



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 011 | Speech and language disorders

Developmental language disorder

What it means

Developmental language disorder (DLD) is a persistent difficulty learning, understanding, or using language that is not explained by a known differentiating condition such as hearing loss, intellectual disability, or autism. It can affect spoken communication and later literacy. A child may have strong abilities in other areas. [1]

Causes and risk factors

DLD is a neurodevelopmental condition with complex genetic and environmental influences on language learning. It often occurs in families, but there is no single cause or routine genetic test that establishes it. It is not caused by bilingualism or by caregivers failing to read enough books. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

Possible signs include difficulty learning words, putting sentences together, understanding longer directions, remembering verbal information, or telling a clear story. Conversation or classroom participation may be harder than expected. Receptive difficulties can be less obvious than limited speech, especially when familiar routines provide clues. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A speech-language pathologist evaluates understanding and expression, speech, literacy risks, and everyday communication. Hearing and broader development are considered. Assessment should include the child's languages and cultural context. Clinicians distinguish DLD from language difficulties associated with another condition; reassessment may be needed in very young children. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Speech-language therapy targets functional language needs, such as vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, or narrative skills. Caregiver and educator coaching supports practice across routines. Visual supports, extra processing time, and classroom accommodations can reduce barriers. Treatment does not rely on a single exercise or guarantee that difficulties will disappear; support needs may change with learning demands. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Use clear language at an appropriate level, pause for responses, and model slightly longer messages. Explain new words during everyday activities. Check understanding through actions or choices rather than repeatedly asking 'Do you understand?' Continue using the family's preferred languages.

When to seek help

A loss of established language, new neurological symptoms, or an abrupt change in understanding needs medical review rather than being assumed to be DLD.

Questions for your care team

- Which language skills are most affected?
- How were hearing and all home languages considered?
- What supports are needed as preschool or school demands increase?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss developmental language disorder. Developmental language disorder (DLD) is a persistent difficulty learning, understanding, or using language that is not explained by a known differentiating condition such as hearing loss, intellectual disability, or autism. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: DLD can be present in a child who speaks frequently; the difficulty may involve understanding or organizing language.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- DLD: developmental language disorder.
- Comprehension: understanding a message.
- Narrative: an organized account or story.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Developmental Language Disorder

<https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/developmental-language-disorder>

[2] Spoken Language Disorders

<https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/spoken-language-disorders/>

[3] Late Language Emergence

<https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/late-language-emergence>