

## Specific language impairment

---

### What is specific language impairment?

This is one of three terms often used to mean the same thing. The others are **developmental language delay** and **developmental language disorder**. These second and third terms refer to different groups of children, but **specific language impairment** refers to all children with marked problems in their grasp of spoken language.

**Specific language impairment** (SLI) is the term used most widely. It does not include children who do not develop language because of intellectual or physical disability, hearing loss, emotional problems or environmental deprivation. It is used of children whose difficulties are with speech and language only.

Different children are referred to by the term **specific language impairment**. Some typical difficulties are listed below:

- the child seems to understand what is said, but people cannot understand what the child is trying to say
- the child speaks clearly and at length, but often fails to get the point of a conversation, making inappropriate comments and replies
- the child speaks clearly in single words, but has difficulties linking them together to make sentences, often leaving words out
- the child understands almost no spoken language and says only a few words.

It is common to distinguish between **comprehension** (understanding language) and **expression** (using language). Most children with an SLI will be better at one area though they may have difficulties in both. The areas can be grouped as follows:

- **speech apparatus** – the mouth, tongue, nose, breathing, and so on, and how they are co-ordinated and operated by muscles. Children with a difficulty

in this area only are usually identified quickly as having a speech and language impairment.

- **phonology** – the sounds that make up the language
- **syntax** (grammar and morphology) – the way that words and parts of words combine in phrases and sentences
- **semantics** – the meaning of words, bits of words and phrases and sentences.
- **pragmatics** – how we use language in different situations and how we convey feelings.
- **intonation and stress** (prosody) – the rhythm and ‘music’ of the way we speak.

A child can have difficulties with phonology, syntax, semantics or pragmatics which affect comprehension, expression or both. The child may have other difficulties as well as the one which is most obvious. Considerable expertise is needed to assess children with SLIs. A problem in one area of language is likely to affect others too. Each child requires skilled assessment and a planned programme of help.

### References

- Beveridge, M and Conti-Ramsden, G** (1987), *Children with language disabilities*. Milton Keynes: Open University
- Byers-Brown, B and Edwards, M** (1989), *Developmental Disorders of Language*. London: Whurr
- Dockrell, J and Messer, D** (1999), *Children’s language and communication difficulties*. London: Cassell
- Donaldson, M L** (1995), *Children with language impairments*. London: Jessica Kingsley
- Fleming, P, Miller C and Wright, J** (1997), *Speech and language difficulties in education*. Bicester: Winslow

**Martin, D and Miller, C** (1996) *Speech and language difficulties in the classroom*. London: David Fulton

**Watson, J** (Ed.) (1994) *Working with communication difficulties*. Edinburgh: Moray House Publications

**Webster, A and McConnell, C** (1987) *Children with speech and language difficulties*. London: Cassell

**Wright, J A and Kersner, M** (1998) *Supporting children with communication problems: sharing the workload*. London: David Fulton

## Other relevant Glossary Sheets

- Developmental language delay/disorder (3)
- Semantic and pragmatic disorders (5)
- Higher level language disorders (13)
- Phonological problems (14)
- Expressive language difficulties (15)
- Dyspraxia (18)
- Comprehension or receptive language difficulties (22)

## Other organisations which can help

### ICAN

4 Dyer's Buildings  
Holborn  
London  
EC1N 2QP  
Tel: 0870 010 4066

### Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

2 White Hart Yard  
London  
SE1 1NX  
Tel: 020 7378 1200

*Written by Bob Daines, educational psychologist,  
edited by Gilbert MacKay, with thanks to Elizabeth Auger, specialist language teacher.*

Community  
Legal Service



**Telephone  
Helplines  
Association**

quality and confidence for callers to helplines

© Afasic 2004

**Afasic**  
2nd Floor  
50-52 Great Sutton Street  
London EC1V 0DJ  
Phone 020 7490 9410  
Fax 020 7251 2834  
Email [info@afasic.org.uk](mailto:info@afasic.org.uk)  
[www.afasic.org.uk](http://www.afasic.org.uk)  
Helpline 0845 3 55 55 77  
(local call rate)

Registered charity no. 1045617