Abstract

Many studies have been conducted regarding the optimal ways in which Typically Developing (TD) children should be exposed to reading. We know that for TD children there is a monumental connection between reading abilities and linguistic abilities and we know that this connection is already found in the earliest stages of reading, hence the stage called 'immerging literacy skills' which includes letter recognition, phonological awareness and awareness to printed materials (Catts et al., 2002; Stothard et al., 1998; Cabell, 2008). Accumulative research is now available showing that many subgroups of children with ASD show different profiles of linguistic deficits (Battagalia, 2013; Sukenik and Friedmann, 2018; Tager-Flusberg and Kjelgaard, 2001). We also know that social skills and social communication have been found as influencing factors affecting reading comprehension (Skibbe et al., 2008). Since both social skills and social communications are part of the core deficits in ASD, children with ASD are at a higher risk for developing reading deficits (Lucas and Norbury, 2015).

The aim of the current study is to test the linguistic profiles and the emerging literacy skills of pre-schoolers with ASD and examine the connection between the two abilities.

Participants included 20 children with ASD aged 4-7 years old and 20 chronological age matched children with typical development. All children with ASD were studying in special education preschools. No known disabilities or delays were reported for the children in the TD group. Background characteristics included NVIQ (RPM) social skills (SCQ) and adaptive behavior (Vineland). Linguistic skills were assessed using the Katzenberger linguistic assessment battery (Katzenberger, 2016). Emerging literacy skills were assessed using an awareness to print battery build for this study and the 'Shmone msimot' assessment battery. Group scores were compared for each task and individual profiles examined the abilities and deficits in each area tested compared to the performance of TD children.

As a group, the TD group had higher scores in almost all linguistic variables tested except for phonological abilities where no differences were found. Children with ASD were found to have better letter knowledge skills than children with TD. Regarding the correlations between linguistic scores and emerging litrecy scores, few relations were found. In the TD group, letter knowledge was found to be related to phonological abilities. In the ASD group, letter

knowledge was found to be related to Semantic production abilities and Print awareness was found to be related to syntactic abilities. Individual profiles found three subgroups of children with ASD, most with uneven functioning between tasks.

Our results demonstrate the wide variability found in the ASD population and the fact that for some children language does not predict literacy skills. This finding has implications for future intervention strategies and the fact that for some children with ASD emerging literacy skills and especially an interest in print and letters does not come naturally.