



Late-Talking Children

Anyone who knows what anxiety, and sometimes anguish, parents go through when they have a child who is still not talking at age two, three or even four, can appreciate what a blessing it can be to have someone who can tell them what to do — and what not to do.

That someone is Professor Stephen Camarata of the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, whose recently published book, *Late-Talking Children*, gives parents information and advice that they are not likely to find anywhere else. And it does so in plain English.



Professor Camarata has been researching, diagnosing and treating children with speech problems for decades. Moreover, he knows from personal experience what it is like to be a parent of a late-talking child, and he himself was three and a half years old before he began to speak. So he has seen this problem from many angles.

A child can be years behind schedule in beginning to speak and yet go on to have a perfectly normal life. Some children with delayed speech may even be noticeably brighter than other children their age. But, for other late-talking children, the delay in beginning to speak can be a symptom of much deeper and long-lasting problems, including mental retardation or autism.

Most parents are in no position to know which of these very different conditions applies to their own child. Nor is it easy to find out, because there are so many people so ready to put labels on late-talking children that can follow these children for years, even when these labels have no solid foundation.

False diagnoses of late-talking children are by no means rare. Even Albert Einstein was thought to be retarded, when he failed to talk at an age when most other toddlers begin to speak. Three renowned nuclear physicists who were involved in the creation of the first atomic bomb had been late-talking children.

Late-talking children can be at any intellectual level, from the lowest to the highest. But it is hard to know what their intellectual level is when they are not saying anything.

In his clinical research at Vanderbilt University, Stephen Camarata has devised some ways of discovering what a late-talking toddler knows and understands. But these methods work only when the child cooperates — and cooperation is not universal among very young children.

When he cannot get enough cooperation from a child to make a reliable diagnosis, Camarata simply tells the parents that he will have to wait until the child becomes more mature, which may be months later or a year or more later. A false diagnosis is worse than no diagnosis.

Unfortunately, too many other people who diagnose late-talking children are not always so careful or so candid. Some rely on checklists of “symptoms” or on even less reliable criteria.



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The net result is too often an unreliable diagnosis of retardation or autism that devastates the parents, and leads to counterproductive treatment for the child.

As the parent of such a child, I remember all too well what the problems are like. But there was no book like this available then. When my son was old enough to take an intelligence test, his IQ turned out to be well above the national average.

Stephen Camarata's *Late-Talking Children* goes into these and other pitfalls that parents of such children need to watch out for. He also explains what science knows — and does not know — about some of the possible reasons why children talk late.

Professor Camarata urges parents to get the most reliable diagnosis they can — and an independent second opinion, when they have any doubts. Above all, he warns them not to park their common sense at the door when they seek either diagnosis or treatment for their child. Too much is at stake to put blind faith in anyone.

Although most parents of late-talking children simply heave a sigh of relief when their child finally begins to talk, Camarata's book warns that there are often behavior patterns common among such children, even after they have learned to speak — and that these patterns may conflict with the rigidities of many public schools.

In a brief review, it is not possible to do justice to the extremely valuable and very readable book that Stephen Camarata has written. It will be like a bright light shining into the darkness for many worried and puzzled parents of children who are years behind schedule in beginning to speak.

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