

Speech/Language Impairment

DEFINITION

IDEA defines a speech or language impairment as a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DISORDERS WHICH AFFECT SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Children may experience one or more of the following disorders:

- Speech sound disorders - difficulty pronouncing sounds
- Language disorders - difficulty understanding what they hear as well as expressing themselves with words
- Cognitive-communication disorders - difficulty with thinking skills including perception, memory, awareness, reasoning, judgment, intellect and imagination
- Stuttering (fluency) disorders - interruption of the flow of speech that may include hesitations, repetitions, prolongations of sounds or words
- Voice disorders - quality of voice that may include hoarseness, nasality, volume (too loud or soft)

INCIDENCE

- According to The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) nearly 1 in 12 children ages 3-17 has a disorder related to voice, speech, language or swallowing.
- Children classified with speech or language impairments make up 18.6% of all students ages 6-21 served under IDEA, and represent 1.65% of the school-age population (Mastropieri & Scuggs, 2007).
- Speech-Language Impairment is the second largest disability category in West Virginia with nearly 5 percent of enrolled students identified.
- Approximately 28 percent of students with disabilities in WV receive special education services for speech-language impairments (IDEA 2012 Child Count Data).

HOW SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DISORDERS AFFECT SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Children with communication disorders frequently do not perform at grade level. They may struggle with reading, have difficulty understanding and expressing language, misunderstand social cues, avoid attending school, show poor judgment and have difficulty with tests.

Difficulty in learning to listen, speak, read or write can result from problems in language development. Problems can occur in the production, comprehension, and awareness of language, sounds, syllables, words, sentences, and conversation. Individuals with reading and writing problems also may have trouble using language to communicate, think and learn.

POSSIBLE CAUSES

Sometimes speech-language disorders do not have a specific cause. Children may just learn the incorrect way to produce a sound or their language skills may be delayed because of limited exposure to vocabulary or appropriate language models; however, many speech-language disorders have specific causes, such as:

- Hearing loss
- Neurological disorders
- Muscular disorders
- Developmental delays
- Brain injury
- Intellectual disability
- Autism
- Cerebral palsy
- Prenatal drug exposure
- Voice abuse or misuse
- Vocal nodules
- Physical impairments - cleft lip or palate, paralysis of the vocal cords
- Family history of speech or language disorders
- Premature birth
- Low birth-weight
- Syndromes, like Down syndrome or Fragile X syndrome
- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder
- Failure to thrive

Speech/Language Impairment

POSSIBLE SIGNS AND CHARACTERISTICS

- Speech and/or language skills that are noticeably in error
- Speech and/or language skills that are different from student's peers
- Speech sound errors (articulation), including omissions, substitutions or distortions of sounds
- Patterns of speech sound errors (phonological disorders)
- Improper use of words and their meanings
- Inability to express ideas
- Inappropriate grammatical patterns
- Reduced or limited vocabulary
- Inability to follow directions
- Possible low self-esteem or self-concept
- Inadequate social skills
- Difficulties in language processing
- Difficulties with vocabulary, sight words, decoding and reading comprehension
- Difficulties with abstract ideas
- Difficulty writing down thoughts
- Stuttering or interruptions in the flow or rhythm of speech, including abnormal rate of speaking, speech interruptions and repetition of sounds, words, phrases or sentences, which interfere with effective communication
- Partial or total loss of the voice
- Difficulties in the pitch, volume, or quality of the voice

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO AT HOME

Talk with your child to help them learn new words or language skills.

- Read to or with your child as much as possible. While reading or talking, encourage your child to speak clearly.
- Point out words you see. Talk about what you see.
- Expand upon what your child says.
- Listen and respond when your child talks.
- Encourage your child to ask you questions.
- Give your child time to answer questions.
- Set limits for watching TV and using electronic media.
- Ask the SLP how you can help at home. Practice "speech homework" consistently.

TEACHING TIPS/INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

There are many powerful things that general and special education teachers can do in class to support the learning of students with speech and language impairments:

- Be aware of the student's speech and/or language disorder by consulting with the SLP.
- Remember that the student needs to practice targeted speech and language skills in all settings throughout the day in order to develop and generalize them beyond the SLP therapy room.
- Ask the SLP how best to reinforce the individual student's speech and/or language skills in the classroom.
- Provide the SLP with information about the student's performance in academic areas or share any concerns you may have about the student's performance.
- Provide classroom information to the SLP, such as upcoming themes, chapters, assignments, which the SLP can use in the student's therapy sessions.
- Make sure that students receive accommodations listed in the IEPs.
- Always presume competence.
- Do not underestimate the student's intelligence or physical ability. Just because the student cannot speak clearly does not mean he does not understand what you are saying and cannot learn.
- Divide academic goals into small units (scaffolding) utilizing the same theme.
- Be aware of the complexity of the language you use while giving instructions or explaining concepts. You may need to say things in a different way or simplify instructions if the student does not appear to understand.
- Some students may need visual supports, such as written directions or written explanations because their auditory skills are a relative weakness.
- Speak clearly and at a reasonable rate.
- Offer many social interaction opportunities.
- If needed, find alternative ways for the student to participate in classroom activities, by modifying the activities and/or including the use of AAC and/or sign language.