Social Outcomes of Students with Language Impairment: Four Case Studies

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Poster presentation at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Convention, Boston, MA 2007

Introduction

In the 1997/98 school year we conducted a study examining the social skills of eight children with specific language impairment (SLI). These children were observed in a variety of contexts, including cooperative learning groups (Brinton, Fujiki, Montague, & Hanton, 2000) and free play on the playground (Fujiki, Brinton, Isaacson, & Summers, 2001). In addition, social status was assessed through peer nomination and acceptance measures (Fujiki, Brinton, Hart & Fitzgerald, 1999). In 2006 we attempted to relocate these individuals to reassess their language abilities and social functioning. We located five students still in the same school district and were able to obtain permission to assess four of these individuals. The following poster will examine the social status of these individuals 7 years later.

The five students ranged in age from 14 to 17 years at the time of the follow-up study. All were female. One of the five students was still enrolled in language intervention and resource services, 2 students received only resource services (1 having only recently been dismissed from language intervention), 1 student was enrolled in an alternative high school, and 1 student had been dismissed from all special services.

Case Studies

SLI 1--Joanie was a 4th grader diagnosed with SLI when initially seen. She was enrolled in a regular classroom and received language intervention on a pull out basis. As a 17-year-old she was enrolled in an alternative high school. Shortly before we began the follow-up study, she was involved in a physical altercation in the front hall of her school and was subsequently expelled. Attempts to contact her after she left school were unsuccessful, however, Joanie's continued academic and social difficulties were a matter of record.

For the four remaining students a combination of formal language and social measures were administered. Additionally, interviews with each student, the student's speech language pathologist (SLP) or special education teacher, and the student's favorite teacher were obtained. The following is a brief summary of these findings.

SLI 2--At the time of the initial evaluation Elise was 6:6-years-old. She was enrolled in a regular classroom and seen for language intervention on a pull out basis. Based on peer acceptance measures, Elise was the most disliked child in her class. She had no reciprocal friendships in her class. Her social profile indicated she was both withdrawn and highly aggressive. As an eight grader, Elise was still enrolled in language
intervention, with therapy focusing on language, literacy, and social goals. In resource classes she received help with language arts and math. Her scores on the both the Teacher and Parent forms of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS, Gresham & Elliott, 1990) were at the 90th and 98th percentile (higher scores indicate more problem behaviors), respectively, for problem behaviors. It was notable, however, that Elise was well accepted by a racially defined peer group. She was still overly aggressive, but played a specific role in this group which her SLP characterized as "bouncer." Her SLP expressed concern that Elise often did not understand when this role was inappropriate, and that this behavior would ultimately put her in danger.

SLI 3-Alexis was 6:1 years old when initially seen. At that time, she was seen for language intervention on a pull-out basis. Social skills ratings indicated that Alexis was one of the more popular children in her class. She had friends and was well accepted by her classmates. At the time of the current assessment, 14-year-old Alexis was no longer enrolled in language intervention, but was receiving resource help for language arts, literacy, and history. Her resource teacher indicated that she had particular difficulty with reading comprehension, spelling, and writing. Alexis' scores on formal social measures were all in the typical range. Despite these positive social ratings, her special education teacher described her as "young, naïve, and needy." Her favorite teacher indicated that Alexis did not appear to understand social boundaries and rules of proximity, and that she had difficulty reading the emotions of others unless they were obvious.

SLI 4-Matilda was 6:3 years old when initially seen. As with the other individuals, she was enrolled in a regular classroom and seen for language intervention on a pull out basis. Social assessment revealed that she was a very withdrawn child who often had difficulty interacting with peers. She also was rated as highly anxious by her classroom teacher. Matilda was followed periodically for language intervention in elementary school and consistently throughout junior high. From 7th to 9th grade, Matilda's intervention focused on a range of goals, including non-literal language, taking meaning from context, and vocabulary skills. She also took part in a social skills group conducted by her SLP. She had been dismissed from intervention shortly before being seen for the current evaluation. Matilda continued to receive resource services for language arts, literacy, and math, however. Formal social measures and interviews revealed that as a teenager, Matilda was still a highly reticent, isolated individual. For example, the parent and self rating scales of the SSRS produced social skill scores at the 6th percentile and 7th percentile (lower scores indicate poorer social skills), respectively. It was of note, however, that her SLP rated her at the 79th percentile.

SLI 5- Katy was 7:6 years old at the time of the initial study. She was also seen for language intervention on a pull out basis. Language test scores using the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-R (Semel, Wiig, & Secord, 1987) indicated near typical language scores in the second grade. Socially, Katy was described by her classroom teacher as a child who was isolated and would rather play alone. Testing supported this observation, indicating that Katy demonstrated a high rate of solitary passive withdrawal. At the time of the current assessment, Katy was enrolled in the 10th
grade. She was not receiving any special services. All language and social test scores were within the typical range with the exception of a social skill rating at the 8th percentile on the teacher scale of the SSRS. Socially, Katy reported having no need for friends at school. She was, however, involved in a social organization for girls outside of school. Her favorite teacher reported that Katy was isolated at school, rarely talking or participating in class. He did report she appeared to have friends outside of the school setting.

Discussion

Although children with SLI are generally characterized as being at risk for social difficulties, these case studies make it clear that social outcomes for children with SLI can be complex and influenced by a range of factors. One of the participants, Matilda, appeared to have serious social problems as a teenager. Another girl, Elise, still exhibited social problems but was in a context in which she was generally well accepted. The two remaining girls, Alexis and Katy, had better social outcomes. However, neither was completely without concerns. Alexis exhibited a lack of social and emotional understanding surprising for her age. Katy, who had made the strongest gains in language and academics, appeared not to need or desire social interaction at school.

References


