

Research Report

Is speech and language therapy effective for children with primary speech and language impairment? Report of a randomized control trial

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Abstract

Background: A randomized controlled trial was conducted of a whole-service cohort of children referred to the Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy Service of Middlesbrough Primary Care Trust between January 1999 and April 2000. The 730 children involved, aged up to 16 years, were diagnosed with primary speech and/or language impairment in the absence of any learning, physical or sensory difficulty.

Aims: The study considered outcomes of treatment versus no treatment.

Methods & Procedures: Treatment involved clinic-based interventions, provided according to local departmental criteria and care pathways, averaging 5.5 h (range 0–24 h) of contact during the 6-month period immediately following initial assessment. Assessments occurred within 8 weeks of referral and intervention began immediately thereafter.

Outcomes & Results: Treatment was significantly more effective than no treatment, over 6 months, both overall ($p < 0.001$) and for each of the three diagnostic categories (comprehension, expression and speech, each $p < 0.001$).

Conclusions: An average of 6 h of speech and language therapy in a 6-month period can produce significant improvement in performance, and it has been shown to be more effective than no treatment over the same 6-month period for children with primary speech and/or language impairment.

Keywords: children, speech, language impairment, evidence-based practice (EBP), speech and language therapy.

What this paper adds

What is already known on this subject?

There is little prior large group evidence for the effectiveness of intervention for children with primary speech and/or language impairment.

What this study adds

Speech and language therapy intervention is demonstrated as being more effective than no intervention for children with primary speech and/or language impairment.

Introduction

Speech and language impairment may be the most common difficulty presenting in early childhood (Law 1992) with a prevalence of around 6% of children (Barnford *et al.* 1998). The incidence of referral of this caseload to speech and language therapy (SLT) may be as high as 16.3% of the child population aged up to 16 years (Broomfield and Dodd 2004a). There is

still limited evidence, however, concerning the clinical effectiveness of SLT intervention. In addition, the need for early SLT intervention for children who fail to acquire age-appropriate communication skills in the pre-school years has been questioned (Hall 1996). Law *et al.* (1998) suggested that the benefit is still not proven, and acknowledged that the available studies have been based on individuals and small groups.

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