

Preschoolers With Special Needs Benefit From Peers' Strong Language Skills

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The guiding philosophy for educating children with disabilities has been to integrate them as much as possible into a normal classroom environment, with the hope that peers' skills will help bring them up to speed. A new [study](#) provides empirical evidence that peers really can have an impact on a child's language abilities, for better or worse.

While peers with strong language skills can help boost their classmates' abilities, being surrounded by peers with weak skills may hinder kids' language development.



The [findings](#) are published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“We were surprised to see the striking differences among children’s language skills at the end of the school year when considering those with less-skilled peers and highly-skilled peers,” says psychological scientist Laura Justice of the Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy at The Ohio State University, lead author on the study. “In particular, children with disabilities seemed to be very negatively affected by having classmates who were less-skilled.”

Previous research suggests that children with disabilities show developmental improvement from exposure to sophisticated language, and that teachers’ level of speech sophistication influences children’s language growth. Moreover, evidence indicates that peers may improve each other’s performance in the classroom. Justice and colleagues hypothesized that classmates’ higher level language abilities would promote language growth in children with disabilities.

Six hundred seventy preschoolers participated in the study. Just over half of them had a clinically diagnosed disability, including autism spectrum disorder, language impairment, or Down syndrome.

Teachers completed a measure examining each child's language skills at the beginning of the school year, and again at the end of the school year. To determine the level of improvement, the researchers then compared individual children's scores in the spring to the classroom average.

The researchers found that preschoolers with special needs were more influenced by their peers' language skills than were children without disabilities. Children with disabilities whose classmates had weak language skills showed the strongest effects — by spring, their language skills lagged far behind those of typically developing children.

In general, preschoolers whose peers had relatively high language skills showed more improvement in their own language skills over the course of the school year than did children whose peers' skills were not as strong.

Children who started the year with weak language skills made larger gains if their classmates had strong language skills; by the end of the school year, they had scores similar to those of highly-skilled kids with less-skilled peers.

The researchers believe that when kids play together and interact in the classroom, they naturally imitate each other's behaviors, which in turn helps them to develop language skills such as "taking turns in conversation, communicating their needs and wants, and producing narratives."

"If peer effects operate as our work suggests they do, it is very important to consider how to organize children in classrooms so that their opportunities to learn from one another is maximized — and so that young children with disabilities are not segregated into classroom serving only those with special needs," says Justice.

Justice and colleagues conclude that regardless of disability, classrooms in which most children have poor language skills are not ideal. They suggest that since typically developing kids continue to improve their language skills even when they have some less-skilled classmates, administrators should aim for a diversity of skill level in the classroom.

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