

THE CONTINUUM OF LANGUAGE

Gloria Weddington, Ph.D., CCC-SLP
Professor Emerita
Communicative Disorders & Sciences
San Jose State University

What we know for sure

- Language acquisition is a natural process and children seem to develop it in a similar way regardless of where they live, SES, or which language(s) they speak.
- All languages are equal and no language is inherently better or worse than any other language.
- The same is true for dialects. Every person who speaks a language, speaks a dialect of that language.

- 
- Children at various levels of physical, neurological, emotional, and intellectual development acquire language.
 - We know that children with disabilities can acquire multiple languages when exposed adequately.
 - We know that some children have difficulty learning their native language and suffer communicative disorders.

- 
- Rarely is a speech or language disorder caused by environmental factors, such as poverty. Only in cases of extreme isolation, neglect, or abuse might communication be affected.
 - Bilingualism and dialectal differences do not cause speech or language disorders.

What is a Communication Disorder

- Speech Disorders – Difficulties in the areas of speech sound or voice production or problems with fluency that cause the individual's speech to be conspicuous or interfere with communication.
- Language Disorder – Difficulty understanding or using a native language. The disorder might manifest in the areas of vocabulary (semantics), grammar (syntax), speech sounds (phonology), and language use (pragmatics)

Communicative Disorders

- Hearing Impairment – Difficulty in one or both ears (permanent or temporary) will interfere with speech-language development.
- A temporary loss, such as impacted wax or frequent ear infections can affect language development.

Preschool Language

- Children enter school speaking their native language.
- Speech-language may not be perfect, but usually is typical for the child's age.
- The speech-language of some children is so different from that of their peers that even the children notice.
- Such children should be referred to the speech-language pathologist (SLP) for an evaluation.

Some Causes of Disorders

- Hearing loss
- Physical disability (e.g. cleft palate)
- Neurological disorder (e.g. cerebral palsy)
- Developmental disability (e.g. autism spectrum disorder)
- Emotional disorders
- Intellectual disabilities
- Extreme isolation, neglect & abuse

How Teachers Can Help

- Refer children to the speech-language pathologist when you suspect a problem.
- When you make a referral, let the SLP know what problems you've observed.
- Encourage all children to use their language in the classroom & playground.
- Give each child sufficient time to have his/her say.

Teachers can help

- If the child is diagnosed with a speech-language disorder, work with the SLP to reinforce new skills in the classroom. The SLP will make suggestions and will allow teachers to observe therapy and will even come into the classroom to work with the child.
- Don't allow teasing or bullying, especially children who are struggling to talk.

Conclusion

- Almost all children acquire skills to communicate in some way.
- Language is vital for education to be successful.
- Children do not need to be taught their native language but school can enhance it.
- Allow preschool children to express themselves in whatever language they know. If a child has to wait to learn English before he/she can speak in class, the child will be affected forever.

- Do not refer children to the SLP for dialectal issues, but feel free to consult with the SLP for information about the dialect.
- Poverty does not cause communication disorders, but some of the effects of poverty can have a lasting effect, mainly inadequate medical care.
- Oral language is the basis of literacy.
- Finally, when children learn the language of education, the world opens up to them.