

## Expressive language difficulties

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### What are expressive language difficulties?

One simple classification of language is to split it into its receptive and expressive aspects.

**Receptive** language refers to meaning, understanding language and “decoding” language. **Expressive** language refers to production, spoken output and coding – “a process of formulating ideas into words and sentences, in accordance with the set of grammatical and semantic rules of language” (Cantwell & Baker, 1987).

Expressive language can be **delayed** or **disordered**. Many elements of delay and disorder overlap, but they are also very different problems. In the early stages, it may be difficult to determine whether the language is delayed or disordered.

A child with expressive language **delay** is slow to develop spoken language, but this language follows the normal sequence and pattern of acquisition when it does appear. Expressive language **disorder** implies that acquisition is not only slow, but different from normal. The pattern of development is uneven and atypical. The features of expressive language disorder vary greatly, depending on the severity of the disorder and the child’s age.

Language is made up of many areas, including...

- **morphology**, the way word structures change (such as, ‘sleep’, ‘sleeping’, ‘slept’)
- **grammar**, rules about combining words in phrases and sentences
- **semantics**, the representation of meaning in language
- **pragmatics**, how language is used
- **phonology**, the sound system of the language.

Expressive language difficulties may affect any or all of these areas. Specialists in communication often consider difficulties in terms of their **content**, **form** and **use**.

### Content

Difficulties with content of language relate to its meaning. Children with expressive language difficulties may have a limited vocabulary, word-finding difficulties, and difficulty expressing abstract concepts or categorisation problems. Difficulties with language content may occur in the case of visually impaired children (Warren, 1981) or those with restricted mobility.

### Form

Some children have difficulty developing the surface aspects of language – its form. This leads to disorders of the sound system, word forms and grammar. Such children may have difficulty with word order, structuring sentences or expressing what they know and understand. They will perform better on non-verbal tests than on language tests. They may have difficulties with word endings, plurals, possessives, verb tenses or prepositions. Such problems may arise because of acquired or developmental dysphasia or to impaired hearing.

### Use

A child may have an expressive language disorder if he or she uses language inappropriately or out of context. The term “semantic-pragmatic disorder” may be used to describe these children, who may seem to have very good verbal comprehension and age appropriate sentence structure, but may have difficulty receiving or interpreting conversational cues. Such problems are also typical of children with learning difficulties. In that case, the children often lack verbal fluency, may overuse a limited or concrete vocabulary, and frequently fail to appreciate a need for clarification (Wiig & Semel, 1980).

### References

- Cantwell, D, & Baker, L (1987)**, *Developmental speech and language disorders*. New York: Guildford Press
- Dockrell, J, & Messer, D (1999)**, *Children’s language and communication difficulties*. London: Cassell

**Law, J** (1992), *The early identification of language impairment in children*. London: Chapman and Hall

**Martin, D, & Miller, C** (1996), *Speech and language difficulties in the classroom*. London: David Fulton

**Wright, J A, & Kersner, M** (1998), *Supporting children with communication problems: Sharing the workload*. London: David Fulton

**Please note: Afasic does not hold copies of any referenced material. However, it may be obtained via academic libraries.**

## Other relevant Glossary Sheets

- Specific language impairment (1)
- Dyslexia/specific learning difficulties (2)
- Developmental language delay/disorder (3)
- Semantic and pragmatic disorders (5)
- Aphasia/dysphasia (17)

## Other organisations which can help

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)  
2 White Hart Yard  
London SE1 1NX  
Tel: 020 7378 1200

The speech and language therapy service of your local health trust. Details appear in the business section of the telephone directory, under 'Health' and the name of the trust.

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