

CHILDREN WITH SPECIFIC LANGUAGE DISORDERS

Do you have a child in your class who never follows your instructions, speaks in a babyish manner, using few words, is withdrawn or appears to be socially inept? Or a child who appeared to do so well in Kindergarten and in Years 1 to 3, in literacy, then start to fall behind for no apparent reason? Have you ever wondered why? It's possible that these children may have a Specific Language Impairment (SLI).

Language is a resource that enables us to make meaning of the world we live in and function successfully within it. It is a culturally based meaning-making system, comprised of the interconnected aspects of form, content, and use; all of which need to be operating effectively for meaning to be maintained (Bloom & Lahey, 1978). Children with specific language impairments have language difficulties with one or several of these aspects, which can significantly affect their learning. These difficulties can also impact on and influence children socially and behaviourally. This article will describe the characteristics of a range of specific language impairments that may be observed in primary school-aged children, in the domains of phonology, syntax and morphology, semantics and pragmatics. It will also describe the relationships between language difficulties and learning problems that these children can experience.

Although there is still considerable controversy regarding the term most appropriate to define language disorders with terms changing over time to reflect changes in how language disorders have been conceptualised (Paul, 2007), recently, two broad groups of children with language difficulties have been identified - those with primary language difficulties and those with secondary language difficulties (Tomblin, Zhang, Buckwalter & O'Brien, 2003). Children with primary language difficulties are developmentally typical yet present with a delayed development in language comprehension and/or production with an unknown etiology (van Weerdenburg, Verhoeven & van Balkom, 2006; Schuele & Hadley, 1999; Dockrell, Lindsay, Connelly, and Mackie, 2007). Children with secondary language disorders have language difficulties associated with, or predicted by cognitive, sensory, biological, neurological or socio-emotional deficits, which include autism, hearing impairment or brain damage (Shuele & Hadley, 1999).

Research in this area indicates that it's likely that children with SLI are severely underdiagnosed in the community and are the hidden population of children with special needs, due to the controversy associated with defining SLIs and the heterogeneous nature of this group of children (Toppelberg and Shapiro, 2000; Dockrell and Lindsay, 2001; Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2000). They don't necessarily have obvious difficulties, but struggle at school, especially as literate language becomes highly decontextualised with meaning coming from text alone (Paul, 2007). Studies have indicated that the co-occurrence of SLI and learning difficulties/social problems is as high as 60% (Paul, 2007; McArthur, Hogben, Edwards, Heath & Mengler, 2000).

The DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) has estimated that 6-8% of children have some form of SLI (Willinger, Brunner, Diendorfer-Radner, Sams, Sirsch & Eisenwort, 2003). Tomblin, Records, Buckwater, Zhang, Smith & O'Brien's (1997) research estimated a prevalence rate for SLI of 7.4% for monolingual English-speaking kindergarten children. Given this, it's possible that in a class of 30 students, one or two children may have SLIs, or more depending on the cultural and socioeconomic makeup of the class.

Prior to briefly describing the characteristics of a range of SLIs that may be observed in primary school-aged children, a short expos  on the three aspects of language (as proposed by Bloom & Lahey, 1978) - form, use and context is required. The aspect of 'form' predominantly refers to phonology, syntax and morphology. The aspect of 'content' refers to the semantic elements of language and includes knowledge of objects and events and knowledge of vocabulary. The 'Use' aspect refers to the domain of pragmatics, which encompasses the functions of language, context and the rules for social communication (Paul, 2007).

Characteristics and Learning Difficulties

Children with SLI often have trouble learning to read, write and spell (and across other areas of the curriculum that require these skills) due to subtle underlying phonological deficits such as complex phonological production, phonological awareness and phonological memory and retrieval, deficits in comprehending complex syntax such as sentences containing relative clauses, passive voice or negation (Kuder, 1997; Nation, Clark, Marshall and Durand, 2004) and morphological difficulties. Syntactic errors are more common in writing than spontaneous speech with their writing often seeming 'simple' or immature with few verbs or adjectives. Many of their sentences appear long as few complex sentence forms are used to condense their expression.

Semantic difficulties include having small vocabularies, which are restricted to short, high-frequency words (Kuder, 1997), a restricted knowledge of word meanings and an over-reliance on non-specific words such as 'thing' or 'stuff' (Paul, 2007). Beyond the word level, these children often have difficulties understanding complex oral directions, understanding figurative language such as metaphors, and producing and retelling narratives. They also can have difficulties in integrating meaning across sentences (Kuder, 1997; Paul, 2007). Pragmatic difficulties include limited oral conversation, which tends to be brief, unelaborated, and dysfluent with numerous false starts and phrases and words often repeated. Other difficulties include initiating and sustaining conversations, reduced sensitivity to the needs of their listeners, poor turn taking (often interrupting other speakers) and providing inappropriate levels of content (Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 1999). Children with pragmatic language impairments use limited eye contact when talking, limited nonverbal cues and have trouble adjusting their speech to different social contexts (Paul, 2007; Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 1999).

These children often have difficulties in comprehending and producing the more formal literate forms of language (such as narrative, exposition and persuasive text types) because of their highly decontextualised nature, the comprehension of which lies wholly within the text itself (Paul, 2007; Catts, Adlof & Ellis Weismer, 2006). Difficulties in following classroom procedures and conventions, clarifying misunderstandings and unclear messages can impair their ability to learn even though these difficulties may not be strictly defined as learning difficulties.

Children with pragmatic language difficulties can “frequently experience behavioural difficulties of an emotional, social and anti-social nature as a secondary result of their primary language difficulties” (Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2000, pp. 105-106; Lindsay, Dockrell, Letchford, Mackie, 2002). Their social skills are comparatively poor and they are often less accepted socially. They have difficulties developing reciprocal friendships and being included in social groups (Paul, 2007). These social difficulties can manifest internally or externally (Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2004). Internal difficulties include behaviours such as withdrawing socially, playing alone and less pro-social interactions, which can lead to depression, anxiety, loneliness, social isolation and low self-esteem (Lindsay, Dockrell, Letchford, Mackie, 2002). External difficulties include anti-social behaviours such as aggression, oppositional behaviour, hyperactivity and conduct problems (Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2004; Paul, 2007). Studies (Records, Tomblin & Freese, 1992; Reed, 2005) have indicated that the negative consequences associated with SLI could persist into adulthood.

Conclusion

The children in your class that are withdrawn, have difficulty following instructions, struggle socially, write with a minimum of verbs and suddenly seem to struggle with their work may have a specific language impairment. They might not just be being ‘difficult’, sullen, disinterested or disengaged or ‘not very bright’.

It has been acknowledged that these children are a heterogenous group in that the specific nature of their impairment resides within one or more of the phonological, syntactic and morphological, semantic and pragmatic domains within the aspects of form, content and use of a language system. The learning difficulties associated with such impairments are found across the curriculum as any curriculum area that requires reading, writing, comprehension and social interaction can be affected if a child has a specific language disorder within one or more of these aspects

There are a number of assessment methods that can be used once a child is suspected of having a language disorder. However, the issues of assessment and intervention are matters for another article.

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