

Language Impairment in school-aged children

An information booklet for Teachers
and other Teaching Professionals



Presented by : Speech Therapy, NUH Rehabilitation Centre

Language

Language refers to any system of words or signs that people use to understand each other. It is the means by which we communicate our needs, our wants, our opinions, our unhappiness, and our fears to the people around us. Language is present in each of the following scenarios:

- An infant whining to communicate its hunger.
- A five-year old boy waving to greet and express his delight at seeing his friend.
- An adult negotiating for a better bargain at the local market as the wholesaler listens.
- A student reading the latest facebook updates that his friend has written and uploaded.

A significant amount of language development occurs before a child can even speak his first word.

Typically at
10 months

Following short
simple instructions



Typically at
12 - 18 months

Emergence of
first words



Typically at
24 - 36 months

Speaking in
2 - 3 word phrases



Language Impairment

As the child continues to develop language skills, his vocabulary widens and he learns to use a greater variety of sentence and grammatical structures to express his intentions more efficiently for different social functions.



Increased exposure to reading and writing throughout the preschool years teaches the child to decode written symbols for the spoken words they represent. The foundation that the child has already built in oral language is crucial as it helps him to understand the written information he has read (i.e. decoded), and allows him to formulate a sentence that he can write (i.e. code in written symbols).

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) defines Language Disorder as **an impairment in the “comprehension and/or use of spoken, written, and/ or other symbol systems”**; this involves phonology and word and sentence structures that make up the language, the content of the language (e.g. vocabulary) and the function of the language in communication, in any combination.

Language Impairment and Language Disability are two common terms used to describe an individual with Language Disorder. Language Impairment is typically diagnosed by a

Speech-Language therapist. It may present itself in different ways in different individuals and can be associated with conditions such as hearing loss, Down Syndrome, or Autism Spectrum Disorder. Individuals who face difficulties learning language in the absence of other contributing factors or deficits (e.g. neglect, hearing loss, intellectual disability) are seen as having a ‘pure’ Language Impairment and are diagnosed with the term, Specific Language Impairment (SLI).



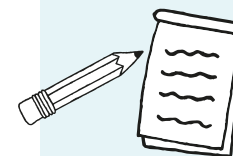
CONVERSATION WITH A CHILD WITH (ONLY) LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT

Child : Very loud the dog ‘whoa whoa whoa’. I I...
‘ahhhhh’ and then and then BOM the door.

Mom : Did you mean the dog was barking very loudly?
And you screamed and shut the door with a
loud bang?

Child : Ya. The dog run. Fast a lot than me.

Mom : Oh the dog ran off. It could run faster than you!



WRITTEN EXCERPT FROM A CHILD WITH (ONLY) LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT

I very scared the dog. And then I bom the door.
The dog run fast a lot then me.

Language Impairment

Individuals with Language Impairment frequently face difficulties in their preschool years in the form of unmet oral language milestones. The degree of the language difficulties varies across individuals. For instance, a child with Language Impairment might still be using sounds and no words to communicate his intentions at three years of age while another child of the same age and diagnosis might be using single words.

A variety of language components could be affected, including their knowledge of vocabulary, their understanding and use of grammar rules and sentence structures, and the communication goals they use language to achieve. Some common communication goals include requesting for a desired toy, asking for information or rejecting an undesired item. These children will also find it hard to understand what they have read, or face difficulty forming sentences they could use in written tasks due to their weak language foundation. These language difficulties often negatively impact the individual's abilities to develop social relationships and to cope with academic demands, and may eventually affect his self-esteem and self-confidence.



Language Impairment vs Dyslexia

Question : Are they the same disorder?

Answer : No, they are 2 different disorders.

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in reading and spelling words accurately and fluently. It is typically diagnosed by a psychologist. Individuals with Dyslexia will find it hard to decode written symbols for the words they represent. They will also find it hard to use written symbols to represent the words that they wish to note down. Unlike children with only Language Impairment, children diagnosed with only Dyslexia will face difficulties mainly at the reading and writing level. They can be very fluent and articulate when they speak, but struggle with great effort when asked to express themselves in writing.

Children begin learning to read and write in their preschool years. From the print media around them, they learn what written words look like before they can even read. They learn about the letters of the alphabet, rhyming, and the different strokes present in each letter or character. Before they can read and write fluently, they need to learn how to allocate a sound to each word, and how to string letters and sounds together or combine strokes to form words.

Despite the complexity of the written system, many children have achieved some degree of success in decoding the written code by the time they are of school-going age. They are able to read and understand simple words and sentences, and write short messages to express themselves by the time they enter primary school. Children with Dyslexia, however, face difficulties with decoding and coding the written symbols for reading and writing purposes. These children may still be confused with their

'p' and 'q', 'b' and 'd', and uppercase and lowercase letters, long after their peers have resolved their confusion. Some examples of other difficulties they may face include:

- Not being able to write a word down even when the letters have been spelled aloud for them
- Frequently omitting, changing the sequence or reversing letters in their attempts to spell
- Difficulty reading words in storybooks pitched at their grade level
- Difficulty identifying the sound that a letter makes
- Difficulty joining individual sounds together to form a word.

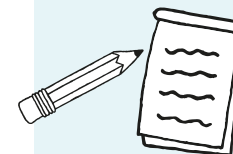


CONVERSATION WITH A CHILD WITH (ONLY) DYSLEXIA

Child : The neighbor's dog was barking so loudly at me!
I was so scared I screamed. Once I reached the
door, I slammed it shut!

Mom : Did the dog chase after you?

Child : No! It ran off when I slammed the door. It could
run so much faster than me!



WRITTEN EXCERPT FROM A CHILD WITH (ONLY) DYSLEXIA

Tobay, be nayber's bog chas me. I ren awei pikli

Language Impairment & Dyslexia

Question : Can an individual be diagnosed with both Language Impairment and Dyslexia?

Answer : Yes, there are individuals diagnosed with both Language Impairment and Dyslexia.

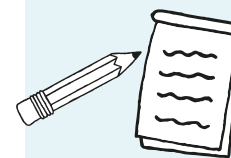
It is possible for a child to face difficulties in both his understanding and use of language, and in his reading and writing skills. Whilst oral language forms the foundation for literacy, access to written language in the print media becomes a major way in which we pick up new vocabulary, sentence structures and grammar rules in the school-aged years and the years beyond. Children with both Language Impairment and Dyslexia face immense difficulties accessing language in the both the spoken and written mode. These children require help to strengthen both their oral language foundation, and to build up their reading and writing skills.

Apart from language, individuals with Dyslexia may also face co-occurring difficulties in the aspects of motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organization. However, these are indicative of co-morbid conditions, and not part of Dyslexia.



CONVERSATION WITH A CHILD WITH LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT & DYSLEXIA

Child : Neighbour dog bark so loud to me! I so scary. I close the door piang!



WRITTEN EXCERPT FROM A CHILD WITH LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT & DYSLEXIA

The nayber dog bak me so i clos the dor.

Speech Impairment

Question : I have heard of Speech Impairment/ Disorder as well. Is this related to Language Impairment or Dyslexia?

Answer : No, Speech Impairment is different from Language Impairment and Dyslexia.

Individuals with Speech Impairment face specific difficulties in their articulation of speech sounds. They often sound unclear when they speak due to their mispronunciation of the speech sounds.

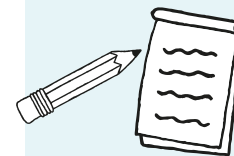
Individuals with Speech Impairment can face co-occurring difficulties with language (e.g. Language Impairment), reading and writing (e.g. Dyslexia), and/or other disorders.



CONVERSATION WITH A CHILD WITH (ONLY) SPEECH IMPAIRMENT

Child : The neighbor's dog was barting (barking) so loudly at me! I was so stared(scared) I streamed (screamed). Once I reached the door, I slammed it shut!

* mispronounced sound "k" to "t"



WRITTEN EXCERPT FROM A CHILD WITH (ONLY) SPEECH IMPAIRMENT

Today, the neighbor's dog chased me.
I ran away quickly.

How can a Speech-Language Therapist help?

For children with speech and/or language difficulties, Speech-Language therapists can help to:

- Identify students with communication disorders who have problems or are at risk for later problems
- Administer assessments to evaluate a child's speech and language skills using formal or informal assessment tools
- Evaluate the results of comprehensive assessments to identify the severity of a child's speech and language difficulties as well as his strengths and weaknesses. This will help guide the planning and setting of session goals during speech and language therapy sessions.
- Set individualised speech and language goals in consultation with teachers and significant caregivers (e.g. parents) to maximise educational and functional outcomes for students. This can be done by helping students to understand and use basic language concepts, integrating classroom objectives, and increasing students' understanding of lesson materials.
- Provide specific targeted intervention to students to work on areas of language difficulties. For example, for a student who has difficulties using grammatically and syntactically correct sentences, intervention may focus on explicitly teaching grammatical concepts and providing multiple opportunities for the student to practice these concepts. Such interventions can be carried out through individual or group sessions.
- Collaborate and consult with teachers, other professionals (e.g. occupational therapist, physiotherapists, psychologists, doctors) and significant caregivers (e.g. parents, family members) to discuss ways that the child can be best supported in his daily environment.

Speech-language therapists are based in both community settings and private setting :

Community

e.g. restructured hospitals, voluntary welfare organizations

Private

i.e. private speech therapy clinics

Some avenues for Speech-Language therapy services are listed at the following Speech-Language and Hearing Association Singapore webpage:

<http://www.shas.org.sg/cos/o.x?c=/wbn/pagetree&func=view&rid=1083800>





Students with language difficulties often have difficulty understanding what is taught in class and as a result, have difficulty following instructions or completing tasks. Some may also start to be distracted and become disruptive in class.

Teachers should be prepared to consider that what appears to be inattention or noncompliance may be difficulties with comprehension and understanding. A history of such difficulties may have led a student to adopt maladaptive behaviours (e.g. not completing tasks, hiding homework, being disruptive during lessons).

Remember, every child is different and has different learning styles. Teachers should be prepared to use a variety of strategies. For instance, some students may respond better to a story told verbally than having to read a story on their own, while some students may need visual cues, such as pictures or a chart of ideas with arrows for them to understand it.

How can teachers help?

Strategies to support students with language difficulties in the classroom:

- For students who are slower at processing information (i.e. taking a longer time to understand), teachers can:
 - Simplify, break down and repeat lengthy instructions.
 - Slow down the rate of presentation.
 - Restate, emphasising key points.
 - Allow students more time to process the information.
 - Limit the amount of material (especially new vocabulary) presented at any one time.
 - Provide visual cues (e.g. pictures, drawings) and concrete materials (i.e. real objects) to support verbal instructions or assist in learning and remembering information.
 - Use gestures and/or demonstrate instructions to aid comprehension of the verbal information presented. Body movement can help to enhance learning in some students.
 - Make things explicit - avoid sarcasm and ambiguity; explain and restate metaphorical language. Students with language difficulties often find abstract ideas and language problematic. Teachers should be aware and attempt to restate such information.
 - Use direct rather than indirect instructions, e.g. “Stop talking” rather than “I didn’t hear Alex because some people were talking”.
 - Check the student’s understanding of verbal instructions or information by getting him to repeat the information in his own words.

How can teachers help?

- For students who have difficulties expressing themselves, teachers can:
 - Allow adequate time for students to organise and structure a response.
 - Assist students who have difficulties finding correct words or using correct words by giving them two options to choose from: one option being an incorrect answer, and the other option being the correct answer.
 - Provide models of grammatically and syntactically appropriate sentences.
- For students with Language Impairment, they often have difficulty with reading and writing as well. Teachers can support these students by adjusting the tasks for them to allow them to access and participate in the curriculum. For example, a teacher aide or learning support teacher can assist the student to read materials in class, and allow students to tape record their answers instead of writing them down.
- Encourage and reward students' attempts to seek help and clarification.
- Incorporate praise in daily activities to reinforce positive behaviour and acknowledge student's efforts in the tasks he attempts. This will increase his confidence and level of motivation.
- When students have problems, routinely talk with caregivers/parents and care providers such as the doctor, allied educator, counsellor and speech therapist etc.



Language Impairment in the Classroom

Here are some case examples of how children with language impairment may present in the classroom:

Case 1

Mary is currently studying at the Primary 2 level. Her teachers have noticed that she often sits alone and eats alone during breaks. Mary is a quiet and passive during classroom activities. She seldom participates in class and is often slower than the other children in following spoken instructions. The teachers frequently have to repeat their instructions or show her what to do. When pressed to speak, Mary often speaks softly in short sentences. Her teachers have misunderstood her intentions several times.



Impression:

Difficulty with comprehension and use of language affecting social relationship with peers and communication with teachers. Possibly poor self-confidence.

Case 2

Tom is a Primary 5 student. His teachers know him as the 'troublemaker' in class as he often disturbs his classmates or stares out of the window during lessons. He often does not do his homework and has even been caught copying his friend's answers several times during tests. Tom is not coping well academically and has been failing most of his subjects or achieving at best, a borderline pass. His parents are aware of his academic difficulties but report that despite their guidance, nagging and all the tuition they sent him for, Tom does not seem to be improving. He appears to dislike work more and more these days.

Impression:

Difficulty understanding and learning from classroom teachings due to poor language comprehension and possibly language use. Difficulty coping with academics could be resulting in negative behaviors of refusing to do homework, listening in class and copying answers.

Further Reading...

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The information provided in this publication is meant purely for educational purposes and may not be used as a substitute for medical diagnosis or treatment. You should seek the advice of your doctor or a qualified healthcare provider before starting any treatment or if you have any questions related to your health, physical fitness or medical conditions.

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