

Module 3: Identification of Language Disorder

Introduction

In Module 1 we discussed speech, language and communication, while in Module 2 we began to develop an understanding of Language Disorder. It is recommended that you complete both of these modules before continuing.

In this module, we will further explore Language Disorder by discussing how students may present. We will outline the process from identification through to diagnosis and provide information about how Language Disorder impacts schooling.

What is language?

To refresh your memory, there are five components of language: Semantics, Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Pragmatics. Semantics is the meaning of words and combinations of words in a language; Phonology is how speech sounds are combined and used; Morphology governs how words go together; Syntax is how words are combined to form sentences; and Pragmatics are the rules of how language is used in social situations, for example, greetings. A child with Language Disorder will struggle with understanding and using one or all the five components.

As mentioned in Module 2, we will be using the broad term Language Disorder which refers to language difficulties that have a poor prognosis and severe enough to interfere with daily life. Language Disorder affects approximately 2 students in the average classroom. The causes of Language Disorder are unknown, however there are some contributing factors, for example, family history, gender, socioeconomic status, parental education and birth complications.

Without intervention, a student with Language Disorder will fall further and further behind their peers as each school year passes. This may result in the student experiencing mental health issues, social isolation and classroom exclusion.

How does Language Disorder present?

No two students with Language Disorder will present the same way, however there are few common signs of Language Disorder:

- Producing short, simple sentences due to a reduced vocabulary;
- Poor comprehension of new words, instructions and following directions;
- Using grammatically incorrect sentences;
- Struggling to understand complex sentences with abstract language or concepts;
- Difficulties sequencing stories and tasks;
- Challenges making and maintaining friendships.

How does Language Disorder affect classroom participation?

School can be a very challenging place for students with Language Disorder. The pace of learning and quantity of work can be difficult when struggling to understand and use language. Nearly all tasks within a classroom rely on language, whether it is reading, handwriting, mathematics, art or physical education. At all times of the school day, a student with Language Disorder will be under increased demand to participate compared with their peers.

This can result in a range of challenges including:

- Low confidence and self esteem

Task avoidance

Behavioural difficulties
Academic standards below age expectancy
Slow handwriting output
Poor organisational skills
Emotional regulation difficulties
Difficulties interacting with peers
Fatigue and resistance doing homework after school

Jenny

To help prepare you prepare for identifying students with Language Disorder in your classroom, we would like to introduce you to Jenny.
Jenny is in Year 2 and her family are concerned about her reading and speech development. When speaking, Jenny uses incorrect grammar and struggles to stay on topic. She leaves out information and it can be difficult to work out what she is saying. Jenny is easily distracted in class and frequently getting in trouble with her teacher. In the playground Jenny is usually alone, as she can be very clumsy when playing. Jenny is presenting with some language difficulties but what is your next step?

Flowchart for Language Assessment

The following section will step you through a recommended diagnostic process for students with Language Disorder. It is important to remember that some processes may vary depending on local, state or federal government requirements in your area. This process provides a useful guide based on current research.

Referring for Evaluation

Generally teachers and parents will be the first people to notice when a child is not developing language as expected. However students with Language Disorder can still go unidentified, because many people aren't familiar with typical language development. To find out more about language development and typical age ranges, please see our SALDA handout at the end of the module. The following signs should be considered when referring a student for evaluation including:

Concerns about speech, language or communication

Behavioral or psychiatric difficulties

Extreme departures from typical development in children under 5 years of age OR

Persistent problems with understanding and using language in children over 5 years of age

A student presenting with one or more of these signs has an increased risk of language difficulties and should be considered for referral to a speech pathologist.

When thinking back to Jenny, she presented with many signs of a potential Language Disorder, such as her parents reporting concerns, behavioural difficulties in class and challenges understanding and using language. These signs suggest further investigation and assessment is warranted.

Assessment of speech, language and communication

While the speech pathologist will take the lead on investigating the cause for the referral, teachers, parents and other key stakeholders can greatly assist. They will be involved in providing an important snapshot of the student's ability at this point in time and can include:

Case history

Interviews or questionnaires

Direct observation of the student

Reviewing work samples and report cards and

Understanding the current adjustments in the school context.

It is helpful to consider other influences, which may be impacting on the student's development, such as whether they speak multiple languages. Speech pathologists can collate this information together to select appropriate standardised and non-standardised assessments to measure speech and language development. It is important to note communication abilities are continuous and the distinctions between impaired or non-impaired language may include shades of grey. All assessment data helps determine the needs of the student to support diagnosis and future intervention. Once it has been determined through the assessment process the student has language difficulties resulting in a poor prognosis, a diagnosis of Language Disorder can be made.

When thinking back to Jenny, what information and examples can you provide to assist with the assessment process? A great starting point would be to have a conversation with Jenny's parents. It would be helpful to discuss their concerns and ask questions about the home environment. Find out if there is a family history of learning differences and if Jenny has had any previous assessments or intervention. Speak to her previous teachers, ask if adjustments were made within the classroom and how Jenny responded. Consider reviewing her previous report cards and collecting samples of her work. The learning support staff can help you implement support strategies even prior to the student completing a formal assessment. All of this information will be extremely helpful for pursuing an assessment process with the speech pathologist.

Identification of additional factors

Language Disorder often coincides with other difficulties in motor skills, attention, reading, social interaction and behavior. It is rare for students to only present with difficulties understanding and using language. Other information may be needed to identify additional factors or associated biomedical conditions such as Autism, Intellectual Disability and Cerebral Palsy. Language Disorder can co-occur with other conditions, such as autism, intellectual disability, and cerebral palsy. Developmental language disorder is recommended to be used for cases of language disorder with no other co-occurring conditions. Other communication difficulties can also co-occur with Language Disorder. When thinking back to Jenny you may remember she was observed to be clumsy on the playground and had difficulties with reading. This information can assist in accurately referring to other professionals, such as occupational therapists, psychologists and specialist teachers.

Supporting Jenny

Following the diagnostic process, Jenny was identified as having a Language Disorder and was referred to an occupational therapist to assess her motor skills. But what do you do now? The report will often include recommendations, which can be implemented in the classroom. Speech therapy may also be recommended to support the development of specific language skills.

When thinking back to Jenny, you can now see how her language difficulties impact her in class. She needs support understanding prepositions and concepts such as first, second

and third, which is why she often gets in trouble when lining up. The speech pathologist begins therapy targeting grammar to support Jenny to formulate correct sentence structures. This includes a variety of vocabulary Jenny is learning at school to help her understand these concepts. By collaborating with the speech pathologist and other key stakeholders, educational adjustments can be integrated to ensure an inclusive classroom environment. For more information on classroom strategies, please complete Module 5. While this module has focused on a primary school aged student, Language Disorder can be identified at any stage of life. Referral for evaluation should occur as soon as signs of Language Disorder are identified. Students with Language Disorder can benefit from intervention at every age.

Reflection

At this stage of the training I invite you to take a minute to reflect. Consider the content covered so far. What are the signs of Language Disorder you might observe in students? How can you contribute to the diagnostic process? How will diagnosis enable positive outcomes for your student in the classroom?
When you're ready to move on click the next button.

Conclusion

We hope that you have a greater understanding of how to identify students with Language Disorder in your classroom, as well as the diagnostic process.
For more information on the content covered in this module please view the following handouts.
We value your feedback so please complete the following survey to help us improve future learning experiences.
This project was funded by the Queensland governments non state special needs organisations program