

CHILDREN WITH SPECIFIC LANGUAGE DISORDERS

Language is a resource that enables us to make meaning of the world we live in and function successfully within it. Children with specific language impairments have language difficulties with one or several of the aspects of form, content, and use, which can significantly affect their learning. These difficulties can also impact on and influence children socially and behaviourally. Children with primary language difficulties are developmentally typical yet present with a delayed development in language comprehension and/or production with an unknown cause (van Weerdenburg, Verhoeven & van Balkom, 2006; Dockrell, Lindsay, Connelly, and Mackie, 2007).

Research 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 (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). 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.

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 common in writing with it often seeming 'simple' or immature with few verbs or adjectives. Many of their sentences are long with few complex sentence forms used to condense expression.

Semantic difficulties include 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 its highly decontextualised nature, its comprehension lying wholly within the text itself (Paul, 2007). 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). 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.

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