

Language disorder and reading comprehension

Language Disorder

Language disorder may be associated with a range of disabilities including autism, intellectual disability and hearing loss, or as a result of a primary language disorder. Research conducted in 2015 by the University of Sydney identified 16% of Year 8 students as presenting with a language disorder (Speech Pathology Australia Submission to Senate Enquiry 2015). Students with language disorder may require explicit instruction in the domains of language to support reading comprehension.

Developmental Language Disorder

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is diagnosed in children and adolescents who 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).

Diagnosis

Speech language pathologists have primary responsibility for the diagnosis and treatment of language disorders, including DLD. In an education setting this encompasses functional impact on literacy and educational outcomes. Speech Pathology Australia (Clinical guidelines 2021) endorses the critical role of speech language pathologists in prevention, identification, and management of interrelated language and literacy difficulties from infancy to adolescence.

Reading difficulties

Learning to read is a complex and dynamic system with multiple points of vulnerability for children with DLD (Catts, Nielsen, Bridges and Liu 2016; Murphy, Justice, O'Connell, Pentimonti and Kaderavek 2016). Children with persistent language difficulties are highly likely to experience reading comprehension difficulties in components of word reading, listening comprehension or both. While DLD and dyslexia are viewed as distinct disorders, research shows there is considerable overlap between the two and that they often co-occur (Bishop et al. 2017; Ward-Lonergan & Duthie, 2018; Adlof and Hogan 2018). Students who are able to decode but have difficulties comprehending due to language deficits often go unnoticed, as they may compensate with a range of other skills to mask their difficulties (Snowling 2017).

Reader Profile

Investigation of the language skills that underpin the components of reading comprehension - word reading and listening comprehension - allows speech language pathologists to develop a Reader Profile. This profile of strengths and challenges in language and in reading comprehension informs evidence-based interventions, instructional strategies and differentiated curriculum delivery.