

HEALTH & HUMAN SCIENCES

Examining Early Language and Communication Skills in Children at Elevated Risk for Developmental Delays

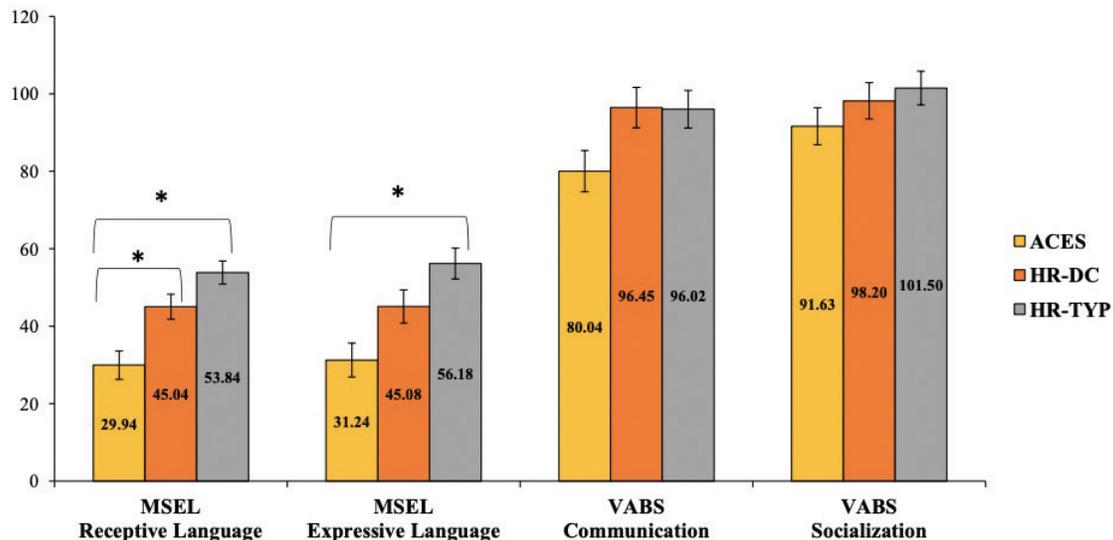
Student researcher: Taylor Watters, Senior

It is important to monitor early language development in children at risk for delays in order to create targeted interventions to best support children's potential. Previous research demonstrates that children with family histories of developmental disabilities including autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are at elevated risk for language/communication difficulties. The present study expands our understanding of language concerns in toddlers at risk by examining whether early communication difficulties are present as a function of developmental/contextual risk.

To improve our understanding of children's communication development across multiple risk types, this project compared communication scores across children with ACEs, children with developmental concerns from families with histories of ASD (HR-DC),

and typically developing children with family histories of ASD (HR-TYP). All 18 children were assessed with the Mullen Scales of Early Learning to index their receptive and expressive language skills when they were approximately 33 months of age. Parents also completed the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales to index their children's adaptive functioning. A series of ANCOVAs revealed significant differences in select areas of communication. Specifically, children with ACEs exhibited significantly lower receptive language scores compared to the HR-DC and HR-TYP groups. Full results are summarized in the figure. Overall, our preliminary investigation highlights evidence of communication-specific concerns in children with varying ACEs that may inform ongoing intervention enrollment efforts. Future research should continue to investigate communicative differences between children with ACEs and other developmental concerns to inform ongoing targeted PMI efforts.

Research advisors A. J. Schwichtenberg and Ashleigh Kellerman write: "Taylor Watters's research skills grew immensely over the course of this project. She gained a keen understanding of the importance of early developmental monitoring in children developing at risk. Watters's interests in exploring children's communication skills as a function of risk type is well suited to inform ongoing monitoring and intervention efforts."



Children's communication skills stratified by group classification.

Notes: ACEs = elevated risk infants with adverse childhood experiences. HR-DC = high-risk infants with developmental concerns outcome. HR-TYP = high-risk infants with typical developmental outcome. MSEL = Mullen Scales of Early Learning. VABS = Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales.

* $p < \text{less than} > .05$.