

Children with speech, language and/or learning disabilities constitute a highly varied population.

In other words, they can demonstrate a variety of communication and/or learning problems.



What constitutes a speech problem?

Speech is the spoken form of language. Children who demonstrate speech problems may have difficulty producing the sounds of the language. There may be one sound in error or many, making them difficult to understand.

What constitutes a language problem?

Language is a code consisting of different parts such as word formation, word order, word meaning, and language use or the expression of thoughts and ideas. Some children may have difficulty learning words and their meanings (vocabulary), others have difficulty organizing their thoughts to express ideas. There are some known causes of language delays or disorders, e.g. autism, mental retardation, hearing loss, but many occur without an identifiable cause.

What constitutes a learning disability?

The nature of learning disabilities can be related to a variety of factors, including health, personality characteristics, intelligence, family, school, culture, language abilities and socioeconomic status. Children with learning disabilities may have difficulty following directions, comprehending information presented verbally or in written form, and/or difficulty expressing themselves in written or verbal form. Academic success is often affected because of these difficulties.

Who is the best person to evaluate (test) my child, provide a diagnosis, and help determine the next steps to take?

If a child is experiencing speech and/or language problems, a fully licensed, certified and/or credentialed speech-language pathologist (SLP), with knowledge about speech and language development as well as disorders, is the best person to evaluate the child's speech and language abilities and determine if they are developmentally appropriate. If problems are identified, the SLP can help to design a plan of treatment based on the child's specific needs.

If the child is experiencing learning difficulties, the complexity of the problem often requires that an assessment of the difficulties a child is experiencing must be multifaceted, which may mean using various professionals to identify the problems the child is having. Determination of **who** does the assessment really depends on the more important question of **what** needs to be assessed. This is not an easy question to answer.

How to make decisions about which professional to choose?

Learning disability assessments are usually conducted by a range of professionals, such as speech-language pathologists, neuro-psychologists, educational psychologists, educational therapists, pediatricians, and special education teachers. Among the professionals conducting learning disability assessments there may be some overlap in the methods and measures used. How do parents and other professionals reach a decision regarding who is best suited to conduct the assessment for their child who is experiencing learning disabilities? Again, we return to the question of what needs to be assessed.

If the problems experienced by the child seem to be related to a sudden change in behavior, especially in terms of motivation, memory, problem solving, then the main question might be "is there

any medical condition that could be contributing to the child's difficulties?" If so, it would be best to start with a physician to rule out any contributing medical condition.

If the problems experienced by the child do not appear to be medically related, then the question of who might be best to consult becomes more difficult. Often parents may only see the academic difficulties the child is having and thus turn to an educator to help the child. This individual may only focus on the skills necessary for academic success, and use individual tutoring to address the problem. Often there is minimal progress because underlying factors such as a language disability may go undetected. Professionals who take a comprehensive look at the child's learning difficulties may be the answer. It will be important to choose an individual who will examine or consider the child's:

- Social/emotional development
- Intellectual or cognitive abilities
- Language comprehension and expression
 - Does the child understand directions given, is he able to use words meaningfully and can he express his thoughts to convey ideas?
- Learning style and behavior

What does the research say?

Much of the research indicates that learning disabilities are language based, and thus determining if this might be related to the child's difficulties should be an important consideration. Learning style and intellectual factors can also be important considerations. Keeping this in mind, consulting with a speech language pathologist and/or an educational psychologist may be the best way to seek answers and explore possible solutions.

What kind of tests should be given?

It is important to understand that a comprehensive evaluation or assessment means more than giving the child one or two standardized tests. Testing usually focuses on examining a particular skill or in finding the place to start a particular intervention program. Evaluation means gathering data and information from a variety of sources and analyzing that data to identify possible problems and explore options to help resolve or compensate for the communication and/or learning problems experienced.

Who is qualified to test the child?

If the child is experiencing learning difficulties, seek help from professionals who have the ability to conduct a detailed and comprehensive evaluation with consideration for the complex problems the child may be experiencing. Be sure to consider the professional's level of training and ask to see the credentials they hold. Fully credentialed, certified and/or licensed SLPs hold a minimum of a master's degree or its equivalent. They may also hold a Certificate of Clinical Competence issued by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. The qualifications of a psychologist vary based on title and certification but often graduate level training is required. The training for educational therapists and behavior specialists may range from a bachelor's degree to a graduate degree, but coursework in their field may not include information about language development and disorders. Be prepared to ask questions and to seek the professionals most qualified to evaluate a child with communication and/or learning difficulties. Defining the problem and identifying appropriate solutions is the best way to help the child.



What is a speech-language pathologist?

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) help people develop communication abilities including the resolution of speech and language problems. Their services include identification, evaluation, and treatment. Speech language pathologists are professionals who hold master's degrees or the equivalent and must be appropriately licensed or credentialed. They may also hold a Certificate of Clinical Competence issued by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

Where can I get more information?

For more information or a referral contact:

California Speech-Language-Hearing Assoc. (CSHA)
Website: www.csha.org
Email: csha@csha.org
Phone: (916) 921-1568

American Speech-Language-Hearing Assoc. (ASHA)
Website: www.asha.org
Email: actioncenter@asha.org
Phone: (310) 897-5700

Children with Speech, Language and Learning Disorders:



Finding Some Answers