

## More 5-year-olds starting school with low speaking skills – teachers

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Teachers say more and more new entrants are turning up to school without the language skills they should have for their age group.

Too many five-year-olds start school unable to talk coherently, teachers say, and they blame Covid-19 and excessive screen time.

Teachers of new entrant school children and early childhood teachers report seeing more children than ever with poor language skills, research by the Education Review Office published today shows.

More than a quarter of teachers in schools in poor neighbourhoods said most of their pupils had oral language below the level expected of them, compared to just 3 percent of new entrant teachers in schools in rich neighbourhoods.

School teachers said some children could not talk in sentences of more than four or five words, spent a lot of time on devices and had little interaction with books.

"There is a complete lack of positional language, pronouns, and simple grammar tenses. A 6-year-old might say 'Me go pee' instead of 'I need the toilet' ...", a new entrant teacher told the study.

"I have been teaching for 24 years and have never seen this low level of oral language." Another said: "They have difficulty both with understanding what is said to them and with formulating responses. They often fail to understand what teachers say, [and] miss important points in class."

Early childhood teachers told the study they were spotting problems before children start school.

"The children want to communicate and try, however, they will often use the same simple words or incoherent sounds to communicate regardless of different contexts and situations," one early learning teacher told the study.

"Some of our 4-year-old tamariki like to tell long stories, but it mostly comes out as gibberish, much like an infant babbling," said another.

The ERO study said research showed 80 percent of five-year-olds had good oral language, but a significant group of children were behind and Covid-19 had made this worse.

"Covid-19 has had a significant impact. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (59 percent of ECE teachers and 65 percent of new entrant teachers) report that Covid-19 has impacted children's language development.

"Teachers told us that social communication was particularly impacted by Covid-19, particularly language skills for social communication. International studies confirm the significant impact of Covid-19 on language development," the report said.

Children's vocabulary at the age of two was strongly linked to their literacy and numeracy at age 12, the ERO report said.

"Delays in oral language in the early years are reflected in poor reading comprehension at school," it said.



However, it also said children's oral language varied a lot up to the first two years of primary school because children's development varied.

### **Quality early childhood education a solution – report**

International studies showed quality early childhood education supports language development and could accelerate literacy by up to a year, especially for children from poor communities, the report said.

It recommended removing barriers to increase enrolments of children from poor families in early learning and increasing the quality of early education available to them through ERO reviews and Ministry of Education interventions.

While most qualified school and early childhood teachers know how to help children improve their oral language, some were not confident, the report said.

It recommended ensuring the school and early childhood curriculums provide clear progress indicators for oral language.

Reference:

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/525811/more-5-year-olds-starting-school-with-low-speaking-skills-teachers>