



THE HEATHER VAN DER LELY FOUNDATION
RESEARCHING LANGUAGE
DIFFICULTIES IN CHILDREN

HvdL Funded Research

Language Disorders in Children Conference 2024

Saturday 8th June 2024 | 9.30am-5pm

www.hvdl.org.uk

The Henry Wellcome Auditorium, Wellcome Collection, 183 Euston Road, London, NW1 2BE

Today's Programme

9.30am	Registration and coffee
10.00am	Welcome Professor Chloe Marshall, scientific advisor and Dr Hilary Gardner, Chair of Trustees
10.15am - 10.50am	Professor Julie Dockrell <i>Capturing the key components of oral language at school entry</i>
10.55am - 11.30am	Dr Helen Spicer-Cain <i>Very early predictors of grammatical, phonological and school readiness skills at school age in siblings of children with communication disorders</i>
11.30am	Coffee
12.00pm - 12.35pm	Dr Fiona Kyle
12.40pm - 1.15pm	Professor Cristina McKean <i>A randomised controlled trial comparing the efficacy of pre-school language interventions: Building Early Sentences Therapy and an Adapted Derbyshire Language Scheme</i>
1.15pm - 2.30pm	Lunch
2.30pm - 3.05pm	Dr Gill West <i>Language Screening at Scale</i>
3.10pm - 3.50pm	Panel discussion
3.50pm	Closing remarks
4.00pm	Drinks reception - venue
5.00pm	Close

Posters

1: Elaine Ashton et al

University of Newcastle

Working with bilingual children and interpreters: from Research to clinical practice

2: Laura Chambers et al

University of Newcastle

Participatory research in action: Using participatory action research methods to implement the BEST intervention in early years settings

3: Susan Ebbels et al

University of Oxford; Moor House Research & Training Institute

The effectiveness of individualized morphosyntactic target identification and explicit intervention using the SHAPE CODING™ system for children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) and the impact of within-session dosage

4: Dr Hannah Harvey et al

Birmingham City University

Navigating the Diagnosis: Parental Perspectives on Developmental Language Disorder

5: Caitlin Holme et al

University of Bristol (HvdL PhD student)

A day in the life of 12 toddlers: studying children's everyday interactions to inform parent-child interaction therapy

6: Lucy Hughes et al

Reading University and Moor House Research & Training Institute

'Better Conversations with Developmental Language Disorder': feasibility and findings from an experimentally controlled case series

7: Rhonwen Lewis et al

Cardiff Metropolitan University

Designing a Welsh-English bilingual tool to identify speech, language and communication needs in the early years

8: Dr Kathryn Mason et al

UCL; City University

Contribution of the Preschool Home Literacy Environment to Language and Literacy Skills after One-Year of Formal Schooling in Deaf and Hearing Children

9: Keira Radice

Birmingham City University (HvdL PhD student)

The effectiveness of a language intervention using an evidence-based approach for young people with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) who are accessing Youth Justice Services (YJS)

10: Anna Sowerbutts

The Churchill Fellowship

Supporting Developmental Language Disorder in schools: an international perspective

11: Kate Shobbrook

UCL (lecturer & PhD student)

Developing oral comprehension in preschool children with language difficulties: an examination of intervention components and their relevance for research and practice

12: Dr Juhayna Taha & Prof Julie Dockrell

UCL

An exploration of the knowledge, practices, and needs of Arab early years teachers in promoting oral language development

10.15am -10.50am

Professor Julie Dockrell

Capturing the key components of oral language at school entry

Concern about the levels of pupils' oral language skills at school entry continues to raise challenges for practitioners and policy makers.

To support and develop these skills effectively an understanding of the key components of oral language at this point in development and their developmental trajectories is required. To our knowledge these data do not exist in the UK.

Drawing on a sample of 250 typically developing monolingual pupils in Reception and Year 1, our study aimed to identify which components of expressive and receptive oral language are evident at school entry and which language skills, if any, identify children struggling with language.

Using confirmatory factor analyses, we examined the associations between oral language skills by component and modality for each age group. Oral language was best represented by four

dimensions in Reception (receptive core language skills, receptive narrative, expressive core language skills, and expressive narrative).

By contrast in Year 1, three dimensions were identified, irrespective of modality: phonology, core language skills and phonology. The data suggest that we should complement our focus on vocabulary and grammar by including a greater emphasis on children's oral narrative skills. Ways of capturing narrative skills are considered.

Overall, the data speak to the importance of capturing and supporting these dimensions in assessments and teaching and monitoring their development at school entry.

10.55am - 11.30am

Dr Helen Spicer-Cain

Very early predictors of grammatical, phonological and school readiness skills at school age in siblings of children with communication disorders

*Dr Helen Spicer-Cain, Dr Abbie Moran and Professor Nicola Botting:
Department of Language and Communication Sciences, City, University of London*

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Background

Early identification of children who may have communication difficulties is important to reduce the impact of potential negative sequelae and to provide early intervention to support the development of communication skills. This project therefore aimed to follow a group of children initially recruited in infancy to look at two main research areas:

1. School age outcomes of children at increased likelihood of communication difficulties
2. How early measures of language and social communication predict communication skills at school age.

Methods

Sixty-two children recruited in infancy were assessed remotely on measures of language, phonological awareness and social communication at 6-8yrs: 31 children with average likelihood of communication difficulties; and 31 children with increased likelihood of communication difficulties based on family history.

Results

Children with increased likelihood of communication difficulties differed from the average likelihood group on measures of language, phonological awareness and parental ratings of communication skills at school age. Different patterns of difficulties emerged in different increased likelihood groups, with more impact for children who experience increased likelihood of social communication difficulties.

Additionally, receptive language and social communication skills in infancy appear to have important relationships with later communication skills at school age.

Conclusion

Children at increased likelihood of communication difficulties have lower language ability and more social communication difficulties at early school age. These difficulties may be particularly pronounced in children at increased likelihood of social communication difficulties. However, all children at increased likelihood of communication difficulties would benefit from ongoing monitoring and early identification of needs.



12.00pm - 12.35pm

Dr Fiona Kyle

To come....

12.40pm - 1.15pm

Professor Cristina McKean

A randomised controlled trial comparing the efficacy of pre-school language interventions: Building Early Sentences Therapy and an Adapted Derbyshire Language Scheme

Christine Jack, Cristina McKean, Sean Pert, Helen Stringer, Carolyn Letts, Emily Armstrong, Elaine Ashton, Kate Conn, Anastasia Trebacz, Jenny Sandham, Naomi Rose, Robert Rush, Mark Masidlover

Building Early Sentences Therapy (BEST) and the Derbyshire Language Scheme (DLS) are effective in improving children's use and/or understanding of simple sentences. BEST is based on 'usage-based' theory. We hypothesised that by systematically manipulating the nature and quantity of language a child hears, BEST would promote abstract representations and flexible use of simple sentence structures, hence accelerating future language learning. DLS incrementally increases the information carrying words children are asked to understand and produce, following a typical developmental sequence. The adapted DLS (A-DLS) used in this study followed DLS principles but delivered the programme more rapidly.

This study examined whether:

- BEST and A-DLS differ in their efficacy,
- BEST and A-DLS differ in the degree to which benefits generalise to broader language and communication skills,
- BEST accelerates progress after intervention as predicted by usage-based theory

Twenty nurseries were randomised to receive BEST or A-DLS. 102 children met inclusion criteria: aged 3;06–4;06, monolingual, comprehension and/or production scores \leq 16th centile (New Reynell Developmental Language Scales (NRDLS)); no sensorineural hearing impairment, severe visual impairment or learning disability.

Speech and Language Therapists delivered interventions with high fidelity, in 15-minute group sessions, twice weekly for eight weeks. Baseline, outcome, and follow-up measures were completed blind to intervention arm.

Both interventions were associated with large, clinically meaningful changes in communicative participation. There were no differences in NRDLS comprehension or production standard scores at outcome but children receiving BEST had higher comprehension and production standard scores at follow-up suggesting the accelerated progress predicted by usage-based theory.



2.30pm - 3.05pm

Gillian West

UCL - Presenter, Co-investigator

Language Screening at Scale

Oral language skills are a critical foundation for literacy, educational success and psycho-social wellbeing. Accurate, reliable and easy-to-use tests are needed to identify children with language learning difficulties.

This talk will focus on the development, standardisation and use of LanguageScreen, an automated language assessment App for children between the ages of 3 ½ - 11 years.

The App contains 4 subtests (Expressive and Receptive vocabulary, Sentence repetition and Listening Comprehension), which combine to provide a highly reliable age-standardised 'score' for each child. The App can be administered in 10 – 15 minutes by teachers or teaching assistants without the need for prior training. LanguageScreen can be used by educators to identify children with language weaknesses, as well as to evaluate the progress that all children make in developing their language skills over time.

In 2018, LanguageScreen was used to assess the language skills nearly 6000 children taking part in a large-scale effectiveness trial of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI). It was subsequently instrumental in the successful roll out the NELI programme to children in over 10,000 primary schools as part of the government's Covid Recovery plans.

The creation of this tablet-based App, now facilitating the assessment of children's language skills in primary schools across the country, has important implications for the identification and support of children with language learning difficulties.



Professor Heather van der Lely and the Origins of the HvdL Foundation Trust



Heather van der Lely graduated with 1st class honours from Birmingham City University, qualifying as a speech and language therapist in 1984. She worked as an SLT for two years before taking a Masters at the Institute of Neurology, University of London, then starting her PhD at Birkbeck College. Her topic was sentence comprehension in children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI).

She continued at Birkbeck with a post-doctoral fellowship from the British Academy which enabled her to continue studying the underlying nature and cause of SLI in children. A career-development fellowship from the Wellcome

Trust followed. In 2001, she was offered the new Chair of Developmental Language Disorders and Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London and founded a Centre to further her work. There she gathered together psychologists, linguists, speech and language therapists and cognitive neuroscientists from all over the world in order to study language disorders using the best tools from a range of disciplines. It was a very stimulating place to work!

In 2009, Heather left UCL and expanded her research with new collaborators: she became vice-chair of a 25-country research project funded by the European Union, and she held Visiting Professorships in Berlin, Louvain and Harvard.

Heather's most significant scientific contribution was the discovery and characterisation of a form of SLI that she termed 'Grammatical-SLI'. She claimed that a small proportion of children with SLI have a deficit that is specific to complex syntax, morphosyntax and phonology, and does not affect other aspects of language processing such as speech perception, vocabulary and pragmatics.

Over the years she refined this claim, locating the deficit specifically in those aspects of grammar that are non-local, hierarchical, abstract and composed. At the same time, she never forgot her speech and language therapist roots, and in 2006 she and her colleagues published the Grammar and Phonology Screening (GAPS) Test, a 10-minute screen for those aspects of syntax, morphology and phonology that are particularly vulnerable in young children with SLI. Heather was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer in December 2012, and it took her life on 17th February 2014.

Heather's wish was that the money she left in her will should be used to set up a charity, the Heather van der Lely Foundation, to fund research into language disorders. In her own research Heather aimed at nothing less than fully characterising the heterogeneity of SLI, at the behavioural, cognitive, neural and genetic levels, because doing so would, she argued, offer a window onto typical language development and processing, as well as leading to better forms of diagnosis and intervention for children with developmental language disorders. She would surely have been proud of the variety of work showcased today, which has benefited from her intellectual and financial legacy.

The HvdL Foundation Trust was set up by a group of friends and colleagues in line with the wishes expressed in her will and has followed rigorous academic research processes to fund 5 projects (Just over 1 million pounds), 2 PhDs (£180,000) and 3 Post docs. The first call (up to the region of £350,000) was made in Spring 2018 and the last instalments have been paid out in 2024.

The trust has liaised with other organisations in the field of developmental language disorders and the Trust would like to thank those who have offered helpful support and advice throughout its existence, especially Emeritus Prof Bill Wells and our ever reliable administrator Helen Strachan.

After 10 years and the vicissitudes of COVID-19, which massively disrupted data collection eg in schools (and cancelled a planned national seminar series), we are at last able to celebrate what the Trust has achieved. Over the next year or so the remainder of the funds will be dispersed to relevant charities and the Trust closed down. The trustees believe it has been a worthwhile effort, if quite onerous at times!

We hope you can celebrate with us today.

The Trustees

- Dr Hilary Gardner (Chair),
- Emeritus Professor Rhona Stainthorp,
- Mr Graham van der Lely,
- Dr Jo Taylor,
- Dr Claire Durrant,
- Mrs Monica Uden
- And our Scientific Advisor Emerita Professor Chloe Marshall.



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