



Developmental Language Disorder

What is a Developmental Language Disorder?

Most of us learn language without any problems. It is taken for granted that every child will do so. For some children however, learning to understand and use language does not come naturally. A diagnosis of **developmental language disorder (DLD)** is made when a child fails to learn language in the typical way¹.

¹ It is important to note that children learn language at different rates and that there are considerable changes to a child's language profile in the early years. If difficulties have not resolved by five years, however, we know that they are more likely to persist.

Important points about DLD

- DLD is **not caused by a medical condition** e.g. hearing impairment or brain injury.
- A language disorder **can affect the person throughout their lives.**
- Each child with DLD may have **different needs:**
 - Some struggle to understand *and* use language. Others struggle only in using language
 - Some have problem learning grammar; others struggle to learn new words
 - For some children, all aspects of language and communication development can be impaired.
- DLD is sometimes described as an **'invisible' disability** because:
 - you cannot tell if someone has DLD by looking at them
 - many children who have DLD are very good at hiding their difficulties
- Many children with DLD go unidentified in school

What might you notice about a child with DLD?

Preschool children with DLD might:

- Use single words rather than sentences when talking.
- Make mistakes when pronouncing words and sounds
- Not follow instructions
- Not be able to retell a story with all of the information included

Primary school children with DLD might:

- Avoid putting their hand up in class
- Have poor listening skills
- Not be able to contribute verbally in class.
- Struggle to learn to read
- Try to opt out of social situations
- Homework might be a battle

At secondary school most learning is done through talking and reading so without help young people with DLD can:

- Struggle to keep up with the work
- Be unhappy in and/or have emotional/behavioural problems
- Refuse to go to school
- May not have many friends.

What should I do if I think my child has DLD?

Children use language for lots of different reasons like:

- Asking questions
- Guessing what might happen
- Describing events
- Negotiating about rules
- Speaking up for themselves and telling their side of the story

If your child is **not using language for these reasons**, there **may be a language problem** that needs further investigation.

If you think your child **may have a language disorder**, you need **to arrange a speech and language therapy assessment** by a qualified speech and language therapist (SLT).

Where can I find further information about DLD?

www.iaslt.ie

<https://www.naplic.org.uk/>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/RALLIcampaign>

www.radld.org

How is a child diagnosed with DLD?

Making a **diagnosis of DLD is complex**. The SLT may need to see your child more than once and in different settings (i.e. home, clinic, school).

The SLT will need to use a combination of different approaches when making a diagnosis. These will be different for every child and might include:

- asking you and others who know the child well to fill in a questionnaire
- observing your child in school
- meetings with the class teacher
- doing some tests with your child
- working with your child for a while to understand how they learn language

If my child is diagnosed with DLD, what help will they need?

Approaches to treatment vary depending on the age of the child.

For **very young children**, parents can learn to interact in specific ways with their child to help support their language development through play. This can involve using video feedback techniques to practise strategies.

Preschool children can also be seen in groups run by an SLT and/or nursery teacher where language and communication skills are targeted.

The **school years** can be very challenging for children and young people with DLD. This is because language is not just a means of communication in school but children must learn using language.

For this reason, it is **not enough** for the SLT to just focus on **improving the child's language skills**. They must also work closely with the teacher to:

- Support the child to learn in class
- Help to adapt the way lessons are planned and delivered
- Think about ways the child can be supported to learn to read/spell in class
- Support the child to understand concepts linked to different subjects in school like maths, history and science

The SLT and education staff may also need to consider whether the young person with DLD needs certain exemptions like learning a second language and/or certain adjustments such as having a reader or a scribe in exams.