



## Speech and Language Difficulties

Speech and language disorders are one of the most common special needs in children. Difficulties can begin when a child is learning to talk or can show up later during the school years when more complex language skills are needed for learning. Language skills involve using words and using non-spoken language. Language is involved in almost everything we do. Sorting out the language difficulties of children can be challenging and can be even more challenging for children who are English Language Learners. As parents, the more we understand our child's special needs, the better we are able to advocate for their needs.

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Assessment  
Behavior  
Bullying  
School Discipline  
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Learning Disabilities  
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504 Plans  
Regional Centers  
Transition to Adulthood  
School Problems

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## Speech and Language Resources

### Internet Resources

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)

Cherab Foundation, [www.cherab.org](http://www.cherab.org)

Childhood Apraxia of Speech Association, [www.apraxia-kids.org](http://www.apraxia-kids.org)

LD OnLine, [www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org)

Michelle Garcia Winner's Center for Social Thinking, [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com)

National Coalition on Auditory Processing Disorders, [www.ncapd.org](http://www.ncapd.org)

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, [www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org)

National Stuttering Association, [www.nsastutter.org](http://www.nsastutter.org)

Selective Mutism Group, [www.selectivemutism.org](http://www.selectivemutism.org)

Speechville Express, [www.speech-express.com](http://www.speech-express.com)

United States Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication, [www.ussaac.org](http://www.ussaac.org)

### Books, DVDs, and CDs

*Augmentative & Alternative Communication: Supporting Children & Adults With Complex Communication Needs* (2006), Beukelman and Mirenda

*Childhood Speech, Language, and Listening Problems: What Every Parent Should Know*, (2001), 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Hamaguchi

*Early Communication Skills for Children with Down Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (2003), Kumin

*From Isolation to Intimacy: Making Friends without Words* (2007), Caldwell

*Growing Up Social: Exploring How Social Communication Develops... and Strategies to Help* (2007), Winner (DVD)

*An Introduction to PECS: The Picture Exchange Communication System* (2000), Frost and Bondy (Video)

*It Takes Two to Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays* (2004), Pepper and Weitzman

*The Late Talker: What to Do If Your Child Isn't Talking Yet* (2003), Agin, Geng and Nicholl

*Like Sound Through Water: A Mother's Journey Through Auditory Processing Disorder* (2002), Foli

*The Parents Guide to Speech and Language Problems* (2007), Feit

*The Social Skills Picture Book for High School and Beyond* (2006), Baker

*The Source for Processing Disorders: Auditory, Language* (2001), Richard

*Teach Me How to Say It Right: Helping Your Child With Articulation Problems* (2005), Dougherty

*When the Brain Can't Hear: Unraveling the Mysteries of Auditory Processing Disorder* (2002), Bellis

### Books for Children and Siblings

*Charlie Who Couldn't Say His Name* (2004), Fahy

*Hooway for Wodney Wat* (1999), Lester

*Taking Speech Disorders to School* (2004), Bryant



## Speech and Language Difficulties An Overview

Speech and language difficulties are sometimes referred to as Communication Disorders. These are broad terms that include many different areas such as how words and sounds are spoken, how the brain uses and understands language, as well as the ability to control muscles in the mouth (oral motor) for speaking and eating. As with other disorders, speech and language disorders vary from child to child. Challenges usually show up in the early years, yet difficulties may not be noticed until the child is using more complex language in school. There can be strengths in one area and weaknesses in another.

Children who are learning English as a second language and who have underlying language difficulties have additional challenges. During evaluations and in planning for interventions, these complex needs must be considered.

Deficits in speech and language skills can impact learning, behavior, social functioning, and other areas. When children experience too much frustration with their language skills, behavior problems can result.

Speech and language skills are sometimes part of or influenced by other disabilities such as:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Autism Spectrum Disorder | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hearing Impairment |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Learning Disabilities    | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Cerebral Palsy     |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Developmental Delays     | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ADHD               |

Sometimes when a child is young, professionals may feel the diagnosis is a speech and language delay, yet as the child gets older, you might find that these delays are part of another diagnosis. Intervention can make an important difference in improving speech and/or language skills. If a child qualifies for special education services, intervention can occur in schools or in early intervention programs. If a child doesn't qualify for services, working with him or her at home on language skills can make a difference.

Professionals working in this field include private and school-based Speech-language pathologists or therapists and Audiologists. Audiologists typically work in private practice or in health care settings. Others such as pediatricians, teachers or child development professionals may notice early warning signs and can help direct you to resources and services. Matrix, a Parent Training and Information Center, also can guide you.

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## Types of Speech and Language Disorders

**Articulation Disorder** is when a child has difficulty making sounds and words. Sounds may be substituted, left off, added or changed, making it hard to be understood. It is not uncommon for young children to have difficulty saying certain sounds. Sometimes they grow out of this. A speech sound disorder occurs when mistakes continue past a certain age. There may be a pattern of sound errors: "tup" for "cup" or "das" for "gas".

**Abnormal Voice** means a voice has an unusual pitch, loudness or other abnormal qualities.

**Fluency Disorder** is when the flow, rate and rhythm of verbal expressions affect a child's ability to communicate with a listener. Speech which is too fast, too slow, or stuttering, which is not typical for that child's age may be considered a fluency disorder. Stuttering may be referred to as disfluency.

**Expressive Language Disorder** involves difficulty using language to express needs or thoughts. It is not how well one speaks the sounds. It involves skills such as putting together ideas, choosing the right word (vocabulary), organizing sentences, or using proper grammar to be understood. Often a child with this difficulty can understand what is being said, but can't form sentences well. Sometimes words are left out or a word is used incorrectly. The child may use the words "thing" or "stuff" instead of the actual word for something.

**Receptive Language or Auditory Processing Disorder** affects a child's ability to understand the language she hears. This may be described as a central auditory processing disorder (CAPD). The brain has difficulty using or remembering what the ear is hearing. A child with receptive language challenges may not be a good listener or may have difficulty following directions. They can seem distracted or tuned out and may ask "What?" a lot. It may also involve difficulties with prosody i.e., hearing the melody or the different tones of language. This can result in not hearing the emotions that go with the words, and as a result, a child may not be aware that your tone is expressing upset or happiness.

**Pragmatic Disorder** is the difficulty using and understanding social language, or pragmatics, a common problem for children on the Autism Spectrum, especially those with Asperger's Syndrome and PDD-NOS. A child may use words clearly in long, complex sentences with correct grammar, yet may say inappropriate or unrelated things, tell stories in a disorganized way, and/or have little variety in language use. They may not make good eye contact, and may mis-read gestures or facial expressions. Pragmatic problems can lower social acceptance. Peers may avoid having conversations with children with a pragmatic disorder, who have difficulty with the unspoken rules about social interactions and communications.

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## Speech and Language Assessments

Speech-language pathologists or therapists assess and diagnose communication disorders. Assessment typically consists of diagnostic tests and a history from the parent on the child's use and development of language. Language samples may also be taken while observing the child in a natural setting and in a more controlled speech and language room. Observing the child in a social setting is vital if language pragmatic issues are suspected.

Audiologists assess using a medical model and evaluate not only how well the ear is hearing, but also evaluate Central Auditory Processing – how well the brain uses what the ear is hearing.

English Language Learners - Children who are learning English and struggling with language need a professional skilled in assessing the complexities of a child learning two languages. Children typically are assessed in both languages. The professional has to determine that the language challenge exists no matter what language a child is learning.

Besides Speech/Language professionals, others such as teachers, developmental pediatricians, psychologists, and pediatric neurologists do preliminary screenings. If there are concerns, a formal assessment by a speech and language pathologist is needed and can be accomplished either through the school or through private assessment.

School Assessments – Children, aged 3 and older, can be assessed by your school district to see if they meet the criteria for intervention services in Special Education. If you want public school services for language intervention, it is important to put your request for an assessment in writing. Our **Assessments** packet has a sample letter and provides information about special education assessment and eligibility.

Private Assessments – These assessments may be broader than an assessment done by a school district. A school district only needs to assess to see if eligibility standards are met. The professional in private practice can assess whatever they or you think is needed. If you get a private assessment and want public school services, your school district may still want to assess your child. Schools are only required to consider your private evaluation, they do not need to use it or accept it.

**Of note:** If intelligence (I.Q.) testing is recommended for a child who has significant language difficulties, discuss with the psychologist the need for a non-verbal intelligence test. Some I.Q. tests such as the WISC rely heavily on language and may not accurately reflect your child's abilities.

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## Speech and Language Special Education Eligibility

The requirements to receive speech/language special education services in a public school are set by Education Code. A child needs to meet criteria in one of 4 areas AND must need specialized instruction to access their education:

- An articulation disorder in which all of the following exist: reduced intelligibility or inability to use speech which significantly interferes with communication or attracts adverse attention, significant interference in communication when production of single or multiple speech sounds is below age level.
- Abnormal voice
- Fluency disorders.
- A language disorder (expressive or receptive) that is at least 1.5 standard deviations below the mean or below 7% for age on two or more standardized tests in one or more of the following: morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics (see glossary)

Special Education has 12 eligibility categories. Some children who don't meet the requirements for speech/language, or who lose that eligibility after intervention, MAY meet the requirements in another category such as Specific Learning Disability or Autism Spectrum. If you think another disability may be present, ask for an evaluation in ALL areas of suspected disability.

**Important:** If the school says your child is not eligible based on assessment, you can sign in DISAGREEMENT with the assessment and this decision. (See our **Assessments, IEP** and **Resolving Disagreements** packets). Also, a child already in special education, but not under the category of speech and language, CAN receive speech and language services WITHOUT meeting the above eligibility requirement numbers if those services are needed to meet goals or access the curriculum.

When a child doesn't meet special education eligibility, it may not mean your child doesn't need help. For children who may just miss the requirements, ask about ways to help at home (sometimes the school professional can provide information sheets on what parents can do), private pay or sliding scale services such as Scottish Rite Childhood Language Centers ([www.scottishritecalifornia.org](http://www.scottishritecalifornia.org)), Easter Seals ([www.noca.easterseals.com](http://www.noca.easterseals.com)), and possibly the Speech/language departments in local Universities ([www.csha.org/university.htm](http://www.csha.org/university.htm)). Some insurance plans may cover private services.

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## Speech and Language Interventions

It is often easier to improve weak skills when children are young. Waiting to see if a child “grows out of it” may not always be wise. If difficulties are seen before age 5, intervention may be needed sooner rather than later.

Interventions are based on several factors such as age and needs (severity and the type of difficulty). Interventions vary from:

- Suggestions by a speech/language therapist for caregivers to practice at home
- Once a week for a half hour to several times a week in a S/L therapist’s office
- One on one services teaching a skill in a controlled and quiet setting
- A special language group setting or class when skills need an every day setting for guided practice and exposure to rich language

If your child is receiving Special Education services, the Individual Education Plan (IEP) will have interventions and other supports such as accommodations to the curriculum or consults between the classroom teacher and the speech/language therapist. For some children, receiving services from a special education teacher, such as a Resource Specialist, for reading and writing can strengthen language skills.

How often services are given is based on identified needs. Unless your child is recommended for a language based special day class, your child may have “pull out” services. This means your child is “pulled out” for a specific time from the general education class and goes to a speech/language setting. If practicing or learning language skills in a natural setting is needed, sometimes the professional can go into the class with the child or give services during recess or other times in the school day. These are called “push in” services. Speech goals may also be worked on by the child’s general education teacher.

If your child is not receiving public school services which require written plans, and you are paying for private services, you might request a written plan, meet with the speech/language therapist regularly, or even sit in on a session. If your child is getting services through the Regional Center, a written plan will be developed. You should also receive reports on progress

Assistive technology can be a useful intervention. This can be as simple as picture symbols such as PECS or a high tech voice output device. The use of electronic communication systems allows those with severe physical disabilities preventing speech to engage in the give and take of shared thought.

*Remember:* Starting with a solid assessment builds the base for the intervention plan.

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## How Speech and Language Affects Learning and School

Speech and language skills are a big part of academic success and learning. Language is the basis of communication. Learning takes place through the process of communication. While many speech and language patterns can be called "baby talk" and are part of a young child's normal development, they can become problems if they are not outgrown and can cause difficulties in learning. When children have muscular disorders, hearing problems or developmental delays, their acquisition of speech, language and related skills is often affected, creating additional barriers in their day to day functioning at school.

Areas that are affected by weak speech or language skills:

- Reading involves language in print form and includes many skills such as vocabulary, sounding out words, understanding meaning of words and concepts and fluency. When a child reads out loud, it shows how a child is using language to sound out words and how easily and smoothly (fluently) they are able to read. All school subjects are impacted by your students reading ability.
- Writing is creating language in print form. It is the academic area that requires the most skills for success. Children who struggle with reading and spoken language, often struggle with writing. If a student is anxious because of weak language skills, emotion can further block writing skills (as it can block all other academic skills).
- Listening to and following class instruction and directions. Schools and classrooms are not always quiet and may have many sounds that compete for a child's attention. A child with language weaknesses may not be able to pay attention and can be seen as off task.
- Social Interactions all throughout the school day involve both verbal and non-verbal language. Often children and teens with language pragmatic difficulties are socially isolated because of their difficulty using or understanding the social part of language. Behavior problems can also result when language is difficult or frustrating. We use our inner language to guide our behavior.
- Transition to the world after high school and into adulthood requires new skills for jobs and for getting needs met in day to day life. The language skills needed for a smooth transition or move to this next phase in life often need to be taught.

If your child is struggling in school or with a particular area of learning, it is important to determine if language is contributing to your child's difficulties and get the needed help.

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## Speech and Language Glossary of Terms

- Ambient Noise** – Background noise that competes with main speech signal
- Aphasia/Developmental Aphasia** – disorder that is due to a brain injury rather than a developmental delay in the normal acquisition of language
- Apraxia** – disorder of articulation - difficulty with sequencing and organizing muscle movements specifically for the production of speech
- Aprosodia** – inability to recognize or produce melodic speech patterns, making it difficult to understand the nonverbal language and/or resulting in a monotone speech pattern
- Articulation Disorder** – inability to correctly produce speech sounds because of the placement, timing, pressure, speed, or flow of the lips, tongue, or throat
- Assistive Technology** – Products, devices or equipment that are used to maintain, increase or improve the capabilities of individuals with needs
- Auditory Discrimination** – Ability to detect differences in sounds
- Auditory Processing/Central Auditory Processing Disorder (APD/CAPD)** – inability to accurately process and interpret sounds and words
- Augmentative Communication** – Non-verbal techniques used to supplement a person’s oral speech, which allows development of language. This includes gestures, sign language, pictures, voice output devices, etc.
- Communication Disorder** – A disorder in one or more of the processes of speech, hearing, or language which interferes with the ability to speak, understand, or use language
- Developmental Language Disorder** – language that is not developing appropriately
- Developmental Speech Disorder** – speech production that is not developing appropriately
- Dysarthria** – motor speech disorder due to paralysis, weakness, altered muscle tone, or incoordination of speech muscles, causing speech to be slow, weak, effortful, imprecise, or uncoordinated
- Dysphasia** – Confusion in or inefficiency in one’s ability to understand and/or express oneself through written and/or spoken language
- Elision** – The omission of a letter or a syllable
- Expressive Language** – language that includes speaking and/or writing
- Language Disorder** – general term for any of the language disorders
- Fluency** – The smooth, uninterrupted, effortless flow of speech
- Listening Comprehension** – Understanding speech and words
- Morphology** – The sounds or syllables on the beginning or end of a word that affect its meaning, often resulting in difficulties with plurals or tenses

**Nonverbal Learning Disability (NLD)** – strong verbal skills and rote memory skills but very weak motor, social, sensory, and visual-spatial abilities

**Oral Motor** – the oral structures for speech i.e., lips, tongue, teeth, larynx

**Perseveration** – Uncontrolled repeating of words, motions, or tasks

**Phoneme** – The smallest unit of speech that go together to form words

**Phonemic Awareness** – The awareness of the individual sounds in words

**Phonological Awareness** – awareness of the sounds of words and word parts

**Post-Lingual** – After the development of speech

**Pre-Lingual/Pre-Verbal** – Before the development of speech

**Pragmatics** – using language with the social rules of different situations

**Prosody** – reading the meaning in the melody or tone of voice of others and give off meaning through the melody and tone of one's own voice

**Receptive Language** – receiving and understanding language

**Rapid Naming** – how quickly one can name common objects, colors, letters, and numbers – a skill key to understanding and using language

**Selective Mutism** – communicating, but only with selected people in certain environments

**Semantic-Pragmatic Disorder** – language difficulties similar to Autism/PDD

**Social Stories** – stories designed to teach social skills in specific situations. These stories are often in picture form with simple text of what to do or say.

**Speech Pathology and Speech Language Pathologist** – The study of speech and language deficits and disorders and the professional who specializes in these disorders

**Speech Therapy** – The treatment of speech and communication disorders

**Stuttering/Disfluency (Dysfluency)** – interruptions in the flow of speech with repetitions, prolongations, hesitations, or blocks on the individual sound or word level

**Syntax** – The order of words that combine to form a grammatical sentence

**Unintelligible Speech** – Speech that cannot to some degree be understood

**Velopharyngeal Dysfunction** – structural problems with the face, such as cleft palate, submucous cleft or irregular adenoids

**Voice Disorder** – Includes abnormalities in pitch, quality, loudness, or resonance of the voice

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