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SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DISORDERS

DEFINITION OF SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DISORDERS

Speech and language disorders refer to problems in communication and related areas such as oral motor function. These delays and disorders range from simple sound substitutions to the inability to understand or use language or use the oral-motor mechanism for functional speech and feeding. Some causes of speech and language disorders include hearing loss, neurological disorders, brain injury, mental retardation, drug abuse, physical impairments such as cleft lip or palate, and vocal abuse or misuse. Frequently, however, the cause is unknown.

INCIDENCE

More than one million of the students served in the public schools' special education programs in the 1998-99 school year were categorized as having a speech or language impairment. This estimate does not include children who have speech/language problems secondary to other conditions such as deafness. Language disorders may be related to other disabilities such as mental retardation, autism, or cerebral palsy. It is estimated that communication disorders (including speech, language, and hearing disorders) affect one of every 10 people in the United States.

CHARACTERISTICS

A child's communication is considered delayed when the child is noticeably behind his or her peers in the acquisition of speech and/or language skills. Sometimes a child will have greater receptive (understanding) than expressive (speaking) language skills, but this is not always the case.

Speech disorders refer to difficulties producing speech sounds or problems with voice quality. They might be characterized by an interruption in the flow or rhythm of speech, such as stuttering, which is called dysfluency. Speech disorders may be problems with the way sounds are formed, called articulation or phonological disorders, or they may be difficulties with the pitch, volume or quality of the voice. There may be a combination of several problems. People with speech disorders have trouble using some speech sounds, which can also be a symptom of a delay. They may say "see" when they mean "ski" or they may have trouble using other sounds like "l" or "r". Listeners may have trouble understanding what someone with a speech disorder is trying to say. People with voice disorders may have trouble with the way their voices sound.

A language disorder is an impairment in the ability to understand and/or use words in context, both verbally and nonverbally. Some characteristics of language disorders include improper use of words and their meanings, inability to express ideas, inappropriate grammatical patterns, reduced vocabulary and inability to follow directions. One or a combination of these characteristics may occur in children who are affected by language learning disabilities or developmental language delay. Children may hear or see a word but not be able to understand its meaning. They may have trouble getting others to understand what they are trying to communicate.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Because all communication disorders carry the potential to isolate individuals from their social and educational surroundings, it is essential to find appropriate timely intervention. 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 as expected. In this way an initial delay in speech and language or an initial speech pattern can become a disorder which can cause difficulties in learning. Because of the way the brain develops, it is easier to learn language and communication skills before the age of 5. When children have muscular disorders, hearing problems or developmental delays, their acquisition of speech, language and related skills is often affected.

Speech-language pathologists assist children who have communication disorders in various ways. They provide individual therapy for the child; consult with the child's teacher about the most effective ways to facilitate the child's communication in the class setting; and work closely with the family to develop goals and techniques for effective therapy in class and at home. Technology can help children whose physical conditions make communication difficult. The use of electronic communication systems allow nonspeaking people and people with severe physical disabilities to engage in the give and take of shared thought.

Vocabulary and concept growth continues during the years children are in school. Reading and writing are taught and, as students get older, the understanding and use of language becomes more complex. Communication skills are at the heart of the education experience. Speech and/or language therapy may continue throughout a student's school year either in the form of direct therapy or on a consultant basis. The speech-language pathologist may assist vocational teachers and counselors in establishing communication goals related to the work experiences of students and suggest strategies that are effective for the important transition from school to employment and adult life.

Communication has many components. All serve to increase the way people learn about the world around them, utilize knowledge and skills, and interact with colleagues, family and friends.

RESOURCES

Berkowitz, S. (1994). *The cleft palate story: A primer for parents of children with cleft lip and palate*. Chicago, IL: Quintessence. (Telephone: 1-800-621-0387.)

Cleft Palate Foundation. (1997). *For parents of newborn babies with cleft lip/cleft palate*. Chapel Hill, NC: Author. (Telephone: 1-800-242-5338. Also available online at: www.cleftline.org/cpf/cpfprm.html)

Eisenson, J. (1997). *Is my child's speech normal? (2nd ed.)*. Austin TX: Pro-Ed. (Telephone: 1-800-897-3202.)

Hamaguchi, P. M. (1995). *Childhood speech, language, & listening problems: What every parent should know*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. (Telephone: 1-800-225-5945.)

ORGANIZATIONS

Alliance for Technology Access
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E-Mail: atainfo@ataccess.org
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American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)
10801 Rockville Pike

Rockville, MD 20852
301-897-5700 (Voice or TT)
800-638-8255
E-mail: actioncenter@asha.org
Web: www.asha.org

Childhood Apraxia of Speech Association of North America (CASANA)
123 Eisele Road
Cheswick, PA 15024
(412) 767-6589
E-mail: helpdesk@apraxia.org
Web: www.apraxia-kids.org

Cleft Palate Foundation
104 South Estes Drive, Suite 204
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(919) 933-9044
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Division for Children with Communication Disorders
c/o Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)
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Easter Seals--National Office
230 West Monroe Street, Suite 1800
Chicago, IL 60606
312-726-6200
312-726-4258 (TDD)
800-221-6827 (For information about services for children and youth.)
E-mail: info@easter-seals.org
Web: www.easter-seals.org

Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA)
4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
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