

# Developmental Language Disorder

## What is Developmental Language Disorder?

Developmental Language Disorder, or DLD, is when a child, adolescent or adult has difficulty understanding and/or using their primary language. Important facts:

- DLD is characterised by difficulties with all areas of language: talking, listening, understanding, reading and writing. These are difficulties that don't go away over time. There are degrees of difficulty from mild to moderate to severe.
- There is no other disability or disorder causing DLD. In cases when a child already has a disability diagnosis such as autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability or a sensorineural hearing loss, we use the term Language Disorder.
- This means that there is no known underlying cause of DLD. We don't know for sure, but it is most likely that DLD is the result of a number of biological, genetic and environmental factors.
- DLD often co-occurs with other difficulties e.g. with reading, spelling, attention, motor skills and/or behaviour.
- We think that at least 7.5% of children and adolescents have DLD. This means that there are at least 2 children in every classroom with DLD. Some population studies put the rate as high as 17%. Even 7.5% makes it more common than Autism Spectrum Disorder (approximately 1% of the population).

- DLD affects a child's or adolescent's learning skills, literacy development, friendships and mental health.

DLD is a **life-long disorder**. There have now been many long-term population studies that have provided information on its persistence across the life span. As children get older, there are increasing and changing demands on their language abilities in the classroom, and in the social world.

Children and adolescents with DLD perform within normal parameters on intelligences assessments, that is they are of **normal intelligence** and sometimes demonstrate high intelligence in some verbal or non-verbal areas.

DLD is known as a '**hidden disability**'. The identification of DLD in a child or adolescent may get overlooked if, for instance, a child is very quiet and compliant in a classroom, or has acting out or other worrying behaviours that are seen as the primary problem, rather than the result of receptive and expressive language difficulties.

**As children with DLD get older** they are at increased risk of failing academically, developing mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, having very low self-esteem, being bullied and teased, and leaving school too early and underqualified for the work place. Young people with DLD are over-represented in youth justice populations.

What are the main **signs and symptoms** of a possible DLD in a school-aged child or adolescent? Any degree of difficulty with:

- Expressing ideas in spoken or written language.
- Making sense: putting words together to make a spoken or written sentence that others can understand
- Following instructions
- Poor spoken and written vocabulary.
- High order language: understanding inferences, innuendo and ambiguity, taking sarcasm at 'face value', understanding and using figurative language such as idioms and metaphors, understanding more abstract information such as analysing more sophisticated texts
- Reading and writing: difficulties with some or many aspects of their development of literacy
- Social interactions: for example, making friends, joining in with play, carrying on a conversation, following the rules of games.

If there are any concerns, it is essential to make a **referral to a speech pathologist** for an assessment (see link below). The good news is that children and adolescents with DLD can

progress well through school, and life in general, if their problems are recognised and assessed early, and if consistent and appropriate support is provided over time.

## Resources

### Find a speech pathologist:

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

### Further information on DLD:

<https://radld.org/>

<https://thedldproject.com/>

<https://dldandme.org/>

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

The Language and Working Memory Lab:

<https://www.uwo.ca/fhs/lwm/index.html>

**Booklet 'I've Still Got It, Haven't I?'** - DLD in older children and adolescents. **Free download** from <https://linksresources.com.au/>

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

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