

Parents key in new measure to evaluate language in children with autism

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A new parent questionnaire, developed at the University of Waterloo, will help health practitioners to more accurately gauge the acquisition of language skills in children with autism.

The pioneering Language Use Inventory (LUI) is among a set of measures for evaluating spoken language development in children with [autism](#) spectrum disorders, recommended by an expert panel.

The experts' report, *Defining Spoken Language Benchmarks and Selecting Measures of Expressive Language Development for Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders*, appears in the June 2009 issue of the *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*. The report was commissioned by the National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders.

"This is very exciting news," said UW professor Daniela O'Neill, a developmental psychologist who created the LUI. "This report will be of tremendous help to researchers, clinicians and speech-language professionals involved in intervention with young children with autism and we are very proud to see the LUI included among the measures recommended for evaluating the efficacy of interventions that target spoken language."

The LUI is a standardized questionnaire that asks parents about their child's use of language in many different kinds of settings. Research from the Centers for Disease Control suggests the prevalence of autism

spectrum disorders to be one in 150 children.

"The LUI looks at pragmatic language development which has do with how young children are able to use their language effectively and successfully in everyday interactions with other people in ways that are age-appropriate and typical," O'Neill explained. "For example, to ask for help, comment about noticeable things, tease, tell stories and give others information they might need. The pragmatics of language can be an area of great difficulty for children with autism."

Difficulty with learning language and communicating with others is often one of the first things that parents become concerned about. Parents have much valuable information to offer about their child's language use to professionals evaluating their child. "A parent has had the most experience watching their child try to use their language in a host of different settings and with many different people."

The LUI provides speech-language pathologists and researchers with a new tool to evaluate a young child's broad pragmatic use of language. As many as 14 per cent of preschool-age children in Canada and the U.S. may be at risk for language disorders.

The LUI is the product of more than eight years of research funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The development of the inventory included a large-scale study in which more than 3,500 parents from across Canada completed the questionnaire describing their child's language ability.

"This study will help us understand unexplored ways of identifying language skills in children with autism," says Dr. Michael Kramer, Scientific Director at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. "Our support for the development of the Language Use Inventory helps keep us on the forefront of research on autism in [young children](#). This

research will also provide unprecedented insight into language acquisition in typically-developing Canadian children as well as those with communication disorders and other disabilities," said Dr. Kramer.

"The tremendous response we had from parents all across Canada has allowed us to provide norms for the LUI at every month from 18 to 47 months of age," O'Neill said. "We were amazed by how eager so many parents were to take part. I think the issue of how children learn language is just as fascinating to parents as to researchers and also many parents can relate to the anxiety of wondering if perhaps a child is experiencing language difficulties or may be falling significantly behind their peers."

The LUI allows a comparison of a child's score with children of the same age -- similar to height and weight charts used by family doctors.

Family practitioners in the Kitchener-Waterloo are involved in preliminary studies looking at its use in doctor's offices. "Both doctors and parents are enthusiastic about the possibility of learning more about how a child's language is progressing relative to peers of the same age through a friendly and easy-to-use questionnaire, such as the LUI."

Source: Canadian Institutes of Health Research

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