



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 014 | Speech and language disorders

Mixed receptive-expressive language difficulties

What it means

Mixed receptive-expressive language difficulties affect both understanding language and expressing messages. The term describes a communication pattern rather than a single cause. These children may need support with incoming information as well as a reliable way to share ideas and needs. [1]

Causes and risk factors

This pattern may occur with DLD, hearing loss, autism, intellectual disability, or other developmental and neurological conditions. Language exposure, cultural context, and sensory access influence assessment. Learning more than one language does not create a language disorder, although tests limited to one language can misrepresent abilities. [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 have difficulty following directions, understanding questions, learning vocabulary, forming sentences, or participating in conversation. They may appear to ignore instructions or rely on familiar routines. Frustration can increase when adults both misunderstand the child and use language that is too complex. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A speech-language pathologist evaluates comprehension and expression separately, then considers how they interact in everyday life. Hearing, speech sounds, nonspoken communication, play, and broader development are reviewed. Appropriate language sampling, caregiver information, and assessment across languages support a fair interpretation. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Therapy may combine direct language teaching, caregiver coaching, and adaptations to the communication environment. Visual supports and simple instructions aid understanding; signs, pictures, or AAC aid expression. Goals should target practical messages and routines. Associated medical or developmental conditions are managed by the appropriate team alongside communication support. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Use brief, clear language, demonstrate meaning, and allow extra response time. Offer choices the child can answer with speech, pointing, signs, or a device. Expand messages gently and check understanding through participation. Coordinate a small set of useful words and supports across home and preschool.

When to seek help

Regression in understanding or expression, new seizures, or a sudden change in alertness requires prompt medical assessment.

Questions for your care team

- What can the child understand without routine or gesture clues?
- Which communication supports should be used across settings?
- How will therapy address comprehension and expression together?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss mixed receptive-expressive language difficulties. Mixed receptive-expressive language difficulties affect both understanding language and expressing messages. 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: Teaching more spoken words alone may not address a child's difficulty understanding language.

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

Terms in plain language

- Mixed: affecting more than one language area.
- Language sample: examples of everyday communication.
- Functional goal: a goal useful in daily life.

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>