

## Expressive language disorder

Expressive language disorder means a child has difficulty with verbal and written expression. Language can either be delayed or disordered or a combination of the two.

The child generally has difficulties with spoken language. Their vocabulary (the number of words they know and say) tends to be smaller and more basic compared with other children of the same age.

They are usually also below the average level for their age in:

- Putting words and sentences together to formulate thoughts
- Recalling words
- Using language appropriately in a variety of settings with different people (for example, at home, in school, with parents and teachers).

### Children all develop at different rates

Many children seem slow in the early stages of learning language and some continue to have problems with language and expression. Examples of expressive language disorder are:

- A seven year old who cannot join sentences with words like 'and', 'but' or 'if'
- A three year old who uses only two words per utterance (sentence).

### Delayed or disordered types

Expressive language disorder can present in two forms, delayed or disordered language. These categories can overlap and it can be difficult to differentiate between the two.

- **Delayed** – is when a child is slow to develop language but the usual sequence, or pattern of development, is normal.
- **Disordered** – is when language is slow to develop and the sequence of development and pattern of grammatical errors is different to that normally expected.

### Symptoms

Symptoms differ from one child to the next and depend on the child's age and the severity of the disorder. Symptoms can include:

- Frequently having trouble finding the right word
- Having a limited and basic vocabulary
- Using non-specific vocabulary such as 'this' or 'thing'
- Using the wrong words in sentences or confusing meaning in sentences
- Making grammatical mistakes, leaving off words (such as helper verbs) and using poor sentence structure
- Relying on short, simple sentence construction
- Using noticeably less words and sentences than children of a similar age
- Relying on stock standard phrases and limited content in speech
- Repeating (or 'echoing') a speaker's utterance
- Inability to 'come to the point' or talking in circles
- Problems with retelling a story or relaying information
- Inability to start or hold a conversation
- Difficulty with oral and written work and school assignments in older children.

### Cause is not always known

For many children the cause of expressive language disorder is not known. For other children, the expressive language disorder is associated with known developmental difficulties or impairments (for example, Down syndrome, autism or hearing loss).

Expressive language disorder can be developmental or acquired. Acquired occurs after a period of normal development; it can be the result of trauma or a medical condition. Research suggests that in some cases expressive language disorder is a genetic disorder (found frequently in more than one family member and across generations).

### **Diagnosis**

If your child is having difficulties with speaking or expressive language, you should have his or her language skills assessed by a speech pathologist (speech therapist). You should not delay an assessment because your child may miss many months of important therapy.

Speech pathologists perform specific assessments in order to find out which areas of language appear to be difficult for your child. The way such assessments are conducted is not stressful for the child, and parents are usually present during these consultation times.

Other assessments that speech pathologists may recommend for further testing include:

- Complete hearing and auditory processing tests
- Tests for learning difficulties
- Assessments of cognitive function (thinking and intelligence).

### **Treatment**

Treatment options depend on the degree of severity of the disorder. Treatment may include:

- Group sessions with a speech pathologist
- Individual therapy sessions with a speech pathologist
- School-based language intervention programs
- Assistance from special education teachers
- Teacher's aide support for children with severe language disorders
- Speech pathology sessions combined with home programs that parents can use with their child.

### **Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Your maternal and child health nurse
- Speech pathologist
- Speech Pathology Australia Tel. (03) 9642 4899

### **Things to remember**

- Expressive language disorder means a child has difficulty with verbal and written expression.
- The cause of expressive language disorder is often unknown.
- Treatment depends on the severity but it includes therapy with a speech pathologist.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

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