

Child and Family Centre

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LANGUAGE DISORDERS IN CHILDREN

Many children will show difficulties understanding language (receptive) and using language (expressive) during early childhood. Language difficulties are most apparent during pre-school and early school years and can persist into adult life. When a child has difficulty understanding and using language it may have a negative effect his or her social, emotional and academic development. The problems associated with understanding and using language are often categorised as language delay or language disorders. A child with a specific developmental delay in expressive and/or receptive language skills has a difficulty which is not associated with learning disabilities (UK terminology) or mental handicap (North American terminology) autism or sensory disorders such as deafness. In other words, the child's development in other areas such as motor, social, non-verbal cognitive, self help and academic areas is at or near age appropriate levels. However, children with specific language disorder may show difficulties in socialisation, behaviour, attention/concentration and acquisition of academic skills. Impairment in acquisition of basic literacy skills (reading and writing) is sometimes associated with language disorders.

There are a variety of possible causes for language disorders/delays, but the exact cause may be unknown. In many cases there may be a family history of similar difficulties. An overview of stages of language development which the majority of children reach by a specified age is included in Appendix A. If your child has not reached these milestones there is cause for concern and assessment by relevant professionals such as Audiologists, Physicians, Psychologists and Speech Language Therapists is recommended. Parents may sometimes have the following thoughts or comments with regard to a child with apparent language delay:

- “That’s just his baby talk. I’m sure he will outgrow it”
- “Everyone in our family was a late talker. My child will talk when the time is right. He has been spoilt by his grandparents and sisters and often doesn’t have to use speech to communicate as everything is done for him”
- “He has been exposed to many languages, so how can he be expected to have really good skills in only one”.

Many parents have similar thoughts or comments. Usually there is concern about a child's speech and language skills if there is no use of language by age 1 year, or if speech is not clear, or if speech or language is different from that of other children of the same age.

Some children often demonstrate difficulty producing speech sounds (articulation) along with language difficulties or their language is appropriate but their articulation is in need of development. Speech articulation requires the correct pronunciation of sounds to form words. It is not uncommon for young children to have difficulty producing specific speech sounds. Specific sound development is often related to the child's chronological age and may not be a problem. If your child is difficult to understand or you are concerned about his or her speech development again an assessment by the relevant professionals mentioned above is recommended. Often times articulation and delayed language development can occur simultaneously.

Will using two languages cause speech language problems?

If a child truly has a language disorder they will have difficulty and delay of language skill development in whatever language is being taught. Parents usually identify that a young child who is bilingual has equal difficulties in development of whatever languages are being taught simultaneously. Many professionals advise parents who have children with language delay that it is best to concentrate on development of only one language and this is the language in which the child should receive therapy.

There are different theories about the best way to teach a child to use two languages. Most researchers agree that a child who is exposed to two languages at an early age and simultaneously, will naturally learn to use both languages. Children can be expected to go through some periods of mixing the two languages and borrowing vocabulary to express ideas, sometimes within the same sentence. A separation of two languages will occur gradually. Children may also experiment with the two languages to create special effects or to express themselves at specific settings. Children may not be equally skilled in both languages. Often there is a greater understanding and actual use of one language. Less confusion will occur if children learn to associate the two languages differently, for example if one language is used while speaking to the mother and the other while speaking to the father.

If parents are concerned about their bilingual child's speech language development and suspect delay they should contact the relevant professionals listed above to rule out all other causes including hearing impairment. An appropriate evaluation of skills, including the evaluation of both languages completed by a bilingual speech language therapist is best. This sort of professional is not always available and it is sometimes possible to only evaluate in one language. The discovery that a child has some delays in both languages does not necessarily indicate a language disorder. A competent professional with knowledge and experience in language difficulties as well as experience in assessment of bilingual children can usually provide good insight as to the nature of a child's language delay.

TREATMENT FOR LANGUAGE DISORDERS

Services are normally provided after a specific diagnosis has been made. Speech language therapy and in more severe cases specialised educational programs may be necessary. Early

identification is crucial and children who start speech language therapy at an early age have a better chance of making progress as they move through childhood. However, it is very difficult to predict how much progress a child will make in overcoming their language difficulties. Increases in language functioning as a result of therapy and/or specialised educational programming may serve to lessen other related social and academic problems. Regular therapy by a qualified Speech Language therapist is indicated for most children. It is best if therapy can include some focus on using language in a natural setting and is presented at the child's developmental level. Parents, Teachers and Speech Language Therapists should work together to make sure the child's gains in a receptive and expressive language are consistently stimulated and output is rewarded. It is also very important that the child have regular access to typically developing peers who provide appropriate models for language and social skills. Parents should also make a strong effort to encourage a child's language development at home and in the community whenever possible.