Measuring pragmatic skills: early detection of infants at risk for communication problems

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Abstract

Background

For the early detection of children who are at risk of communication problems, we need appropriate assessment instruments. Two Dutch-language standardised screening instruments are available: the Dutch version of the Non Speech Test (NNST) and the Dutch version of the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventories (N-CDIs). These instruments gauge the precursors of language development, early vocabulary and early morphosyntactic skills. However, they do not adequately assess pragmatic skills.

Aims

To develop a norm-referenced instrument to examine the pragmatic skills of Dutch-speaking infants that is translatable into other languages.

Methods & Procedures

The instrument ‘Lists for the Evaluation of Pragmatic Skills in Infants’ is based on ‘The Pragmatics Profile of Everyday Communication Skills in Children’ Dewart and Summers (1995). We translated the instrument into Dutch and transformed the structured interview format into a parent questionnaire. The parent questionnaire—Evaluatie van Pragmatische Vaardigheden (EPV)—was created following extensive research on item selection, norm table development, and reliability and validity studies. The EPV1 is applicable to children 6–15 months old; EPV2 is applicable to children 16–30 months old.

Outcomes & Results

We developed norm tables for the number of pragmatic skills achieved by the child and also for how and to what extent the skills are exhibited. For the norming study of EPV1 and EPV2 we included 390 and 534 infants respectively. The reliability scores are high for both lists. Concept validity and criterion validity studies demonstrate adequate results for the overall lists, the subscale components and specific items.

Conclusions & Implications

The parent questionnaire is a valuable tool that specifically targets pragmatic skills in infants. The instrument can detect communication delays in infants. It is translatable into other languages and avoids having the infant examined directly by a stranger.