

## Childhood Language Disorders

### **What is a Childhood Language Disorder?**

Language can be divided into two areas: receptive language (what a child understands) and expressive language (how a child uses language to communicate). Language disorders can impact either or both areas. Signs and symptoms of a childhood language disorders may include:

- Receptive Language Difficulties:
  - Understanding and following directions
  - Answering “yes/no” and “wh-” questions
  - Identifying objects and pictures
  - Understanding functions of objects
  - Demonstrating eye contact and turn-taking with others
- Expressive Language Difficulties:
  - Limited vocabulary/difficulty naming objects and actions
  - Using gestures
  - Using language for a variety of reasons (requesting, labeling, asking for help, etc.)
  - Combining words into phrases or sentences
  - Using correct grammar (pronouns, verb tenses, plurals, etc.)
  - Asking questions
  - Knowing how to start a conversation and keep it going
- Early Reading and Writing Difficulties:
  - Learning rhyming words, identifying words that begin with the same sound, and counting syllables in words
  - Holding a book right side up
  - Attending to a book and turning pages
  - Telling a story with a beginning, middle, and end
  - Recognizing and naming letters and numbers
  - Learning the alphabet

### **How Do We Evaluate Childhood Language?**

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) use formal and informal tests to evaluate childhood language. They might use a combination of standardized tests, play-based activities, and parent interviews to see if a child’s language skills are at age-appropriate levels. SLPs

evaluate play skills as well as language. (For more information on this topic, please see our handout “Language and Play”.) SLPs will look at the following skills during the evaluation:

- Receptive Language:
  - Following spoken directions, with and without the use of gestures
  - Identifying common objects or pictures of objects when they are named
  - Identifying colors, numbers, and letters
  - Demonstrating eye contact, responding to name, and turn-taking in play/conversation
- Expressive Language:
  - Getting wants and needs met at home and school
  - Naming common objects and actions
  - Using age-appropriate sounds
  - Asking and answering questions
  - Combining two or more words into phrases and sentences
  - Using age-appropriate grammar
- Early Reading and Writing:
  - Recognizing familiar signs and logos (e.g., Target, McDonald’s)
  - Identifying and making rhymes
  - Attending to books and talking about pictures in books
  - Trying to write letters and numbers

### **How Do We Treat Childhood Language Disorders?**

When a child is young, the most important people in his or her life are parents, teachers, and other caregivers. SLPs focus on teaching adults in the child’s life how to communicate with the child, and how to encourage the child to use language. SLPs also see the child for therapy sessions focused on the difficulties found during the evaluation. SLPs use play to work on the child’s language goals. Some examples of using play to facilitate language include:

- Playing with a barn and modeling simple phrases for the child to imitate (e.g., “open door”, “muddy pig”, “bye-bye, cow”).
- Pretending to have a tea party and having the child request items he or she wants.
- Playing “Simon Says” to focus on following directions.
- Reading books and having the child identify pictures of familiar objects and actions.
- Modeling language and expanding on what the child says.
- Taking turns during simple games such as driving a train on a track or stacking blocks.



- Modeling correct grammar (pronouns, verb tenses, etc.) while playing with a dollhouse.

#### References

“Preschool Language Disorders” by The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association:  
<http://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/Preschool-Language-Disorders/>

“Your Preschool Child’s Speech and Language Development” by Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services:  
[http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/earlychildhood/speechlanguage/brochure\\_preschool.aspx](http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/earlychildhood/speechlanguage/brochure_preschool.aspx)