



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 013 | Speech and language disorders

Expressive language difficulties

What it means

Expressive language difficulties affect sharing ideas, needs, and information through words, sentences, signs, or other language forms. They are different from difficulty pronouncing sounds, although both can coexist. Some children understand more than they can express; their understanding still needs assessment rather than assumption. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Expressive difficulties may be associated with late language emergence, DLD, hearing loss, autism, intellectual disability, or neurological conditions. Motor speech difficulties can limit spoken output without explaining all language skills. Multilingual development is not itself a disorder, and skills should be considered across all relevant languages. [1,2]

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



Signs and everyday impact

Concerns include a slowly growing vocabulary, difficulty combining words, short or poorly organized sentences, problems finding words, or difficulty explaining events. A child may use gestures or become frustrated when misunderstood. The amount of talking alone does not show whether expression is developmentally appropriate. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A speech-language pathologist examines word knowledge, grammar, sentence formation, narrative, speech production, and nonspoken communication. Assessment includes comprehension, hearing, developmental history, and language exposure. In young children, ongoing monitoring helps distinguish a temporary delay from persistent language needs. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Therapy may model and teach useful words and sentence patterns, build conversational or storytelling skills, and coach caregivers. Pictures, signs, or an AAC system may support immediate communication. Treatment should provide a way to express needs now while developing longer-term skills; spoken language should not be the only accepted communication method. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Respond to the child's message before correcting form. Expand it slightly: if the child says 'car,' model 'blue car' or 'car goes.' Offer meaningful choices and allow time. Do not withhold food, comfort, or needed items to force speech.

When to seek help

Loss of previously used language, new swallowing or movement difficulties, or a sudden change in communication needs medical review.

Questions for your care team

- Is language formulation or speech production the main barrier?
- How can the child express needs successfully now?
- What language targets can we practice during enjoyable routines?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss expressive language difficulties. Expressive language difficulties affect sharing ideas, needs, and information through words, sentences, signs, or other language forms. 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 can have expressive language difficulties even when speech sounds are clear.

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

Terms in plain language

- Expressive language: sharing meaning through language.
- Word finding: retrieving a word when needed.
- AAC: communication supports beyond speech.

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] Late Language Emergence

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

[3] Developmental Language Disorder

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