

# **Stability and continuity of early child vocabulary: Reporter comparisons and a cumulative score for the cdi**

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## **Abstract**

Reports and checklists such as the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventories (CDI; Fenson et al., 1993) are now standard sources for cost-effective rapid general evaluations of child language (Fenson, Dale, Reznick, Bates, Thal, & Pethick, 1994). These report measures focus on vocabulary, a key marker in children's language development and a prominent part of children's language that parents hear and attend to. We undertook to study developmental stability and change (between two age periods) in vocabulary development in children. One factor that may influence the measurement of stability and change in vocabulary development is the type of person and/or the number of persons charged with assessing children's vocabulary knowledge. In this study, we compared multiple reporters and recommend the use of a cumulative score in assessing child vocabulary.

Mothers, fathers, and caregivers in 29 middle-class monolingual Dutch speaking families each completed the Infant Form 'Words and Gestures' and the Toddler Form 'Words and Sentences' of Dutch adaptations (N-CDI; Zink & Lejaegere, 2002) of the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventories for the same children at 13 and 20 months, respectively. We computed comprehension, production, and cumulative N-CDI scores, which credit the child with the best score for any item on the N-CDI as checked by any single reporter. Considerable intra- and interfamily variation emerged in how two (or three) different reporters who are all close to the child assess a particular child's communicative abilities. However, reporters agreed more often than they disagreed or partially agreed: Mothers', fathers', and third persons' comprehension scores were all significantly intercorrelated as were their production scores. Reporters are more likely to agree when the child has less vocabulary than more.

Mothers' and third persons' comprehension scores were not significantly different from the cumulative comprehension score, but their production scores were lower; fathers' comprehension and production scores were lower than cumulative comprehension and production scores. For all reporters and the cumulative score, we found significant stability in comprehension and production from 13 to 20 months and, as expected, significant increases in comprehension and production. We conclude that cumulative scores are valid representations of children's reported language and should receive both empirical and clinical attention.

## References

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