

The Reading and Writing Centre

your centre for expert advice and professional learning
in child and adolescent reading and writing disorders

Developmental Language Disorder and written expression

Developmental Language Disorder

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is diagnosed when children present with persistent difficulty producing or understanding language for no apparent reason (Bishop, Snowling, Thompson, Greenhalgh, CATALISE consortium 2017). Children with DLD may have difficulty understanding what people say to them and may struggle to express their ideas and feelings. DLD is a spectrum disorder ranging from mild to severe and often leads to significant functional impacts. On average, two children in every class of 30 will experience DLD severe enough to hinder academic progress (Bishop et al 2017). Despite its high prevalence and persistent functional impacts, DLD is largely undetected and underdiagnosed (Adlof, Scoggins, Brazendale, Babb and Petscher 2017). Research conducted by the University of Sydney identified 16% of Year 8 students as presenting with language disorder (Speech Pathology Australia Submission to Senate Enquiry 2015).

Diagnosis

Speech language pathologists have primary responsibility for the diagnosis and treatment of DLD. In an education setting this encompasses functional impact on literacy and educational outcomes. Speech Pathology Australia (Clinical guidelines 2016) endorses the critical role of speech language pathologists in prevention, identification, and management of literacy difficulties from infancy to adolescence.

Writing difficulties

Writing is a powerful tool that lets us communicate with others, persuade others, convey our knowledge, and express ourselves. Written expression poses a significant challenge for many students because it is markedly different from the language used in everyday life and demands students pay attention to the structure of discourse that they never had to employ when they began to talk (Fang, Schleppegrell and Cox 2006). There is little dispute that oral language provides the foundation on which written language is built and that children with developmental language disorders are at an increased risk of becoming struggling writers.

Intervention

Investigation of the language and cognitive skills that underpin written expression allows speech pathologists to develop a profile of strengths and challenges in both spoken and written language. This profile informs evidence-based interventions, instructional strategies and differentiated curriculum delivery.

