

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, that is it can have a significant and far-reaching impact.

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 (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 government mandating for speech pathology services in NSW schools, however parents should always check with their child's individual school.

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, developing their knowledge and use of vocabulary, and expressing their ideas effectively in spoken and written language. Such difficulties are diagnosed as either a **Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)**, where there is no other disability or disorder causing the language difficulties, or a **Language Disorder** associated with a disability such as ASD, Intellectual Disability or a sensori-neural hearing loss. (See the LDC fact sheet on Developmental Language Disorder).
- 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 and making the link between sounds and letters (phonics). A language disorder 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 verbal interactions that can be quite complex. Some children have a communication disorder that is primarily observed in **poorly developed social skills**, for example those on the autism spectrum or with a language disorder.

- Some children may have problems with their vocal cords (voice box), 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 disorders 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

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

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

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

For information about DLD see LDC Fact Sheet on DLD.

For information on stuttering:

<https://www.schn.health.nsw.gov.au/files/factsheets/stuttering-en.pdf>

For information on the Autism Spectrum Disorder:

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

This LDC Fact Sheet was compiled by Dr Julia Starling, Speech-Language Pathologist & Member of Executive of the LDC Management Committee 2016, updated 2021.

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