



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 012 | Speech and language disorders

Receptive language difficulties

What it means

Receptive language difficulties involve understanding spoken or signed language. A child may hear a message without fully understanding its words, grammar, or meaning. This is a descriptive communication profile; it can be part of developmental language disorder or occur with other developmental or sensory conditions. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Possible contributors include DLD, hearing difficulties, autism, intellectual disability, or other neurological and developmental conditions. Unfamiliar language or limited exposure to a language can affect assessment without indicating a disorder. Receptive difficulties should not be interpreted automatically as poor attention or defiance. [1,2]

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



Signs and everyday impact

A child may struggle to follow directions, understand questions, identify words outside familiar routines, or learn concepts such as size and location. They may copy peers or rely on gestures to manage. Difficulty often becomes clearer as instructions become longer or the setting becomes less predictable. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A speech-language pathologist assesses vocabulary, sentence understanding, concepts, and functional comprehension using accessible tasks. Hearing should be considered. Assessment across languages and settings helps separate a language difference from a disorder. The team also examines attention, cognition, sensory access, and the demands of each task. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Therapy may teach vocabulary and sentence structures directly, use repeated meaningful examples, and develop strategies for checking understanding. Visual supports, demonstrations, simplified instructions, and extra response time reduce barriers. Medical or sensory causes require appropriate care alongside communication therapy. Treatment goals should connect with real activities, not only matching pictures on a test. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Give one clear step at a time, pair words with gestures or demonstrations, and pause. Check understanding by inviting the child to show or choose something. Reduce background noise where helpful, and avoid adding more words when the child is already overwhelmed.

When to seek help

Sudden or progressive loss of understanding, reduced alertness, new seizures, or loss of other skills requires prompt medical assessment.

Questions for your care team

- Which kinds of language are hardest to understand?
- Could hearing or language exposure explain part of the pattern?
- How should we adapt instructions at home and preschool?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss receptive language difficulties. Receptive language difficulties involve understanding spoken or signed language. 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: A child who cannot follow a direction may not understand it; repeated correction will not solve a comprehension barrier.

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

Terms in plain language

- Receptive language: understanding language.
- Visual support: an image or demonstration that supports meaning.
- Processing time: time needed to understand and respond.

Sources and further reading

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

[1] Spoken Language Disorders

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

[2] Developmental Language Disorder

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

[3] Late Language Emergence

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