

LANGUAGE DIFFICULTY IN CHILDREN



What is a language difficulty?

Language is the ability to understand words and to use them to make sentences. A child might have a **language difficulty** if:

- they cannot understand what is being said to them
- they find it difficult to express what they want to say

There are two types of language difficulty:

1. Comprehension difficulty

This is when the child has difficulty understanding what is being said. They might do some of the following:

- Find it difficult to follow instructions.
- Not know what some words mean.
- Find it hard to follow a conversation.
- Look like they have not heard when someone speaks to them.
- Find it difficult to remember strings of words.
- Repeat back words to the person who has just spoken them.

2. Expressive language difficulty

This is when the child has difficulty expressing themselves. They might do some of the following:

- Not use as many words as expected.
- Speak in short sentences.
- Find it difficult to start a conversation.
- Not be able to find the right word to say what they mean.
- Not talk much but seem to understand what is said to them.
- Find it difficult to tell stories.

A person can have a comprehension difficulty on its own. Or an expressive language difficulty on its own. Sometimes, though, a person might have both a comprehension difficulty and an expressive language difficulty at the same time.

Language delay

As children grow they go through different stages of developing language. If a child is developing through all expected stages but more slowly than other children, they might have a **language delay**.

Language disorder

If a child's development is delayed by 2 years this is a big delay. We call this a **language disorder**.

Also, if a child cannot understand some things we expect for their age, but can express themselves using language we only expect older children to use, this is unusual. This is a disordered pattern of development. We also call this a **language disorder**.

Is language difficulty called anything else?

- A **comprehension difficulty** (difficulty understanding language) is also called a **receptive language difficulty**.
- A **mixed language difficulty** (having both a comprehension difficulty and an expressive language difficulty) is also called a **mixed receptive-expressive language disorder** or just a **mixed receptive language disorder**.

What causes a language difficulty?

We don't always know why some children have a language difficulty. But some possible reasons are:

- hearing difficulties, including ongoing ear infections
- general developmental delay
- lack of stimulation
- learning difficulties
- genetic conditions, such as Down's Syndrome
- some psychological conditions
- brain injury

What can I do to help my child develop language?

The aim is to help your child to listen carefully, to concentrate on what is being said and to **enjoy talking**. You can try some of the following, depending on the age of your child:

- **Be interested** in what your child has to say. This shows you love them and encourages them to keep talking.
- Try and **make sure your child is looking at you** when you are talking to them.
- **Speak in short, clear sentences**.
- **Talk to your child often** such as when you're out walking, visiting the park or at bath time. But make sure you give opportunities for your child to talk.
- Use a **small core vocabulary** that includes objects, actions, and people in your child's environment.
- **Repeat sentences**, varying the form, e.g. "See the dog?" "John, see dog?"
- **Talk about things and activities** which your child is interested in.
- Gesture or **use simple signs** to help your child understand.
- **Expand simple words**, e.g., if your child says 'dog' then you could say 'pat the dog' or 'where's the dog?'

I'm worried – what should I do?

Arrange an assessment

If you think your child might have a language difficulty then you should ask for an assessment by a **speech therapist**. Speech therapists are trained to assess language development. They will be able to tell you if there is nothing to worry about or if there is some difficulty. Sometimes language difficulties just go away by themselves. Sometimes help is needed to make things better. The speech therapist will explain all this. They will have lots of ideas and many more things you can do to help your child develop language.

How to arrange an assessment

In some places you can organize an assessment yourself. Just phone the local speech therapy department.

Sometimes you need your doctor to organize it for you.

If your child is in school, then your child's teacher will know how to arrange an assessment. The teacher may be able to do this for you.

Hearing test

Because hearing difficulties can cause a language difficulty, the speech therapist might arrange a **hearing test**.