# Developmental language disorder (DLD)

## What is developmental language disorder?

**Developmental language disorder (DLD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects how people understand and use language. It can affect both receptive language (understanding what others say) and expressive language (using language to communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings).**

DLD has no single known cause but is thought to result from a combination of biological, genetic and environmental factors. It is recognised internationally through the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11).

DLD was previously known as specific language impairment (SLI). Although the terminology has changed, the condition remains the same, and earlier research continues to inform our understanding of DLD.

Speech and language therapists have a crucial role in identifying, diagnosing and supporting children, young people and adults with DLD throughout their lives.

## DLD in numbers

**DLD is common: 1 in 14 children has DLD**

Approximately 7.6.% of children – around two children in every classroom of 30 – have DLD.[1]

DLD is more common than many better-known neurodevelopmental conditions and is often described as the most common neurodevelopmental condition you have never heard of.[2,3]

A further 2.3% of children have a language disorder associated with a biomedical condition such as hearing impairment, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, acquired brain injury, or learning disability.[1] This means that nearly 1 in 10 children has a language disorder.

## DLD is a hidden disability

Language difficulties are not always visible. Children and young people with DLD may appear inattentive, withdrawn, anxious or behaviourally challenging when the underlying difficulty is understanding and using language.[4]

## How DLD may affect language and communication

**People with DLD may experience difficulties with:**

- understanding spoken language
- following instructions
- learning and using vocabulary
- expressing thoughts and ideas
- finding the right words
- understanding abstract or figurative language
- remembering and processing verbal information
- organising and sequencing information
- participating in conversations and social interactions
- reading comprehension and written language.

DLD affects every individual differently and difficulties may change over time.

# The impact of DLD

Without appropriate support, DLD can affect many aspects of life.

## Education

**Children and young people with DLD are:**

- six times more likely to experience reading difficulties[5]
- six times more likely to experience spelling difficulties[5]
- four times more likely to experience difficulties in mathematics[5]
- 12 times more likely to experience difficulties across all three areas in reading, spelling and mathematics[5]
- more likely to leave education earlier than their peers[6]
- less likely to progress to further and higher education.[6]

## Mental health and wellbeing

People with DLD are more likely to experience anxiety, reduced confidence, low self-esteem, and difficulties forming and maintaining relationships.[7,8,9]

## Employment and adult life

DLD is a lifelong condition. Without appropriate support, it can affect educational progression, employment opportunities, workplace communication, and independent living.[6]

## The role of speech and language therapists

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) are professionals with specialist expertise in speech, language and communication.

**SLTs support people with DLD by:**

- identifying and diagnosing DLD
- assessing language skills
- delivering direct and indirect interventions
- supporting families, educators and employers
- developing strategies and reasonable adjustments
- supporting participation in education, employment and everyday life.

The aim of speech and language therapy is to help people with DLD achieve their communication potential and reduce the impact of language difficulties on their lives.

**DLD can affect many aspects of daily life, including education. This young person's experience highlights the challenges that language difficulties can create.**

### Young person's story

'Living with DLD is different because I often need language explained or reworded. In lessons, my teaching assistant helps me understand what the questions are asking and explains difficult vocabulary. Without that support, it can be hard to show what I know.

'During my mock exams, I didn't have the same level of language support that I normally use in class. I found the questions difficult to understand and my grades were lower than I expected. It felt like the exams were testing my language difficulties rather than my knowledge.

'I want to go to college and have a successful future. Like any other young person, I want the opportunity to show what I can do and achieve the grades I am capable of.'

*Young person with DLD.*

## Why early identification, intervention and support matter

Early identification and support can significantly improve outcomes.

**When DLD is recognised and supported:**

- communication skills can be strengthened
- barriers to learning can be reduced
- confidence and wellbeing can improve
- participation in education, employment and community life can increase.

Every child, young person and adult with DLD deserves access to the support they need to achieve their potential.

## Key messages

- Nearly 1 in 10 children has a language disorder, and the largest subgroup of these have DLD.
- DLD is a common, lifelong neurodevelopmental condition: around two children in every classroom have DLD.
- DLD affects understanding and use of language.
- DLD is often hidden and misunderstood.
- DLD can affect education, wellbeing, relationships and employment.
- Speech and language therapists play a central role in identification, diagnosis and support.
- Early identification and intervention improve outcomes.
- DLD can have a significant impact on learning, literacy, academic progress and educational attainment, as well as wellbeing, relationships and employment.

## References


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