

# Communication Disorders

Human communication involves speech, language, hearing, listening, understanding, using the voice, and all aspects of literacy (reading and writing).

One in seven Australian adults and children have some form of communication disorder, according to Speech Pathology Australia. This means that there are over a million Australians who are having difficulty with some aspect of their communication. The impact of a communication disorder can be seen in a child's academic, behaviour and/or social development i.e. it can have a significant and far-reaching effect.

Speech pathologists are specialists who work with children and adults with communication and swallowing disorders. If you are concerned that your child may have a communication disorder, please contact a speech pathologist [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au) (follow the link to 'Find a Speech Pathologist'). Some speech pathologists work as part of community health service teams, and in most areas can assess and treat children up to the age of 7. There is no provision for speech pathology services in NSW schools, however parents should check with their child's school as some employ the services of private speech pathologists.

The following are some examples of communication disorders in child and adolescent populations:

- Problems saying some, or many, sounds in everyday **speech**. These are known as **phonological disorders**, or **articulation disorders**, depending on the type and cause of the problem. This may make a child's speech difficult to understand.

- Difficulties understanding or expressing themselves using their primary, or first, **language**. These children may have problems following instructions, increasing their knowledge and use of vocabulary, and expressing their ideas effectively in written language. A **language delay** refers to an early developmental delay, up to the age of around 5 years. Delayed language development may improve with appropriate intervention. Even with intervention, some children continue to demonstrate difficulties with their primary language in the long term, and such persistent difficulties may then be referred to as a **language impairment**, or **language disorder**. These might also be referred to as **language-based learning difficulties**, because of the major role of receptive and expressive language in the child's learning difficulties.
- Problems with spoken language (both speech and language developmental issues) often impact the development of a child's **literacy skills**. For example, poor speech production may interfere with the development of phonological awareness skills (awareness of the sound structures in words), essential for early literacy development. Delayed or disordered language often impacts a child's ability with reading accuracy, spelling, and reading comprehension.
- A communication disorder at any age is likely to affect an individual's **social interactions**. Social communication is how we communicate with others in the broad social environment: starting and carrying on conversations, interpreting underlying messages, understanding non-verbal information, and following the accepted rules of interaction that can be quite

complex and culturally based. Some children have a communication disorder that is specifically observed in **poorly developed social skills**, for example those on the autism spectrum or with a specific language disorder.

- Some children may have problems with their vocal cords, causing a **voice disorder**. A common problem is a chronically hoarse voice, due to the growth of nodules on the vocal cords. Other voice problems may be due to chronic or acute physiological or neurological problems.
- Problems with the fluency of speech are often referred to as **stuttering**. The problem is usually first apparent when a child starts talking in sentences.

## The interaction of communication disorders and learning difficulties.

- 12% of children and adolescents have a communication disorder. This translates to three in every average-sized class.
- Three in every 1000 newborns have a hearing loss, which may later affect their speech, language and literacy.
- Indigenous children have three times more hearing problems than non-indigenous children.
- Children with language impairment are six times more likely to have a reading problem than children with normally developing language abilities.

- 14% of 15 year olds are functionally illiterate, therefore not having the literacy skills essential for academic progress and future employment opportunities.
- 46% of Australian youth offenders have impaired language abilities.

*(Source: Speech Pathology Australia, 2014)*

## Useful links

For general information on communication disorders, also to find a speech pathologist in your area:

[www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)

For resources on communication disorders in children and adolescents the following UK sites are very comprehensive:

<http://www.afasic.org.uk/>

<http://www.ican.org.uk/>

For information about language impairment:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/RALLIcampaign>

For information on stuttering:

<http://sydney.edu.au/health-sciences/asrc/>

For information on the Autism Spectrum Disorder:

<https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/>

Communicating with young offenders:

<http://www.sentencetrouble.info/>

*This LDC Fact Sheet was compiled by Dr Julia Starling, Speech-Language Pathologist & Member of Executive of the LDC Management Committee 2016*

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