

Maternal Education as a Risk Factor for Speech/Language Impairments

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Low levels of maternal education at birth are associated with an increased risk for special education placement. Children born to mothers with less than 12 years of education at the time of the child's birth are at increased risk for a variety of disabilities including specific learning disabilities, severe emotional disturbances/emotional handicaps, and mental retardation. Results of studies on the relation between maternal education and speech and/or language impairments have been mixed. The present study utilized integrated statewide datasets to evaluate the risk associated with maternal education in preschool age children who were born in Florida.

Sample

The sample consisted of children born in Florida from 1994 through 1998. CHRIS records were utilized to categorize children into one of the following four groups:

- *Isolated speech impairment (SI)*: a primary exceptionality of speech impairment and no secondary exceptionality (n = 6,835).
- *Language impairment (LI)*: a primary exceptionality of language impairment and no secondary exceptionality (n = 2,357).
- *Combined speech and language impairment (CSLI)*: a primary exceptionality of speech impairment with a secondary exceptionality of language impairment or a primary exceptionality of language impairment with a secondary exceptionality of speech

impairment (n = 3,607).

- *Comparison group*: No primary exceptionality or primary exceptionality other than speech or language impairment (n = 946,177).

Results

Maternal education was not associated with an increased risk for speech and/or language impairments among children whose mothers had a completed 12 years of education or less at the time of the child's birth. Of interest, though, the likelihood of a child being classified as SI or CSLI increased with higher educational attainment. Although higher levels of education do not likely pose an increased biological or environmental risk to the child, these findings may indicate a bias towards the identification of SI in more educated families with higher socioeconomic status.

Although maternal education may not have a direct relation to the development of speech problems, they are indicators of family income and overall SES. Maternal education is associated with the environment and experiences of children, including the availability of books and toys in the home that create a stimulating environment as well as nutrition and health care. Maternal education is also associated with knowledge of child development, parenting practices, and quality of the language environment.

Less educated mothers may not recognize the early signs of SI or may view speech problems as something the child will naturally outgrow. In addition to being more able to identify aberrant speech or language, mothers with higher levels of education may be more aware of the services provided in their communities and recognize the importance of early intervention for improving outcomes. Informing less educated mothers of the early signs of speech and language impairments, the availability of services, and the importance of early intervention could assist in the early identification of children at potential risk for these disabilities.