



## Child's play

**KIM WILSON on bringing up babies**

**T**HERE has been a prevailing philosophy that, as children develop at such different rates, parents should not be overly alarmed if their child appears to be slower to walk, talk or learn to read than their peers.

But in recent months new research has revealed the "watch and wait" approach, where it was thought most children would outgrow slow development, may not be in the child's best interest.

A few weeks ago, I wrote about literacy experts' concerns in allowing struggling readers to continue solely with their existing school reading programs.

Literacy expert Prof Kevin Wheldall, director of Macquarie University Special Education Centre, cautioned parents to trust their instincts and seek help, despite advice that their child eventually would "get it".

"The problem is, all too often teachers say, 'Don't worry about it, your child will come to it in their own time'. Some will recover spontaneously, but (the reality is) a large proportion won't," he said.

Now a University of Melbourne study has found that almost half of all children who are late talkers will develop language difficulties by the age of four.

Prof Sheena Reilly, author and speech pathologist at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, says the new research dispels the myth that all children grow out of language problems.

"Some children spontaneously overcome their early language delay. However, about one in two 'late talkers' will go on to experience future language impairment," she says.

"Almost 20 per cent of the children in the five-year study were late-talkers at two."

Indicators of late talkers include a vocabulary of fewer than 50 words and a failure to combine words into mini sentences by age two. But Prof Reilly says speech in two-year-olds varies greatly.

"We had kids who were saying no words, up to precocious talkers with up to 600 words."

She says there were equal numbers of boys and girls who were late talkers at age two, but by four girls tended to recover better than boys.

"There is certainly a difference between genders. Girls at two tend to have on average 50 more words than boys."

The new research has led experts to ditch the "watch and wait" approach in favour of early intervention.

"We have learned you miss a critical opportunity if you watch and wait," she says.

Children with language difficulties often have problems learning at school and forming relationships with other children.

"Imagine not being able to tell your mum what you did or saw at school, or being unable to understand bits of conversations.

It's no wonder these children often find it difficult to form relationships with their peers and adults," she says.

Prof Reilly recommends parents trust their instincts and talk to maternal health nurses and GPs if they are worried.

For more information visit [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)  
[wilsonkim@heraldsun.com.au](mailto:wilsonkim@heraldsun.com.au)

**“ We have learned you miss a critical opportunity if you watch and wait ”**

### FIVE facts on late talkers:

- 1** Almost 20 per cent of children are late-talkers at age two.
- 2** one in two 'late talkers' will go on to experience future language difficulties.
- 3** Indicators of late talkers include limited vocabulary of less than 50 words and a failure to combine words into mini sentences.
- 4** Equal numbers of boys and girls are late talkers at age two, however by four girls tend to recover better than boys.
- 5** Children with language difficulties often experience problems learning at school and forming relationships with other children.