a language disorder, with or without a speech disorder, and approximately one third had a speech disorder only. The results indicated that most of the group with language disorders still had a measurable impairment at age 25. In addition, the group with language disorders consistently had lower scores in areas of achievement (reading, spelling, and math) at each testing, and had poorer outcomes in terms of high school graduation, number of arrests, and enrolment in post-secondary education.

However, at the latest evaluation of the groups at age 25, there were almost no differences in how the members of each group rated their systems of social support and quality of life. In a number of areas,

the two groups had similar results. For example: there were no significant differences in the levels of employment or the number of group members who are now married.

The conclusions drawn from the study were:

1. In young adulthood, children with early language disorders show:

- High rates (70-75%) of continued disorder.
- Increased risk of long term, adverse outcomes in communication, academic, cognitive and social/behavioural areas.
- Poorer overall prognosis than children with early speech-only disorders.

2. In young adulthood, children with early speech-only disorders show:

- Modest rates (40-50%) of continued very mild speech-only disorder.
- Minimal risk for adverse long-term outcomes in communication, academic, cognitive, and social/ behavioural areas.

3. Young adults with and without early communication disorders do not differ in their perceptions of their:

- Own communication effectiveness
- Quality of key relationships
- Quality of life

The results to date of this long term study suggest that there is some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that many language disorders are lifelong and that students with language impairment are at higher risk for failure in high school and dropping out of school, are less likely to attend post-secondary school, and are at higher risk for getting into trouble with the law. On the positive side, individuals with or without a communication disorder were generally satisfied with their relationships with family and friends and with their quality of life.

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**Source:** Carla Johnson, Associate Professor, Department of Speech-Language Pathology, University of Toronto, March 2004