



CENTRE FOR  
Community  
Child Health

# Language Problems

*Practice Resource*

## Section 1: Introduction (only)

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# Practice Resource: Language Problems

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# Glossary

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<b>Child-centred approach</b>	A perspective that emphasises the importance of fostering a child's language development by following the child's lead in conversation.
<b>Didactic approach</b>	An approach involving an adult modelling a desired response and then attempting to get the child to give this response.
<b>Expressive language</b>	Language produced by the child.
<b>Hybrid approach</b>	A combination of child-centred and didactic approaches, in which the child is encouraged to learn a specific lesson or complete a specific task in his or her natural environment.
<b>Parent-administered Intervention</b>	An approach to language development that usually occurs in the child's natural environment in which a parent or carer takes the lead in supporting language development.
<b>Pre-linguistic stage</b>	The stage before a child uses words to communicate.
<b>Receptive language</b>	Understanding what spoken words mean.
<b>Semantics</b>	The meaning of words.
<b>Syntax</b>	The grammatical arrangement of words in sentences.
<b>Vocabulary</b>	The total number of words a person knows and uses.

Refer to Appendix 5 for a glossary of terms related to research methodology terminology.

# Section 1: Introduction

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## Setting the scene

Focus: Early Intervention

Topic inclusion: Expressive and receptive language delay and disorder

Topic exclusion: Global developmental delay

Age group: Early childhood (birth-5 years)

Language is a particularly important form of human communication and is defined as “the set of symbols, usually words or signs that are organised by convention to communicate ideas”.

There are two components of language:

- **expressive** – using words, gestures or written words to communicate
- **receptive** – understanding what is said, written or gestured.

A language system is made up of strict rules and a number of building blocks. Infinite combinations can be generated from these basic building blocks. The building blocks of language include:

- **morphology** – word formation (for example, making a word past tense)
- **prosody** – variation in the pitch, intensity and duration of the sounds of speech
- **semantics** – the meaning of words
- **syntax** – the way in which words are combined to form grammatical sentences
- **vocabulary** – the total number of words a person knows and uses
- **pragmatics** – social conventions of how we interact with each other

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Some important understandings about language include the following:

- **Communication begins at birth.** Early language development is the end product of a communication process that begins at birth. Communication includes a range of pre-linguistic behaviours including making eye contact, shared smiling and laughter between infant and another person, attending to the same thing as another person, babbling and cooing, imitating and showing understanding through physical or bodily gestures.
- **All children acquire language in the same developmental sequence without requiring direct teaching or effort.** All children are biologically programmed to acquire language provided basic requirements are met, such as being surrounded by language from birth and exposed to normal social communication and interaction.
- **Language development is affected by the complex interaction of both genetic and environmental influences, including parental education and the home environment.** Genetic factors influence the ways a child makes use of the interactions in the home environment. Environmental influences include child rearing practices and patterns of parent-child interaction.

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*Practice resource:*

**LANGUAGE PROBLEMS**

# Section 1: Introduction

## Stages of development in language

The stages of development in language to be addressed are:

- Infants (9 – 12 months)
- Toddlers (13 months – 3 years)
- Pre-school aged children (3 – 5 years)

Nine months is used as the starting point as children's 'understanding of others' verbal and non-verbal communication begins to emerge rapidly from this age.

With regard to the stages outlined, it is important to note that while they are considered 'typical', there is a natural degree of variation in what 'typically' occurs with children's language development.

The information included below is what might be expected for the development of language in English speakers. For speakers of other languages there may be natural variation that occurs from these patterns.

### Infants (9 – 12 months)

Between 9 and 12 months the developmental process are:

- Uses gestures and vocalisations to interact with others
- Responds to others' communication, for example, gestures, facial expressions and eye gaze

### Toddlers (13 months – 3 years)

Between 13 and 18 months the developmental process are:

- an increase in recognisable words (usually 10 to 20 words at a time)
- increasing use of gestures and sounds to communicate intent
- persistence with unsuccessful communication by repeating or modifying the communication

Between 18 and 30 months the developmental process are:

- show a sudden surge in vocabulary from a few dozen to several hundred words
- combine words
- use imitation as the main strategy in language learning
- begin to engage in conversation by providing new information about the previous speaker's topic, requesting information, and providing information about things in the past
- comprehend the meaning of words

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## Pre-school aged children (3 – 5 years)

Between 3 and 5 years the developmental process are:

- able to use language for more complex purposes (for example, to plan and anticipate outcomes, report on present and past experiences and comment on an imagined situation)
- begin to grasp the rules governing language use – for example, to order words correctly and understand different grammatical forms

The following information outlines what to expect in relation to a child's language at specific age groups.

### ***By the age of one year, a child is likely to be able to:***

- respond to familiar sounds, such as the telephone ringing
- respond to simple commands, such as 'no'
- recognise her or his own name
- respond to the names of familiar objects or people
- say a few words such as *dada* or *mama*
- enjoy songs, music and books
- try to make familiar sounds such as car and animal noises

### ***By the age of two years, a child is likely to be able to:***

- say the names of simple body parts
- listen to stories and name objects in pictures
- understand simple statements, requests or questions such as 'where's your shoe?'
- use more than fifty words
- talk to her- or himself or toys during play
- sing simple songs, such as 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star'
- use some pronouns (such as he or it) instead of names
- try simple sentences, such as 'milk all gone'

### ***By the age of three years, a child is likely to be able to:***

- understand how objects are used – for example that a crayon is something to draw with
- recognise her or his own needs, such as hunger
- follow directions
- use three- or four-word sentences
- begin to use basic grammar
- enjoy telling stories and asking questions
- have favourite books and television programs
- be understood by familiar adults

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***By the age of four years, a child is likely to be able to:***

- say the names of shapes and colours
- understand some words relating to time, such as *lunch time, today, winter*
- ask questions about who, what and why
- use around 900 words, usually in four- to five-word sentences
- use mostly correct grammar with occasional mistakes (such as 'I falled down')
- becoming familiar with books and letters, even though they can't read yet
- speak clearly enough to be understood by most people

***By the age of five years, a child is likely to be able to:***

- know opposites, such as high and low, wet and dry, big and little
- use sentences of about six words with correct grammar
- talk about events that are happening, have happened or might happen
- explain why something happens, such as 'mum's car stopped because it ran out of petrol'
- explain a series of instructions – for example, 'stand up, get your shoes on and wait by the door'
- say how he or she feels and share ideas
- become interested in writing, numbers, counting and reading
- speak clearly enough to be understood by anyone

**There is a natural degree of variation in what “typically” occurs with children’s language development.**



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## About language delay and language disorder

### What is language delay?

Just as there are two components of language development, there can be two types of language delay. These are **expressive language delay** and **receptive language delay**.

Children with expressive language delay will have difficulties with spoken language and, compared with other children, their vocabulary will tend to be smaller.

Traditionally, the earliest sign that a child has an expressive language delay is failure to develop first words at a typical age (for most children between 12 and 15 months). Although there is variation in when a child's first words may appear, concerns are raised if by two years of age a child has fewer than 50 words and no word combinations. Such children are termed a 'late talkers' and although some children may go on to develop language normally it is likely that some are displaying a language delay.

Children with *receptive language delay* have trouble understanding what is said to them. As children need to understand language before they can use it effectively, many children with a receptive language problem may also experience expressive language problems as well.

Language delay may be primary or secondary. Secondary delay occurs as a result of another difficulty experienced by a child (for example autism, hearing impairment, general developmental difficulties), while primary delay will not be able to be accounted for by any other condition.

### Prevalence and impact of language delay

At least 20 per cent of infants and toddlers across all socio-economic ranges have early language delays. Of these, in up to 60 per cent of these children the language delays will disappear without formal treatment between the ages of two and three years. Recent Australian research suggests that up to 25 per cent of parents of young children report concerns in expressive language, mostly for children in the three-to-four-year-old age group. These data are consistent with data collected in the United Kingdom.

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Language delay may impact on a many other aspects of development including school achievement, socialising with peers, family relationships, emotional wellbeing, and behaviour.

## Early indicators of language delay

While saying first words is one marker of language development, there is an increasing amount of research that suggests there may be other earlier markers of normal or delayed language development. Specifically, the research indicates that some communication behaviours observed before a child has reached 13 months can be potential markers of later expressive and receptive delays.

These early indicators of a language problem occur at the stage labelled 'intentional communication' (9-13 months) and include:

- **Emotion and use of eye gaze**
  - limited ability to show attention and emotion with eye gaze and facial expression
  - limited use of looking between people and objects
  - delay in following another person
- **Use of communication**
  - low rate of communicating gestures or vocalisations
  - limited range of ways of communicating, such as a limited ability for joint attention for very long (eg being read a book)
- **Use of gestures**
  - limited repertoire of conventional gestures
  - limited use of symbolic gestures, for example waving hand for goodbye
  - reliance on gestures and a limited use of vocalisations to communicate
- **Use of sounds**
  - limited number of consonants
  - immature syllable structure eg one syllable utterances (da)

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## What is language disorder?

Whether the problems are expressive or receptive, it can be difficult to distinguish between language *delay* and language *disorder*. In both cases language is slow to develop. Outlined below are symptoms that suggest a possible expressive or receptive language disorder.

The symptoms of an expressive language disorder may include:

- Frequently having trouble finding the right word
- Using the wrong words in sentences
- Not understanding the meaning of words
- Limited vocabulary
- Making grammatical mistakes and using poor sentence structure
- Relying on short, simple sentence construction
- Having difficulty retelling a story or relaying information

The symptoms of a receptive language disorder may include:

- Not appearing to listen when spoken to
- A lack of interest when stories are read
- Inability to understand complicated sentences
- Inability to follow verbal instructions
- Reliance on the use of gestures and other non-verbal clues to help understand
- Parroting words or phrases

It should be noted that only when children reach three years of age can they be formally diagnosed as having a language disorder. See the following section for tools that can be used to make a formal diagnosis of a delay or disorder.

**Parental concern about a child's language is considered a sufficient reason for parents to discuss their concerns with a professional.**