

Correlates of Language Abilities in Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Joint Attention and Imitation

Yen-Che Lee¹, Chin-Chin Wu², and Yu-Han Lee³

¹Department of Psychiatry, Pingtung Branch of Kaohsiung Veterans General Hospital

²Department of Psychology, Kaohsiung Medical University

³Department of Psychiatry, Ditmanson Medical Foundation Chia-Yi Christian Hospital

Purposes: This study examines the role of early social-communicative skills (i.e., joint attention and imitation) in the development of the language abilities of young children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). **Method:** There are 131 young children with ASDs, with a mean chronological age of about 30 months. The Taiwanese version of the Screening Tool for Autism in Two-Year-Olds (T-STAT) was modified and used for measuring early social-communicative skills, including initiating joint attention (IJA), responding joint attention (RJA), object imitation, and manual imitation. With reference to previous studies, the IJA was divided into full-IJA (F-IJA) and partial-IJA (P-IJA). A structured tool and the parent-report scale were both used to measure language abilities, including the Mullen Scale of Early Learning (MSEL) and the Communication Subscale in Adaptive Behavior Assessment System-II (ABAS-II). **Results:** The results of this study showed that, F-IJA, P-IJA, RJA, object imitation, and manual imitation were significantly related to receptive language, expressive language, and overall language from MSEL, and communicative ability from ABAS-II. Hierarchical regression analysis was used to control chronological age and non-verbal cognitive ability. The results of hierarchical regression analysis showed that, the strongest predictor of receptive language, expressive language, and overall language from MSEL, as well as communicative ability from ABAS-II, was RJA. In addition, manual imitation was the second predictor of language abilities, as it could predict the development of expressive language and overall language according to MSEL. However, neither object imitation nor IJA could predict the development of language abilities. **Conclusions:** The results of this study revealed that RJA was the robust predictor of language abilities in young children with ASDs. Young children with ASDs could correctly follow their partner when directing their attention, and understand the intention, which is a critical factor of early language development. Generally speaking, when young children with ASDs experience interesting social interactions and engagements, it could enhance their expressive language development. The results provide the implications to design the goals and skills for the early intervention in young children with ASDs.

Keywords: *joint attention, autism spectrum disorders, language ability, imitation*