

Diagnostic Decisions: Language Difficulties or DLD in Under 5-year-olds

Diagnostic Scenario

The SLP/SALT assessment determines that a child under 5 years has language difficulties with a significant impact on everyday interactions & no known biomedical condition. Given the variability in language development at this age, what considerations might help the clinician decide if the problem is likely persistent and a diagnosis of DLD is warranted?

Diagnostic Considerations

Diagnostic Decision

	Indicators of relatively low concern	Indicators of moderate concern	Indicators of quite high concern
Age in years when assessed ¹			
	up to 2	3	4+
Time over which re-assessment has indicated continued language difficulties ²			
	less than 6 months		6 months or more
Language domains impacted ² :			
	<input type="checkbox"/> Phonology <input type="checkbox"/> Morphosyntax <input type="checkbox"/> Semantics <input type="checkbox"/> Word finding <input type="checkbox"/> Pragmatics <input type="checkbox"/> Verbal learning & memory		
	Phonology only	Few domains Expressive only	Many domains (see note (a)) Receptive & expressive deficits
Risk factors ³ :	<input type="checkbox"/> Family history of communication or reading disorders <input type="checkbox"/> Low level of parental education/vocabulary <input type="checkbox"/> Socioeconomic disadvantage	<input type="checkbox"/> Low birth weight or responsiveness <input type="checkbox"/> Others: birth order, male, shyness	
		Many (see note (b))	
Early gesture or language indicators ⁴			
		At 12 months, few words used meaningfully or understood without gestures, limited pointing or holding out arm to show object	At 24 months, no word combinations
Later preschool language indicators ¹			
	Retells main events in story (even with morphosyntactic & phonological errors)		Unable to retell simplified sequence of story events (even with pictures)
Malleable factors ⁵ :	<input type="checkbox"/> Language & literacy home environment (e.g., toy talk: <i>When my child looks at a toy, I talk about it</i> ; shared book reading; many books available; interactions during screen time) <input type="checkbox"/> Variability in language input (i.e., informal play opportunities; attends childcare centres) <input type="checkbox"/> Intervention		
Language improves with existing or enhanced inputs		Not available	No change when enhanced or change requires considerable effort

Determining best label to use: Consider the range in which the majority of indicators fall...

Language Difficulties
(with monitoring)

Language Difficulties / At risk for DLD
(address malleable factors & monitor)

Indicators of a differentiating condition
(see note (c), also vol. 2 & 4)?

No:
(Probable)
DLD

Yes:
(Probable)
Language Disorder

Notes: (a) – Ref. 1 reported isolated impairments to have good outcomes & most stable profile when phonology, morphology, syntax & semantics impacted; (b) – 3-4 risk factors increase concern but are not sufficient (on their own) to determine diagnosis; (c) - very severe impairment; qualitative differences from DLD; concerns in domains beyond language (e.g., difficulty imitating body movements⁶)

References: 1.Bishop & Edmundson, 1987, JSHD, 52:16-73 (participants: 3.9-4.2yrs); 2.Bishop et al, 2016, PLoS ONE, 11/7:e0158753; 3.Eadie et al, Pediatrics, 147/2:e20201712; McKean et al, 2015, PLoS ONE, 10/8:e0134251; McKean et al, 2016, IJEC, 48:329-51; Rudolph, 2017, AJSLP, 26:991-1010; 4. McKean et al, 2016; Rudolph & Leonard, 2016, JEI, 38:41-58; 5.McKean et al, 2016; Collisson et al, 2016, J Peds, 172, 168-74; 6.Dohmen et al, 2016, ADLI, 1:1-15