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Language Disabilities in School Age Children

Many children develop adequate speech skills but continue to have trouble expressing or understanding language. As the child reaches school age, the difficulty may begin to interfere with reading, writing and learning of new material. When should a parent or educator become concerned?

Children with a history of language delay (late talkers) are at higher risk for a later diagnosis of Specific Language Impairment (SLI). A child with SLI has normal nonverbal intelligence, hearing and motor development, their difficulty is specific to language. SLI affects both comprehension and expression of language. Children with a history of delayed onset of speech and language or language delays that persist beyond the end of a child's fourth year of age are considered to be at higher risk for a later diagnosis of SLI.

Children with SLI may speak in shorter sentences than their same aged peers. They may use nonspecific words (thing, stuff, it) so it may be difficult to understand what they are talking about. Their speech may lack grammatical markers, such as tense, plural and possessive markers and they may mix up pronouns (he/she, him/his) beyond the developmentally appropriate age. They may have trouble telling a story in a sequential and organized manner. Comprehension problems include difficulty understanding directional terms, prepositions (under, inside, between) and grammatical markers. Sometimes these children appear to be inattentive as they don't seem to understand or remember what you tell them. They may have trouble paying attention and following along in a group. It is important to rule out language based learning problems prior to diagnosing attention deficit disorders in children.

Often SLI isn't readily apparent until a child enters grade school. As demands on language increase in an academic setting, children begin to have trouble keeping up with their peers. Difficulty with language can impact self esteem, social development and classroom behavior.

As children with language impairments get older, they may be re-labeled as having a language based learning disability. It is important to identify children at risk for learning disabilities early so they can get the help and accommodations they need to maximize their academic success. Early intervention should begin in preschool to help prepare your child in meeting the demands of an academic environment. A Speech Language Pathologist is skilled in assessing all aspects of language development and can provide recommendations for both home and school.

Note: This article serves as a general guideline for parents regarding language development only. Please contact us if you have any additional questions about your child's speech or language development.