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# Gestures as a Compensatory Strategy in Late Talkers: Supportive Mechanism or Masking of Risk Indicators?

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## OBJECTIVE(S) AND METHODS

**Objectives.** Gestures are a central component of early communication and play a significant role in predicting later language development. Late talkers often rely on gestures to compensate for limited expressive vocabulary, yet it remains essential to distinguish when gesture use reflects a developmental strength and when it may signal underlying risk for persistent language difficulties. This theoretical analysis aims to (1) synthesise recent findings on gesture use in late talkers, (2) differentiate supportive versus risk-related gesture profiles, and (3) provide implications for early identification and intervention within speech and language therapy (SLT) practice.

**Methods.** Scientific literature source analysis based on a theoretical review of peer-reviewed research published between 2019 and 2024. Studies were identified through keywords related to early gestures, preverbal communication, and late language emergence. Included studies examined children aged 0–3 years and explored the relationship between gesture use and later language development. Excluded were studies where language delay was primarily associated with neurogenetic conditions, hearing impairment, or motor disorders.



## SHORT INTRODUCTION

- ✓ Late talkers represent a heterogeneous group: some children “catch up”, while others continue to experience persistent language difficulties. When early spoken vocabulary is limited, gestures often become a key channel for expressing intentions and participating in interaction.
- ✓ Research shows that gestures—especially pointing and gesture–word combinations—carry predictive value for later vocabulary and grammar. In clinical practice, gesture use is sometimes interpreted as reassuring; however, gesture profiles differ in quality, diversity, communicative functions, and developmental progression.
- ✓ This poster summarises recent evidence and translates it into practical considerations for risk-sensitive early identification and gesture-informed early intervention.
- ✓ *Across Baltic SLT services, early referral pathways and routine use of validated early measures may vary. In this context, gesture-informed interpretation offers a feasible, low-cost enhancement to early assessment that can be integrated into clinical observation and parent consultations.*



## RESULTS

### Supportive vs risk- related gesture profiles (0–3 years)

| Key indicators (linked to later language)   | Supportive profile   | Risk-related profile  |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Joint attention (pointing / showing)</b> | Increasing deictic gestures, especially pointing to share attention    | Few/inconsistent deictic gestures; limited joint attention acts |
| <b>Gesture–word combinations</b>            | Frequent gesture–word combinations as speech emerges                   | Few/absent gesture–word combinations beyond expected window     |
| <b>Communicative functions</b>              | Beyond requesting: commenting / showing / sharing                      | Mostly requesting; fewer declarative/triadic acts               |
| <b>Developmental trajectory</b>             | Clear qualitative growth over time (more coordinated, more functional) | Flat/slow/inconsistent qualitative change over time             |
| <b>SLT implication</b>                      | Monitor + parent-mediated support to scaffold language                 | Closer monitoring / earlier referral + targeted support         |



## CONCLUSIONS

1. Gestures provide clinically meaningful information about communication profiles in late talkers and should be interpreted beyond “more gestures = better”.

2. The most informative markers are gesture quality, diversity, communicative functions, and trajectory, including gesture–word coordination. Gesture quality and developmental trajectory are more informative than gesture quantity alone.

3. Distinguishing supportive versus risk-related gesture profiles can strengthen risk-sensitive decision-making and improve referral accuracy in early pathways.

4. Gesture-informed, parent-mediated naturalistic strategies (e.g., modelling pointing + words, expanding gesture–word combinations in routines) may support early language growth and should be considered in early intervention planning.



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