

Language Development

The majority of children acquire language effortlessly, but approximately ten per cent of all children find it difficult especially in the early or preschool years, with consequences for many aspects of their subsequent development and experience: literacy, social skills, educational qualifications, mental health, and employment. With contributions from an international team of researchers, this book is the first to draw together a series of new analyses of data related to children's language development, primarily from large-scale nationally representative population studies, and to bring a public health perspective to the field. The book begins with a section on factors influencing the patterns of language development. A second section explores continuity and change in language development over time. The third explores the impact on individuals with developmental language disorders (DLD), the effectiveness of available interventions, and broader issues about the need for equity in the delivery of services to those with DLD.

JAMES LAW (1956–2021) was Professor of Speech and Language Science at Newcastle University. He received an OBE for services to speech and language therapy in 2018.

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Language Development

Individual Differences in a Social Context

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A Tribute to Our Friend, Colleague and Fellow Editor, Professor James Law

In memoriam
James Law
30 May 1956–12 October 2021

James Law passed away on 12 October 2021. James originally studied linguistics, qualifying with a BA in Linguistics from the University of East Anglia, and went on to study Speech and Language Therapy in London at Kingdon Ward School of Speech Therapy (now part of City, University of London). James worked as a speech and language therapist in Hackney, East London for eight years before completing a PhD at City University in 1993. He went on to become the Head of Department in 1999 and was made Professor the following year. In 2004 he moved to Edinburgh to set up the Centre for Integrated Healthcare Research and in 2010 moved to Newcastle University as Professor of Speech and Language Science.

James conceived of this book. He had a vision to bring together recent discoveries about children's language, to take a global perspective and to place the social context front and centre in the field. His wish was that we document the factors that influence child language development including the biological, social and environmental influences and how these interact to impact children's language outcomes. James recognised that the interactions were complex as was the measurement of language and the child's environment, and he wanted us to articulate why this was important. James was passionate about the power of population studies and the need for large, representative cohorts to inform theory, policy and practice, conducting research in cohorts in the UK, Australia, Germany and the Netherlands. James' vision was for this book to position child language in society as a fundamental global policy issue and to emphasise that this early developmental achievement sets the pace for later development, attainment and well-being.

James was a world-leading researcher into child language development and disorders. His work was pivotal in broadening as well as deepening our

understanding of what enables children to communicate and develop robust language skills. James worked to ensure that his rich body of research not only generated knowledge but also contributed directly to improvements in policy, practice and outcomes for children.

James believed passionately that policy, practice and interventions should be informed by high-quality science. James authored and co-authored several seminal publications including the ground-breaking Cochrane Review on speech and language therapy interventions which remains one of the profession's most cited papers. He was also one of the four academics who led the largest review of speech and language support for children in England, the Better Communication Research Programme. This project arose from the Bercow Review of Services for Children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs, and led to the development of the What Works for Children with Speech and Language Needs database, enabling access to evidence-based interventions for countless children.

James also was not afraid to tackle big issues that others might shy away from. A key motivation for his work was the need to address inequalities in society and the place of child language as both a driver and product of those inequalities. James lobbied at every level to improve children's life outcomes and in doing so raised the credibility of the speech and language therapy profession in the eyes of policy makers around the world.

A colleague recently relayed a story that epitomises James's thirst for knowledge and motivation to bring about positive change. Upon hearing that an organisation was reluctant to fund his work, James queried this and asked them, 'Don't you want to know the answer?' The outcome was a favourable one for James; the funder reconsidered, and the research took place. This typifies how James always wanted to know the answer and the steps he took to find answers to the questions he was passionate about. In a recent tribute to James a colleague described him as taking control and leading the field early on in his career, and he continued to do so.

James had a gift for building teams and steering diverse groups towards a common goal with humour and respect. This ability, and his global ambition and influence are exemplified by his leadership of a European research network COST Action. The Action aimed to increase the availability and use of research evidence to increase the effectiveness of services provided to children with language difficulties across Europe. This was a four-year project, bringing together over 200 researchers and practitioners across forty-three countries. A key achievement was the conduct of the largest ever international survey of practice in thirty languages and with more than 5,000 responses. The collaborations built over this time continue to yield research which will benefit children with language difficulties across Europe and beyond for many years to come.

These contributions to the field of child language and the profession of speech and language therapy were recognised in a number of ways. In 2008 James was awarded a Fellowship of the RCSLT in recognition of his

contribution to the field; in 2018 he was awarded an OBE for services to speech and language therapy. In 2021 James received an Academic Distinction Award from Newcastle University, recognising his outstanding impact within the university, nationally and internationally.

It is clear from the many tributes after his death that across the world, James was a well-known, well-loved, admired and respected friend and colleague. His generosity and encouragement of early and mid-career researchers is widely recognised and not surprisingly he influenced the careers of many clinicians and researchers. In building capacity, James was inclusive, empowering and always constructive in his criticisms; even when he thought an idea was daft, he would gently and with humour find a way to steer the idea in a new direction. James will be missed by the many people whose lives he touched, but the impact of his work and his encouragement of many has made a lasting difference that will live on.

James left us too soon, there was much he wanted to do, and we relished the thought of our ongoing, long-lasting collaborations with him. His loss is felt profoundly by many within and beyond the world of child language research and child health policy and practice.

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