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Research report

Long-term reading and spelling outcome in Italian adolescents with a history of specific language impairment

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Abstract

Specific language impairment (SLI) diagnosed in the pre-school years is frequently associated with reading and writing difficulties at school age. The nature of this relationship is unclear, despite the availability of a large number of studies, mostly on English speaking children. Phonological processing deficits have been considered the prominent cause of both difficulties. However recent findings in both children with SLI and in children with reading difficulties are not easily accommodated within a single dimensional model explaining the relationship between oral and written language deficits.

Our study focuses on the long-term reading and spelling outcome in relation to preschool oral language skills in a group of Italian adolescents with a documented history

of SLI.

Sixteen Italian adolescents diagnosed as SLI at our Hospital in the pre-school years and 32 normal controls were submitted to an extensive assessment of oral and written language skills. At a group level SLI adolescents had weak oral and written language skills in almost all tests.

Results show that reading difficulties have some features in common with those of Italian developmental dyslexics but also have distinct characteristics, since reading accuracy and written comprehension, usually relatively spared in Italian developmental dyslexics, were impaired in adolescents with SLI.

Longitudinal analyses showed that expressive morpho-syntactic and lexical abilities at pre-school age were the oral language skills that best predicted reading and spelling outcomes in adolescents with SLI.

However, also children with severe phonological impairment in the absence of other oral language deficits showed later literacy difficulties, although less severe and mainly limited to reading accuracy.

Our study supports the notion that there is a complex relationship between oral and written language difficulties which may change at different developmental time points, not captured by a single deficit model, but best conceptualized considering multiple interactions between language skills and literacy abilities.



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Keywords

Specific language impairment; Reading and spelling disabilities; Phonological and morphosyntactic predictors; Reading and spelling outcome in adolescence

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