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Causes of Speech and Language Impairment

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A child's speech and language skills develop as he grows from infancy to school age. This development should follow suggested timelines and patterns. When it doesn't, this can be a worry for parents and is cause for a professional evaluation by a speech-language pathologist. Often, these difficulties can be treated with speech and/or language therapy.

Frequently, the cause of speech and language delays and/or disorders is unknown. Sometimes, however, there can be specific causes. They may include:



- **Hearing Loss:** Chronic ear infections may result in decreased speech and language skills. When a child has a hard time hearing, he is unable to hear words to repeat them correctly. Words may be slurred, have the wrong tone, or wrong emphasis. The child may also have trouble understanding, imitating, and using language. Simple ear infections that have been treated should not affect speech.



- **Neurological Disorder:** This can include cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, or traumatic brain injury. A child with a neurological disorder may have difficulty coordinating the muscles used for speech or controlling spasms in the tongue area. Hearing may also be affected.



- **Autism:** A child with a disorder on the Autism spectrum may display developmental problems, including speech and language difficulties. This will likely include a lack of nonverbal communication, such as hand gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact.



- **Intellectual Disability:** This occurs when a child has significant limitations in both academic and everyday skills. Because of limited cognitive abilities, there may often be delays in speech and/or language skills.



- **Physical Impairment:** This may include a cleft lip, cleft palate, or short frenulum (the fold beneath the tongue). These affect the structure of a child's mouth and can limit tongue, lip, and jaw movement for speech production.



- **Vocal Abuse or Misuse:** This can come from yelling, screaming, excessive throat-clearing, and overuse of the voice. A child's voice may sound rough, breathy, too high/low, or too loud/soft.



- **Extreme Environment:** A child at risk for developing speech and language problems may come from poverty, have been exposed to drugs or alcohol, have poor nutrition, or experience neglect and/or abuse. Studies show that 35% of children with speech and language delays have experienced one or more of these negative environmental scenarios.



- **Prematurity:** A child born prematurely may have delays in several areas, including speech and language. These can likely improve with early intervention.

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- **Life Events:** Difficult or traumatic life experiences can ‘trigger’ stuttering or disfluent speech in a young child.



- **Genetics:** There are specific genes that are responsible for communication. Research shows that 50%-70% of children who have difficulties with speech and language also have at least one family member who has (or had) the same difficulties.

Speech and language delays and/or disorders may have a number of different causes; often, it is difficult to know why they occur. If a child is exhibiting speech and/or language difficulties, it is important for him to be evaluated by a professional. With the help of a speech-language pathologist, many of these problems can be treated.



Resources:

“Speech and Language Delay and Disorder,” Michigan Medicine, accessed November 20, 2017, <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/speech.htm>

“Delayed Speech or Language Development,” KidsHealth, accessed November 20, 2017, <http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/not-talk.html>

“Intellectual Disability,” ASHA, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.asha.org/PRPSpecificTopic.aspx?folderid=8589942540§ion=Overview>

“Understanding the Impact of Abuse & Neglect on Speech & Language Development,” accessed November 20, 2017, <file:///C:/Users/ndahl1977/Downloads/1206-Welc-Julia.pdf>

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