

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Issues Final Recommendation Statement on Screening for Speech and Language Delay and Disorders in Children

*Task Force determines that more research is needed to recommend for or against
screening all children age 5 years and younger*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – January 23, 2024 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today published a final recommendation statement on screening for speech and language delay and disorders in children. The Task Force determined there is not enough evidence to make a recommendation for or against primary care professionals screening for speech and language delay and disorders in children 5 years and younger who do not show any signs. **This is an I statement.**

Grade(s) in this recommendation:

I: The balance of benefits and harms cannot be determined.

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The Task Force looked at evidence on whether or not it is helpful to screen all children 5 years old and younger for speech and language delay and disorders. It found that more evidence is needed on primary care screening and whether it leads to improvements in speech, language, or other outcomes, such as school performance.

Speech or language delay is when a child develops speech and language at a slower rate than expected. Speech or language disorders refer to speech or language ability that is different from typical development. This may mean a child has difficulty with forming specific sounds or has trouble speaking compared to other children their age.

“Caring for children with speech and language delay and disorders is incredibly important; however, the Task Force found that there is not enough evidence to tell us whether or not it is helpful to screen children 5 years and younger who do not have signs or symptoms,” says Task Force member Tumaini Rucker Coker, M.D., M.B.A. “We are urgently calling for more evidence, particularly for those who are more likely to experience speech and language delay and disorders, such as Black and Hispanic or Latino children, as well as children in households with low incomes.”

Importantly, this recommendation is for children who do not show signs of speech and language delay or disorders. If a child does show signs, or their caregiver raises concerns about their speech and language development, these children should be evaluated and, if needed, receive treatment.

“Speech and language are the building blocks of development, so delays and disorders can be hard for kids and their families,” says Task Force member Li Li, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H. “In the absence of evidence, healthcare professionals should use their judgment when deciding whether or not to screen children who are not showing signs of speech and language delay and disorders.”

The Task Force is also calling for more research on the potential harms of screening and treatment, such as labeling, stigma, caregiver anxiety, other social and emotional harms, and overdiagnosis. Additionally, more studies are needed about outcomes such as academic performance, social and emotional health, and child and

family well-being, which result from the treatment of children who were found to have delay or disorders through screening.

The Task Force's final recommendation statement and corresponding evidence summary have been published online in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, as well as on the Task Force website at <https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org>. A draft version of the recommendation statement and evidence review were available for public comment from July 25, 2023, to August 21, 2023.

The Task Force is an independent, volunteer panel of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine that works to improve the health of people nationwide by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medications.

Dr. Coker is division head of General Pediatrics and professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington School of Medicine and Seattle Children's. She serves as the co-director of the University of Washington's Child Health Equity Research Fellowship, which is funded by the National Institutes of Health.

Dr. Li is a family physician and the Walter M. Seward professor and the chair of family medicine at the University of Virginia (UVA) School of Medicine. He is also the director of population health at UVA Health and co-leader of the Cancer Prevention and Population Health program at the UVA Comprehensive Cancer Center.

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