

DLD

DEVELOPMENTAL LANGUAGE DISORDER



A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES

By Jeanne Tighe, SLPD, CCC-SLP, BCS-CL



This book was created in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Speech-Language Pathology Doctorate (SLPD) degree from Kean University.

About the Author

Jeanne Tighe is a Speech-Language Pathologist and Board Certified Specialist in Child Language. She is the owner and Clinical Director of [Beyond Communication](#), a private practice serving children with communication and learning needs located in Lambertville, New Jersey. Jeanne earned her Speech-Language Pathology Doctorate degree from Kean University, in which DLD was her area of research focus. She is a proud founding member of the [USA branch of Raising Awareness of Developmental Language Disorder](#) and has been a contributor to [dldandme.org](#). Jeanne also serves as a topic area expert on literacy for [The Informed SLP](#) and an adjunct professor in the undergraduate and masters SLP programs at Kean University. Jeanne can be reached at dld@bcpractice.com.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the following people who helped make this work possible.

- Lexi K. and V.R. for sharing your personal stories. There are no more important voices than those of the people living the experience.
- Kim and Jackie for your parental words of wisdom and support.
- Janice Schroeder for the layout and page design
- Stefanie Martelle, Samantha Townsend, and Marisa Brunner for adding their professional perspectives
- Dr. Mahchid Namazi and Dr. Sarah Patten for their support and mentorship throughout the Kean University SLPD program
- The many children and teens with DLD and their families who have worked with Beyond Communication over the past 15 years. We've learned so much from you. Each one of you teaches

us things that help us help others.

Copyright Notice

Copyright © 2022 by Jeanne Tighe. All rights reserved.

This work has been made free to the public in hopes of helping to meet the urgent need for family-friendly information about DLD. You are encouraged to share it widely, with the following copyright considerations.

Here's what you can do:

- Share this complete document with anyone interested in learning more about DLD
- Use excerpts for presentations, lectures, social media, or other educational purposes with *attribution to the author and the original document*
- Copy suggested language for school communications, insert your child's name, and adjust it as needed to suit your individual needs

Here's what you can't do:

- Republish or repackage the contents
- Use excerpts in your own work without attribution to the author
- Alter sections of the text and redistribute the document in an altered state

Please contact [the author](#) with any questions about permissions for use and distribution.



Table of Contents

Preface: In Our Voices	31
-------------------------------------	----

Chapter 1: Getting to Know DLD

What does DLD mean?	5
Why haven't I heard of it before?	5
Who has DLD?	6
What causes DLD?	6
Who helps people with DLD?	7
How long does DLD last?	7
Key Takeaways	7

Chapter 2: Language: Breaking down a big concept

Language Vs. Speech	8
Phonology: The sounds of words	8
Morphology: The building blocks of words	9
Syntax: How we arrange words	9
Semantics: The meaning of words	10
Pragmatics: How we use words with others	10
Language through 4 channels	11
Key Takeaways	12

Chapter 3: DLD at Home

Talking with your child about their DLD	13
Talking with others about your child's DLD	14
Building language learning into your life	15
Supporting your child's communication at home	16
Key Takeaways	17

Chapter 4: DLD at School

DLD Terminology at School	18
Reading	19
Writing	20
Math	22
Other Subjects	23
DLD and IEPs	23
Key Takeaways	24

Chapter 5: DLD with Friends

How DLD impacts friendships	25
Supporting your young child	25
Supporting your teen	26
Relationships as protective factors	27
Key Takeaways	27

Chapter 6: Adulthood with DLD

Communication challenges in adulthood	28
What happens to kids with DLD when they grow up?	28
How can I help keep my child on the path to the best outcomes?	29
Key Takeaways	30

Resources	31
------------------------	----

References	32
-------------------------	----



Preface: In Our Voices

Conversations about DLD usually take place between parents and professionals working to support children, but those children grow up to be adults with lived experiences and voices that need to be heard. Throughout this book, you'll find quotations from two adults with DLD who agreed to share their experiences and insights for this project. Their stories illustrate the different paths that DLD can take and reinforce our faith in positive outcomes for young people with DLD.

Lexi is a young woman in her mid-twenties living in northern New Jersey. Lexi attended public school for her elementary years but had difficulty in the mainstream environment. She transitioned to a specialized independent school for students with language and learning disabilities, where she thrived through middle and high school. Lexi went on to complete the Career and Community Studies (CCS) program at The College of New Jersey. She now enjoys working as an office assistant for a real estate company. In her free time, she loves to read mysteries.

VR is a young man in his mid-twenties. He grew up in a large suburban town in New Jersey, where he attended public school. As a high school student, VR set a goal for himself to transition out of special education classes and succeed academically in all general education classes. He not only achieved that goal but also went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Rowan University. He now works in information technology and is preparing to begin a master's program in cybersecurity. In his free time, VR enjoys hanging out with friends and family, traveling, and photography.

It is also helpful for families to hear from each other and share insights from the perspective of adults who are raising children with DLD. Throughout this book, you will also find quotations from two mothers of children with DLD, Kim and Jackie. Their words of wisdom include tips for supporting your child at home, at school, with friends, and along the journey of growing into a happy, healthy person with DLD.



Chapter 1: Getting to Know DLD

Learning that your child has a developmental disability with a specific label is an experience that comes with lots of feelings. You may feel confused, worried, or possibly relieved to have validation of your concerns. Many parents feel a mix of these and other emotions as they process the news of a diagnosis. That's completely normal. As you begin to learn about DLD, it may be helpful to know that you're not alone. DLD is one of the most common developmental challenges children face. Because it is a very common condition and researchers have been interested in it for a long time, we know a lot about DLD that can help your family and your child.

What does DLD mean?

Typically developing children effortlessly learn the language of their community simply by being surrounded by talk. Even before birth, babies are listening to the sounds of speech and their brains are storing those sounds and patterns. Most young children

rapidly learn to understand and say new words and how to combine words into sentences that follow rules. It's easy to take this amazing process for granted!

My parents told me to be true to myself and ask for help when I need it. They said we're here for you and we support you. That was very big for me. —Lexi

Some children do not learn the patterns and rules of spoken language as easily as others. Toddlers vary in their development of speech and language. Many toddlers who lag behind typical milestones at age 2 or 3 eventually catch up and have no long-term difficulty with communication. Some children, however, continue to have persistent difficulty with learning new words, remembering words, forming sentences, and understanding what people say. When this difficulty persists past early childhood and gets in the way of communication in daily life, the child may be diagnosed with DLD.

DLD stands for Developmental Language Disorder. Each word in that term explains an important aspect of the condition. Let's break it down.

- **Developmental:** In this context, developmental means the condition has been a part of your child's brain since birth and will likely stay with your child over their lifespan, changing over time as they grow.
- **Language:** Language is the use of words (spoken and written) to communicate with others. We'll dive deeper into the parts of language in [chapter 2](#).
- **Disorder:** When professionals use the term disorder, it means the difficulties are significant enough to impact the person's functioning in daily life, including at school, at home, and/or in the community. A disorder is different from a delay because a delay is likely to fully resolve, while a disorder is expected to continue to impact the person over their lifespan.

Why haven't I heard of DLD before now?

Not many people know the term DLD. (That's something we're trying to change with this book! Other efforts are also underway to spread awareness of DLD. You can find links to more resources and organizations [here](#).) The main reason you likely haven't heard of DLD is that professionals working in child development have disagreed about what to call it until recently. DLD has been known to researchers and professionals for over 200 years but it has been called by many names over that time. Over the past



5 years, more and more professionals and scientists have agreed to use the term DLD to help coordinate efforts to improve research, advocacy, and public awareness.

For now, DLD continues to have multiple names. If your child is seen by a physician or an SLP in a medical setting (e.g., a children's hospital) in the USA, the professional will probably use the term **Mixed expressive-receptive language disorder**. Terms used in schools vary by state. Many school systems will use the term **Specific Language Impairment**. It's good for you to know that these terms mean essentially the same thing and are not additional diagnostic labels for your child's difficulties.

DLD is a useful term because it is not specific to one state, school district, or system. If you continue to search for information to help your child after reading this book, DLD will help you connect with resources and communities.

Who has DLD?

DLD is very common. About 7-8% of all children have DLD! Although it is not well known, DLD is far more common than autism and about as common as ADHD. It affects children in all countries, children speaking all languages, and children growing up monolingual or multilingual. DLD can co-occur with other developmental

When my son was diagnosed with DLD, I was relieved to finally have some answers. Realizing that he could not always understand what we were saying or could not get out what he really wanted to say made all the difference in our daily lives. —Kim

*When I'm introduced
to something new,
I don't understand
it initially.
But it doesn't deter me.
I go over it. I ask questions.
I also
have to practice
it on my own.
Then I get it. —VR*

challenges such as ADHD or dyslexia, but it is distinct from these challenges. One does not cause the other. DLD is often said to be an invisible disability because most children with DLD look and act very much like their typically

developing peers. DLD is often not noticeable in casual conversations or brief interactions.

What causes DLD?

There is no single cause of DLD. The best available scientific evidence shows that DLD has genetic underpinnings but there is no one gene that causes it. DLD does often run in families. Often, parents of children with DLD will report that they or others in the family are poor readers or had difficulty throughout their school years. Because DLD is called by many names and often goes undiagnosed, family history is often presumed but uncertain.

Though DLD doesn't have one clear, consistent cause, we can exclude some possible causes with certainty. DLD is *not* caused by:

- Growing up multilingual
- Parents who don't read much to their children
- Households with lower education or SES
- Any race or ethnicity
- Attention or behavior difficulties
- Laziness
- Shyness



Difficulties in learning and using language are a part of other developmental disabilities such as autism, intellectual disability, and hearing loss, but in these cases, we don't use the term DLD. We use DLD when the

child's difficulties with language do not stem from another known condition.

*My questions I first
had when I found out
were how to I help him
overcome this,
can this be treated, and
how was DLD never
brought to my attention
before?*

—Jackie

with DLD. SLPs work in schools, medical settings, and private clinics. Families of children with DLD can seek help from SLPs in any of these settings or in more than one setting. More information about SLP service at school can be found in [chapter 4](#). More information about clinic-based services can be found in [chapter 3](#).

How long does DLD last?

DLD is not something that we can fix or cure. DLD describes one aspect of your child's brain. We all learn some things more easily and some things with more struggle. DLD means that, for your child's brain, mastering the patterns and meaning of language is difficult to an extent that results in challenges in daily life. Your child will likely always experience language comprehension and expression as more challenging than other people do. That doesn't mean their skills won't improve! Children with DLD continually progress and you will see that growth over time. Words will likely remain difficult, however, and the complexity of communication in adolescence and adulthood bring new and different challenges. You'll find more information about DLD in adulthood in [chapter 6](#). Although your child likely won't fully outgrow DLD, over time they can build skills and coping strategies that enable them to live productively and happily.

Who helps people with DLD?

DLD is usually identified in childhood by a professional in one of several fields related to child development. Your child's language disorder might first be identified by a developmental pediatrician, psychologist, speech-language pathologist (SLP), or by a provider of early intervention, preschool disability, or special education services. SLPs are the professionals with the most specific expertise in DLD and are usually key service providers for children

Chapter 1: Key Takeaways

- DLD is a very common developmental disability that causes difficulties in understanding and using language to communicate and learn.
- Children do not grow out of DLD but they can improve their skills and learn ways to cope with their communication challenges.
- DLD has gone by many different names, so people often have not heard of it before. As international awareness of DLD grows, more resources are becoming available.



Chapter 2: Language: Breaking Down a Big Concept

Language is a really big thing. Just like when you try to imagine how big the sun is, it can be hard to wrap our minds around what language is and how it works. In this chapter, we'll break down the idea of language into five parts, each with its own function. Thinking about the parts of language can help you understand your child's strengths and challenges in communication.

Language vs. speech

Language is different than speech. Speech is the production of sounds using the vocal cords and mouth to form words. Language is the words themselves, their meaning, and their structure. One person can have rich language skills but difficulty forming clear speech. Another person can have clear speech but speak with short sentences and simple words. Many individuals are skilled with both or need assistance with both. People who use sign language or assistive devices may have robust language and no speech at all. These different outcomes can happen because speech and language are separate processes.

Children with DLD all have difficulty with language but they vary in their speech skills. Some children with DLD also struggle to pronounce words, while others develop articulation with no difficulty. Many kids with DLD may have speech delays early in their childhood. As these speech delays resolve with time and/or speech therapy, it may seem like their language has also resolved. This can be deceiving. Language difficulties often persist even after a child's speech has matured. Parents are also sometimes perplexed if they are told that their child should work with a "speech therapist" even though their speech appears fine. Keep in mind that "speech therapist" is a casual name for a speech-language pathologist (SLP) and SLPs are experts in language as well as speech.

Part 1: Phonology

Phonology is all about the sounds of language. We use sounds to form words. Every language has its own set of sounds. These sounds act like building blocks to form all the words in that language. English has about 40 sounds, depending on the regional dialects. (That's a lot! Some languages have less than 20!).

When babies are born, they begin listening to the sounds of the language or languages in their environment. They learn to tell sounds apart and eventually to produce them to form spoken words. For some babies and children, these processes are difficult. Difficulty with phonology will often present as delayed or unclear speech production, but it's important to remember that listening involves

Try This

Say the last syllable of the word and have your child repeat it.

Parent: helicopter

Child: hecipopter

Parent: Try this. Say ter.

Child ter.

Parent: Say cop.

Say the next-to-last syllable and have your child repeat it.

Child: cop.

Parent: Copter.

Say those two syllables together and have your child repeat.

Child: Copter.

Parent: Great! Try hela

Now move on to the next syllable or chunk forward, until your child has the whole word.

Child: hela

Parent: now we have two parts: hela - copter. Try that.

Child hela-copter.

Parent: You got it!

8

phonology too. Difficulty with phonology can result in trouble with understanding spoken language.

Part 2: Morphology

Morphology is word grammar. We have rules for how to adapt a word to fit different language functions. Verb tenses are one example. We know we can take the word jump and add *ing* to make jumping, which means that the jump is happening now.

Here are some other examples of morphology at work:

- **Plurals**
- **Possessives**
- **Prefixes**
- **Suffixes**
- **Meaningful bases** (e.g. ‘spec’ always means to look or see, as in spectacles or spectators)

Young kids with DLD almost always have trouble mastering morphology in their early childhood years. You may notice, or have noticed in the past, that your child said things like “He falleded,” or “We goed.” All children make these errors in their preschool years, but in typical development, basic morphology (like tense markers) is mostly mastered by around age five

When you hear your child make a morphology error, you can easily carry out an effective technique called recasting. Simply restate what your child just said, but with the error corrected. Make your restatement casual by framing it as a clarification or adding some expansion. You can add a little emphasis to the word you have corrected. Even though your child doesn’t have to repeat the word in this technique, research has shown that it is an effective language teaching tool.

**Try
This**

Child: I writed a story today.

Parent: You wrote a story today? Cool! What was it about?

in English-speaking children. Kids with DLD tend to make morphology errors even as they get older and may need instruction, as in speech-language therapy, to master these rules.

We often ignore morphology errors that children make in conversation. They seem like small details.

Children

who are struggling with morphology will also use these errors in their writing, however. Morphology errors in writing will impact the quality of written sentences. You’ll find more information about DLD and writing in [chapter 4](#).

*History was hard.
There was a lot
of vocabulary. Tests said
things differently than how
I learned them and that
was confusing. —Lexi*

Part 3: Syntax

Syntax is sentence grammar. Syntax involves putting words in the right order and combining words to work together according to the rules of our language. Syntax often conveys meaning. Think about the difference between *The girl helped the boy* and *The boy helped the girl*. In these two sentences, the words and the morphology are identical. The syntax tells you a totally different event is happening.

Children with DLD tend to use simpler, shorter sentences than their same-age peers. This may be most noticeable at young ages, but it usually persists into middle childhood and even beyond. Sometimes, especially in conversation, short sentences work fine for communication. In some situations, though, simple syntax gets in the way of understanding or expressing a complex idea. This is especially true in academic settings. The texts used in school have more complex syntax than we usually use in conversation, which can lead to challenges. For more about syntax in academic contexts, see [chapter 4](#).



Part 4: Semantics

Semantics is the part of language that involves the meanings of words. When you think of word meanings, you may think about a dictionary definition. Most words have more complexity to them than a single definition, however. Many words in English have multiple meanings or layers of meaning that vary depending on the context. Words also connect to one another. In order to fully understand what *democracy* means, for example, it's important to also understand the meanings of related words like *government* and *elect*.

Children with DLD tend to have more difficulty learning words and their meanings than their peers. For a student with DLD, it often takes many more exposures to a new word to store in their long-term memory. Children with DLD also tend to make fewer connections between words. They often have more trouble associating words within categories or finding relationships between words. Making connections between words is a vital part of learning. Think about a unit of study in science class, for example. As the class explores a topic such as the water cycle, all the key terms fit together and help to explain one another. It's hard to understand or define *evaporation*, for example, without also knowing what *water vapor*

You can use a similar technique to recasting to help build your child's syntax. Try recasting with expansion. When your child produces a short sentence, repeat it back to them with any errors corrected and more information added. The following dialogue shows an example of how this might work with a middle-grade child while talking about a novel they're reading together.

Kid: He's mad.

Parent: I agree, I think he's feeling angry at his mom for embarrassing him.

Kid: She shouldn't do that.

Parent: Yeah, she shouldn't have broken the promise she made to him.

is. When you're helping your child learn a new word, make sure to point out connections to other words. Some easy ways to do this include:

- If the new word is a thing, name some of its parts
- Mention some words that mean something similar
- Mention a word that means the opposite
- Explain some other contexts where the word might be used

Semantic skills play a large role in classroom learning but also influence social interactions. Keeping up with conversations requires understanding the words your friends are using and being able to think of the words you want to say. Supporting kids with DLD in building their semantic knowledge helps them both in the classroom and on the playground.

Part 5: Pragmatics

Pragmatics refers to the way we use language to communicate effectively with other people in different contexts. People change their communication style depending on who they are talking with and where they are. Think about how you might differently address your boss and your 3-year-old niece. The words you use, your sentence style, your tone of voice, and your pace of talking will all likely be different. You'd also probably use different body language and facial expressions. As children mature, they learn to adjust their communication

Try This

I struggled to understand concepts in school but working with a speech-language pathologist helped. —VR



Try This

Your child will learn a word more quickly when they use it than if they just hear or read it. Activities that require your child to use the word will result in better learning than activities that just involve recognizing it. For example, imagine your child is studying new vocabulary for their social studies class. Instead of making flashcards with the word pioneer and its definition, encourage your child to use the word pioneer in multiple new sentences.

Parent: Let's practice pioneer. Tell me a sentence with that word.

Child: A pioneer goes to live somewhere new.

Parent: Great! Now make a sentence about a pioneer and tell me something about their home.

Child: A pioneer might have to build a new home.

Parent: Good one. Tell me a sentence about a place where pioneers went.

Child: Pioneers moved west.

style to fit the situation they're in. They also learn to interpret subtle shifts in how others are communicating with them.

Children with DLD vary widely in their pragmatic skills. For some children, the social aspects of communication may be stronger than the rule-governed aspects like syntax and morphology. For others, the nuances of pragmatics are quite difficult to learn. Pragmatic difficulties often become more noticeable as the child's peer group ages and the communication between friends becomes more complex. As they become older kids and teens, individuals with DLD may need more help understanding messages that are conveyed indirectly, identifying sarcasm, and figuring out what words are appropriate in different social contexts.

Social communication is more challenging when

the situation is new or unfamiliar. We all feel more relaxed when we can anticipate what is expected of us. Think about going to a birthday party. You know you'll bring a gift and there will be food and probably a cake and you'll likely sing. These sets of expectations are known as scripts. You can help your child prepare for new situations by helping them preview the script.

Language through 4 channels

Recognize when your child is having a "DLD moment" and call it that. It gives both your child and yourself permission to get frustrated, acknowledge it, take a break, and come back to that communication attempt later. —Kim

Language always has those five parts but we use language through multiple channels. As you learn more about how DLD impacts your child, it may be helpful to notice that your child uses language with up to four different systems.

- **Ear** - Most children take in language through listening. Language enters your child's brain when they listen to the people around them talking.
- **Mouth** - Most children communicate with others by talking. They produce language by forming the sounds of words with their mouths.
- **Eye** - Right now you are using your eyes to read this book. By reading, you are taking in language with your eyes. Deaf people also take in language by watching others communicate in signed languages.
- **Hand** - When you write, whether with a pencil or by typing, you are using your hands to express





Talk with your child before a new event happens to plan some things they could say. For example, a child who is joining a new gymnastics class may feel nervous. A parent can help by suggesting some things the new coach might say or ask, and challenging the child to think about what they could say back. The following dialogue shows how a parent could prepare their daughter in this scenario.

Parent: Do you think the new coach might ask you some questions?

Zoe: I don't know, maybe.

Parent: Let's try to guess. I bet she might ask you if you have ever done gymnastics before. Pretend I'm your coach. Welcome to the team, Zoe! Have you ever done gymnastics before?

Zoe: Um, yeah.

Parent: You could tell her that you've done gymnastics since you were five!

Zoe: Oh. Yeah, I started when I was five!

Parent: Cool! Maybe she'll ask you if you have a favorite event. If she asked you that, what could you say?

Zoe: Floor.

Parent: I bet she'd want to know why you like it.

Zoe: Because I like the music.

Parent: Those are all great things to tell your new coach when you talk with her.

language with symbols. Some people also express language with their hands by signing or using assistive devices.

DLD is not specific to language by ear, mouth, eye, or hand. It impacts all four channels. You may find that you notice the effects of DLD more in one modality than another. For example, a child with DLD may manage to express themselves reasonably well when talking (language by mouth) but have a lot of difficulties understanding information that they read (language by eye). It's normal to observe this kind of variation, and it may change over time. When supporting a child or teen with DLD, it's important for parents and professionals to be thoughtful about all four channels and all five parts of language.

Chapter 2: Key Takeaways

- Language is different than speech. Children with clear speech can still struggle with language.
- Language has 5 parts that serve different functions. Children with DLD will have difficulty with some but not necessarily all of the parts of language. Identifying which ones are most challenging for your child is one way to identify ways to help. There are techniques for building kids' skills in all the areas.
- We do language by talking, listening, reading, and writing. These may seem like very different activities but they are all forms of language and DLD tends to impact them all. Plan to find support for your child with each of the four channels.



Chapter 3: DLD at Home

You probably notice your child's DLD in your daily life at home. You may find that they are less talkative than others their age, or that you have to repeat things you say multiple times. Your child may say the wrong word for what they mean or struggle to explain what happened in their day. Many children with DLD don't enjoy watching movies with their families because they have trouble following the dialogue. Your child's experiences with language will influence how they connect with others, function in the family, and spend their time. You can help your child with DLD at home in many ways, ranging from including language-building activities in your routines to simply expressing your understanding and support.

Talking with your child about their DLD

It's very important that your child learn, at a time that's right for them, that they have DLD and that that's ok. Research on outcomes for students with various learning challenges shows that the strongest predictors of long-term well-being are self-awareness and self-acceptance. In order to cope well with a lifelong challenge, your child will need to grow to understand their challenge and view it as one part of themselves, along with many other traits and qualities. Helping them adjust positively in this way is a process that will take time.

Tell them your child about DLD as soon as you think they can participate even a little in that conversation. Many parents are hesitant to tell a young child about a diagnosis, but it's quite a bit easier to introduce the idea to a young child than to a teenager. Children as young as 6 or 7 can often begin to listen to explanations of their challenges and form an understanding. Don't expect to fully explain what DLD is and what it all means at once. Plan to talk about DLD frequently, in small doses, always in a casual way that makes it clear that this is not something bad. It's just a part of life that needs to be dealt with, like having to brush your teeth.

The first time you introduce the idea of DLD, it may help to use an incident of communication difficulty as an opportunity to introduce the concept through an example. You can start by drawing attention to

that experience and telling your child that there is a name for that experience. It will likely feel easier to tell your child that there's a label for their experience than a label for a thing they have.

Let's say your child had a very difficult time telling you what they wanted for breakfast one day. They struggled to find the words until they eventually said waffles. So you kindly made waffles for them, only to have your child burst into tears when you presented the lovely waffle. This wasn't what they meant. They wanted pancakes but said the wrong thing. They were frustrated and you were frustrated. Later, after everyone has moved on from the incident, you could refer to that moment and label the experience. The talk could go something like this.

"Remember yesterday when you tried to tell me you wanted pancakes but the wrong word popped out? For some people, that happens a lot. I think that happens a lot for you, right? There's a name for that. It's called DLD. DLD means the person finds words tricky. Lots of people have DLD. It can be frustrating sometimes, but it's ok. We'll help you learn to manage it."

Your child may have questions for you or they may shrug off this message and move on. Either way is fine. The important thing is to begin using the term DLD and associating it with their real experiences of communication difficulty so that, over time, they can come to understand it.



Make connections to others if you can. If you think other people in your family have DLD, share that with your child so they can see that people with DLD grow up and things turn out ok. DLD is very very common, though many people with DLD have never been diagnosed. It's ok to guess. If someone else in the family has similar struggles with language, you can point out the similarities to normalize your child's experience. It helps a lot for children to know they're not the only ones with this challenge.

Try This

Talking with others about your child's DLD

Children have lots of people in their lives. You can ease some strains on your child by helping certain key people understand DLD. Coaches, clergy people, group leaders, friends' parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents are all important people who communicate with your child. When you help these people gain some sense of what DLD is, they can notice communication challenges for what they are rather than blaming your child's difficulties on other factors like behavior or effort. (Teachers obviously fit in this group too but we will discuss them more specifically in [chapter 4](#).)

Simple explanations are usually best. It may help to take the same approach you use with your child. Start by referring to an observation the person has already made about your child's communication. For example, if you're talking to your son's baseball coach, you might start with, "You know how Matteo always wants to watch everyone else do the drill before he takes his turn? We have figured out that he has a language processing problem called DLD. The DLD makes it hard for him

*Patience is a virtue and
don't delay in exploring
professional guidance.*

—Jackie

to understand what you're telling him to do. It really helps him to see it. That's why he watches first." By starting with an example that is relevant to the context in which the person interacts with your child, you're making the message meaningful from the beginning.

Next, explain some implications of DLD that the person may not have realized yet. In our example, the coach probably grasps the drill example easily but may not understand what else DLD means for your child's participation in baseball. What you say next will depend on your child and the traits of their DLD. Some common traits that are good for adults in your child's community to know include:

- She might not understand what you're saying, even if you think you're being really clear.
- She might not be able to express her thoughts in words sometimes
- There might be a delay in her response when you ask a question
- She might hang back when the other kids are all talking

Finally, share anything you know that helps ease communication with your child. It's ok if you're not quite sure what that might be right now. Awareness of the challenges is a fantastic start. Over time, you'll come to find steps that work for your child. The more you have open dialogues with other adults in your child's life, the faster you can work as a team to discover these supports! Here are a few suggestions that are positive for most children with DLD for you to start with.

- Make sure she can watch a demonstration
- Use gestures to help show what you mean
- Giving her extra time to say her thoughts
- Don't force her to talk when she's not ready
- If she says the wrong thing, don't make it a big deal.



- Find opportunities for her to lead or be acknowledged for her strengths

Building language learning into your life

Talk about everything. Children with DLD need to hear, say, read, and write words many times to master them. You can help them get a head start on all this language input by talking to your child a lot. Get in the habit of thinking out loud. The car is a great time for talk. Talk about where you're going, what you'll do when you get there, what you see along the way, or whatever else comes to mind. Point things out and describe them. Bring up a memory you're having or an issue on your mind. Use a mix of words, including some you bet your child doesn't know. Input matters.

Read out loud, even after your child starts learning to read, and even when you think they're too old. For some families, building a read-aloud habit takes extra work. Some children really don't like to listen to their parents read to them, at least at first. If you're finding that reading

to your child isn't working, think about how you could try something different. Have you tried a variety of books? Some kids much prefer fiction or nonfiction. For many kids with DLD, lots of pictures and short text works well (think the Guinness Book of World Records or the National Geographic Ultimate series). Your child

I think the best advice I have for another parent is to be open and honest with your child about their diagnosis and what it means. That you will be there to help them through and learn how to help them find their voice along the way.

—Kim

may enjoy poetry for kids (Jack Prelutsky), which sounds rhythmic and comes in short verses. There are lots of ways

to change up read-alouds until you find something appealing. Also, lots of parents think that once their child hits first or second grade and learns to read, they should stop reading to the child and make the child read. Your

school child with DLD has a long and challenging school day. You don't need to make evening reading another chore. It's very beneficial to let your child relax and let you do the reading. They're still taking in all those words and complex sentences and ideas and that's really what we want to build.

Focus on ideas and experiences and the words will come along. Let's say you visit an aquarium with your child and they think the jellyfish are really cool. You can introduce the word tentacles and find other animals that also have tentacles. You can point out parts that the jellyfish doesn't have, like a spine. You can also use different words to describe how the jellyfish moves (*glide, float, propel*) and how it gets its food (*current, sting, paralyze, prey*). Think of every new activity or event as an opportunity to introduce new concepts and rich language.

Expect lots of repetition. You may feel like you've covered the same ground many times. You may sometimes feel frustrated because you expect your child to know what you mean by certain words or expressions and yet the communication breaks down again. That's totally normal. Children with DLD need

Talking to your child is important so you're on the same page. When my parents told me about my disability, I was like, "Oh, that's why school is hard!" It made sense. Communication is the best thing to have.

—Lexi



lots more repetition to learn words and lots more time to master language comprehension than their peers.

Find help from others if you can. It's hard to be a parent and a teacher. Many children learn best from adults other than their parents after early childhood. If you are able, enlisting extra help with oral and written language from SLPs or specialized tutors can be a key avenue for building your child's skills.

Building a supportive home for your child with DLD

Everyone's home life is different. There's no one right way to parent a child with DLD. Along your journey, you'll learn what conditions help your child be more successful and what triggers stress. It's very helpful to talk with other families of children with language difficulties and share strategies. The following four basic tips for building healthy home life for your child with DLD are drawn from the experiences of many families.

Manage your own expectations. It can be frustrating when your child isn't talking or understanding the way you expect. Some parents feel sad that their child doesn't enjoy being read to or doesn't say much about their day. It's ok to feel that sadness. You can feel sad about the struggles and still support your child. No matter what, remember to embrace your child exactly as they are and let them know that you do.

Give choices. It's easier to recognize a word than to pull it out of memory. If you find that your child is struggling to name or explain something, you can offer some options for them to choose from. You may guess wrong and they may say none of those are what they're trying to say. That's ok. Go back to just listening.

Normalize communication breakdowns. Everyone says the wrong thing or fails to get the message sometimes. Children with DLD aren't different because these things happen to them. Children with

DLD just have to deal with them more often. Build a culture in your home in which it's normal to need help remembering, saying, or understanding things. You can start to do this by calling out your own imperfections and taking them in stride. Imagine you just tried to call your older son for dinner but

*My parents taught
me to work hard.
They encouraged
me to spend the
extra time.
They said,
put your mind
and heart into it
and you'll be
able to
achieve it. —VR*

you used your younger son's name. "Jaxon, come in for dinner! Oh! I just said Jaxon and I meant Carter! The wrong name popped right out of my mouth. Let me try that again. Carter, come in, dinner's ready!" Let your child with DLD and other members of the family

hear you talk through moments like this in a relaxed way. This can help your child with DLD build healthy coping mechanisms and help others in the family react to breakdowns without stigmatizing them.

Find ways to connect without lots of talk. Building a language-rich environment at home can help your child grow their skills, but it's important to also cultivate downtime. Remember that, no matter how hard you work to help your child get better with words, their brain works very hard to process all the talk in their day. Your child will probably appreciate activities that are light on language. Make sure they have plenty of time for physical play (whether it be organized sports or just kicking a ball around), arts, music, nature, or whatever feels easy and fun for them. It's totally ok if that relaxing activity for your child is playing video games. As long as your child also has other activities in their life, don't stress about



screen time. It's also a good idea to plan to do some of these activities together. The time you take to toss a frisbee or splash around in the local creek, (or even run

around together in a Minecraft world) without having to talk too much could mean a lot to your child.

Chapter 3: Key Takeaways

- It's important to educate your child about their DLD. This is a process. There's no need to plan a big lecture. Short conversations spread out over time work well. Everyone has to find the right time and way to talk to their own child, but bear in mind that it's usually easier to introduce an idea like this to a young child than to a teenager.
- Your child will be supported best when key people in their lives also understand the basics of DLD. When you decide to tell another adult, use an example to illustrate what you mean by DLD and offer a few ideas of simple things they can do to ease communication for your child.
- Kids with DLD need to interact with language a lot. When you find ways to add more talk into your home environment, you're increasing that exposure. It's also wise to give your child time to relax without the pressure of words (yes, even when that means playing video games). Everyone needs time to feel the pressures are off.



Chapter 4: DLD at School

Children and teens use language everywhere they go, but the language of school is different from the language we use at home and in our communities. Even early in the elementary school years, children hear denser language with more complex sentences and more unknown words at school than at home. With the early school years also comes the introduction to using language by eye (reading) and hand (writing), new skills that are more challenging for students with DLD than their peers. Navigating DLD at school is a complex journey and we will not be able to address all the issues in this beginner's guide. The following sections lay out some key considerations for students with DLD in different parts of the school day. Our hope is that this information will help you start to form a framework for thinking about how to make sure your child with DLD is supported at school.

DLD Terminology at School

The teachers, specialists, and administrators at your child's school may not be familiar with the term DLD but they're certainly familiar with children with language disorders. Language disorders in children are so common that every school has many students who need support with language. It is likely, though, that the staff at your school use different terms to describe your child's language difficulties. They might refer to language learning disability (LLD) or specific language impairment (SLI). In some states, the term 'speech and language impairment' is used even if the child has no difficulty with speech.

It's ok to have different ways to say the same thing, but it's important for the people who are working together to support a child to share a common language. If your school team doesn't use the term DLD, you can start a conversation to bridge the gap. First, find out what the staff at your school call a language disorder. It's ok if your team explains that they need to use a different term in your child's IEP. The terms used to classify children for special education are regulated at the state level and as of the time this book was written, no state in the USA uses DLD as an eligibility category. The school will likely use a different term for official purposes like an IEP, but you can still infuse DLD into the conversation.

Plan to explain to your team how you were informed

of the diagnosis of DLD and what it means to you. (You can share this book!) It's also a good idea to tell the team that you talk with your child about DLD at home. If your child is learning about their own DLD, they are developing vital tools for self-advocacy. It's important for their teachers and service providers to be ready to engage with your child about their disability in a way that works for your child.

IEP meetings can move fast. Many parents feel that

they're struggling to keep up with lots of unfamiliar information coming at them at once. If you think you and your child's team need to establish a common understanding of DLD, be proactive in planning time to have that conversation at an IEP meeting. You may want to reach out ahead of time to tell the person who runs the meeting (usually a case manager) that

*DLD carries through
all subjects, so make
sure they have the services
and accommodations
needed to succeed
in the subjects many of
these kids love best.
We know those likely
aren't reading
and writing!*

—Kim



Try This

Come to the meeting prepared to explain your view of DLD. You can use the following sample statements as you talk with your IEP team at a meeting.

You are free to copy and modify this language to suit your situation.

- We learned about DLD from Micah's speech-language pathologist (or other source). She explained that DLD affects listening, talking, reading, writing, and learning in all classes. It also makes it difficult for Micah to keep up with his peers in conversation so it can cause social challenges. We know that his DLD isn't going to go away, so we want to make sure that we support him as he grows up with it.
- At home, we use the term DLD to talk about Micah's language disability. He knows he has DLD and he understands that DLD makes it hard for him to put his thoughts into words and understand what people are saying at times.
- We understand that the term (insert your state's term) has to be on the IEP. We'd also like to include DLD because that's how Micah identifies his disability. We have a statement about DLD to include in the parental concerns section.

you want to save a few minutes of the meeting to talk about DLD.

It's also a good idea to write out a statement about your perspective on your child's DLD and ask for it to be included in the IEP. Every IEP has to have a section for parental input or concerns. The following is an example of a statement you could add to your child's IEP to summarize DLD. This is just a suggested starting point. Again, you are free to copy this text and make changes to personalize it for your child.

Micah has Developmental Language Disorder (DLD). DLD causes the child to have difficulty understanding and using language. DLD affects speaking, listening, reading, writing, learning, and socializing. Children don't outgrow DLD. Micah's challenges with language will impact him in different ways as he grows up. Micah's DLD also impacts his life at home and in our community because he needs to communicate with others throughout his day. We are committed to helping Micah improve his language skills and also learn to manage the challenges that come with DLD.

Reading

Reading is a language activity. When we read, we are activating the same language centers of the brain that we use when speaking and listening. Many, but not all, children with DLD will have some difficulty with decoding and reading fluency. Some children with DLD also have dyslexia, a developmental disability that affects accurate and automatic recognition of written words. Children who struggle with decoding and reading fluency need structured, systematic phonics instruction. You can find more resources about dyslexia and interventions for dyslexia [here](#).

Children with DLD most commonly have trouble with reading comprehension, because it relies on the same language comprehension processing that we use in spoken language. In fact, many children with DLD are not identified with any kind of language difficulty until the middle elementary grades, when children are expected to be able to read to learn. When this happens, the child with DLD may be identified as a student with a reading problem, when the problem is truly at the level of language learning. For students with DLD, help for reading comprehension difficulties needs to address the underlying language skill weaknesses. The following are components of proficient reading that tend to be challenging for



students with DLD. Plan to talk with your child’s teachers about these skills and how to support your child in each area as needed.

Vocabulary: Reading comprehension is highly dependent on the reader’s vocabulary knowledge. Text uses sophisticated, rare, and topic-specific words far more often than conversation. Students with DLD frequently experience breakdowns in comprehension when they come across words they do not understand. Classroom instruction should include the targeted study of useful vocabulary words as well as strategies for what to do when you come across words you don’t know.

Background knowledge: Lots of research shows that reading comprehension is strongly tied to the reader’s background knowledge of the subject matter. Knowledge is also strongly tied to semantics. Children with DLD may have more trouble building and storing rich topic knowledge because that knowledge is so dependent on learning the associated words. Building background knowledge needs to be a part of classroom reading experiences.

Sentence structure: Written sentences tend to be longer and more complex in structure than we use in conversation. For students with DLD, reading comprehension often breaks down when they encounter a long sentence with many meaningful parts. Reading comprehension support should include work on parsing sentences. Research has also shown that sentence comprehension can be improved when students work on writing longer and more complex sentences.

Cohesion: To understand what you read, you must integrate verbal information across sentences and paragraphs. Children with DLD may struggle to connect one sentence to another. For example, consider these two sentences from a science article. “Octopuses eat small creatures that crawl along the ocean floor, like crabs and shrimp. The cephalopods hide themselves by blending into the environment when they hunt.” A reader with DLD

may not immediately recognize that cephalopods is another term for octopuses and interpret the second sentence as telling about a totally different creature. Practice finding cohesive devices across sentences can help students with DLD make connections as they read.

Story structure: Stories have a predictable organization, often referred to as narrative structure. Many children implicitly learn to recognize this structure and use it to predict what will happen next as they read stories. Children with DLD may not figure out this pattern on their own and will likely benefit from being taught narrative structure.

It’s important that reading instruction for kids with DLD includes close attention to building language skills. Many popular approaches to reading instruction focus on comprehension strategies like finding the main idea. Strategy instruction can be useful but it will doesn’t replace learning to



Speech-language therapy services and smaller classroom setting continue to help our son in the middle school years.—Jackie



understand what words and sentences mean. One way to support children and adolescents with developing reading comprehension is to coordinate language intervention

with their reading instruction. If your child works with a speech-language pathologist on language skills, ask about how the SLP and reading teacher collaborate to ensure your child is working on language skills that are meaningful in the classroom.

Writing

Writing is also a language activity. When we write, we are drawing on our expressive language skills and



shaping them to fit the written conventions of our language. Writing is one of the most complex and demanding activities students do in school. Children and teens with DLD tend to find writing very hard. It's common for parents and teachers to hear students say they hate writing! Your child may never feel a love of writing but it is important that they develop written communication skills that support their success in school and in life after school. The following are

components of proficient writing that tend to be challenging for students with DLD. You may notice that this list has a lot in common with the list of critical components of reading! Many language skills needed for literacy can be addressed in an integrated way across reading

and writing activities. As with the reading list, plan to talk with your child's teachers about these skills and how to support your child in each area as needed.

Vocabulary: Students with DLD typically use simple words in writing and may repeat the same words rather than vary their word choice. This can make their writing sound immature. It can also be problematic in content areas like science and history, where using the right vocabulary is an important part of writing to show what they've learned. Students with DLD can benefit from word banks and prewriting steps that involve collecting useful words related to their topic.

*I couldn't understand
what the teacher was
teaching me in a large
classroom. Smaller
classrooms were very
helpful. Some things that
helped me in school
were having notes written
down for me and
having teachers available
to help me when
I got stuck.
—Lexi*

Ideation: Writing involves generating ideas. Most writing for school requires lots of ideas! Teachers are always asking students to think of more details to add. Coming up with ideas requires background knowledge, vocabulary, and other skills such as retrieval, perspective-taking, and cognitive flexibility, which are also areas of difficulty for many children with DLD. Students with DLD may need more support in the planning phase of the writing process to generate enough content to meet the expectations of the assignment. Visuals, brainstorming activities, and conversations with peers and teachers can help students with DLD expand their ideation.

Sentence formulation: The sentence is the basic unit of written composition. As we know, difficulties with syntax are usually a primary feature of DLD. Some popular approaches to writing instruction assume that children will be able to use their oral language proficiency to naturally compose complete, correct sentences. This can be problematic for children with DLD, who need more structured instruction in sentence writing. Explicit, systematic sentence instruction that provides students with guided practice in formulating sentences with different structures is very useful for students with DLD.

Cohesion: Sentences connect with one another and work together to form cohesive writing. Children with DLD often need support to learn how to connect their written sentences by using transitional words and phrases. They may also have difficulty varying referents. Referents are different words used to label the same person, thing, or group. For example, in the following text, all the pink words refer to the same person and all the red words refer to the same group of people. “My mom is a doctor. She helps sick children get better. They need her to give them medicine.” Students with DLD will need guided practice with finding opportunities to use these devices in their writing and choosing which transitions and referents work best.



Paragraph and essay organization: All students learn that paragraphs follow a set structure, with a topic sentence, detail sentences, and a concluding sentence. In later years, they learn to write essays with paragraphs following a similar structure. While learning to organize writing is a process for everyone, students with DLD will likely need a lot more guidance and practice over a longer period of time to learn to compose organized writing independently.

Math

It may seem like math would be the part of the school day that would provide students with DLD some reprieve from the constant challenge of processing language. Unfortunately, that's not the case. Learning math and thinking mathematically are very demanding on language processing. Many parents of children with DLD observe that their children struggle with math and regard it as an additional or separate problem. Though some children with DLD get diagnosed with an additional math learning disability, challenges with math are very much a typical experience associated with DLD.

It's very important that the impact of DLD on math learning be considered in your child's educational planning. Research on math interventions for students with language disorders has shown that remedial instruction focused on math processes without language support is not effective. As you work with your child's team to plan supports for their math instruction, consider the following features of math learning that pose particular challenges to students with DLD.

Math teacher talk: Children learn math through classroom discourse, the back-and-forth conversations with the teacher and other students. Discourse is hard for kids with DLD. It involves questions and answers, sequencing, cause-effect, and other challenges to language processing. Math discourse comes with all of these challenges embedded. Teachers need to use complex syntax

to explain math concepts and procedures. It's important for math teachers working with students with DLD to plan to break down their explanations and use visual supports wherever possible.

Numbers as words: Numbers are words, and so it is often difficult for children with DLD to master the basic concepts of numbers. Think of the number five. When you hear or read that word, your mind instantly activates its meaning in many ways. You may be able to visualize a group of five things and associate it as being more than four and less than six. You may visualize the written digit 5. These are all semantic features of the word five. Children with DLD have difficulty developing robust semantic representations of number words, leaving holes in their foundations as the curriculum quickly progresses to calculation and operations. It's critical that children with DLD have the opportunity and supports needed to enable them to master basic number concepts.

Math vocabulary: Math has lots of vocabulary in addition to the numbers themselves. Carrying out math procedures depends on understanding the words that describe the elements and steps of those procedures, such as numerator, divide, carry, borrow, regroup, etc. Students with DLD will need more instruction and practice with the vocabulary of math in order to understand how to carry out the targeted processes.

Story problems: Story problems, also called word problems, are notoriously difficult for children with DLD (and their peers!). To solve a story problem, the student has to apply reading comprehension to make a mental model of the situation. Then the additional challenges of the mathematical concepts and procedures are the next step. Students with DLD may need to learn extra steps to break down word problems, identify key words, parse sentences, and create meaning from the story before beginning to carry out the calculations.



Other Subjects

In the elementary years, there is a strong focus on acquiring basic skills in reading, writing, and math, and students with DLD tend to need the most support in these subject areas to build their foundations. In middle school and beyond, however, it's common for science, history, and other subjects to pose even greater challenges because these subjects increasingly rely on their own topic-specific language.

History and science often require as much or even more writing than English/Language Arts classes in the later grades but offer less

*School was complicated
and confusing but one-on-one
help and breaking it
down was really helpful.*

—VR

whole-group support. Content area tests may be challenging because students study key vocabulary with the definition expressed a certain way, and then the test presents the word in a novel context. Further, in many schools, there are few options for academic support in classes other than English/Language Arts and Math. For many students with DLD, modifications to the curriculum in content area classes are critical. Some possibilities for modifications that ease language demands follow.

- Limit open-ended response questions on tests and quizzes
- Provide word banks
- Reduce the number of pages or words required in written assignments
- Provide alternatives to writing to complete some requirements (e.g. make a movie, create a slide deck, give a short presentation with visuals)
- Provide guided notes or study guides
- Reduce answer choices on multiple-choice tests

When planning supports for your student with DLD, don't forget the classes outside the core four (English, math, science, history). Language demands can be significant in unexpected classes, such as music, art, and health. Sometimes these classes are challenging because the level of language complexity is underestimated and supports aren't planned. Also, teachers of these subjects likely have less training in language and learning disabilities than their colleagues in the core classes. You may need to enlist help from specialist members of your child's team to develop accommodations and modifications that will enable your child to be successful in related arts and elective classes.

DLD and IEPs

Navigating the special education system is complex. There are many resources for families of children with disabilities to help them learn how the special education system works and how to advocate for their child. We have included several excellent references [here](#). Though we can't address all the ins and outs of special education in this introductory guide to DLD, we do want to address a few issues specific to children with DLD.

DLD is a disability, so a child with DLD may be eligible for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The presence of a disability does not, by itself, qualify a child for an IEP, however. To be eligible for an IEP, a child must have a disability and demonstrate adverse educational impact from that disability. States and school districts have their own criteria for determining educational impact. Students with DLD very often qualify for special education because DLD has a wide-ranging impact on learning and academic achievement.

IEPs can include a variety of services to support students with DLD. The IEP provides the child with an educational placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Some children may be placed in a co-teaching setting, while others may benefit



from small group instruction in a resource room or self-contained classroom. Depending on your child's individual strengths and needs, it may help your child to have all or some of the following services included in their IEP.

- Small-group instruction
- Specialized instruction in reading and writing
- Specialized instruction in math
- Speech-language therapy
- Additional class time to review material with support
- Social skills instruction
- Counseling or advocacy coaching

Sometimes, a child is diagnosed with a disability, but they are able to make good educational progress without special education. In a case like this, a child with DLD may not be eligible to qualify for an IEP. This may be especially true in later years, after a student has had intervention from SLPs and specialized instruction in basic skills.

Students with disabilities who do not qualify for an IEP may be eligible for a different form of help at school, known as a 504 Plan. At the federal level, the right to equal access is protected by Section 504 of

the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Per this law, students with disabilities have the right to equal access to their education. Any student with a disability may be entitled to a 504 Plan, which provides accommodations that are necessary to provide that student with equal access to their education. An accommodation is a change to the environment, format, or modality of learning that removes an obstacle for a student with a disability. 504 plans do not provide instructional services like specialized reading intervention or speech-language therapy. Students with DLD may benefit from 504 plans that provide accommodations such as the following (just a few examples):

- Extra time to complete tests or assignments
- Advantageous seating in the classroom to facilitate language processing (i.e. close to the teacher, away from sources of competing noise)
- Access to text-to-speech and/or speech-to-text software
- Permission to complete an assignment or assessment in an alternative modality (e.g. answer questions orally instead of in writing)
- Provision of written notes or guided notes instead of requiring note-taking

Chapter 4: Key Takeaways

- Because there are lots of different terms for language disorders, you will likely need to talk with the professionals at your child's school about DLD and come to a common understanding.
- Reading and writing are language skills so students with DLD almost always need specialized instruction and support to build literacy proficiency.
- DLD can impact your student's participation and success in all subject areas including math and related arts. Prepare to talk with your child's teachers and IEP team about supports, modifications, and/or accommodations across their curriculum.
- With the right supports in place, children with DLD succeed in the general education classroom.



Chapter 5: DLD with Friends

We direct a lot of attention to the educational implications of DLD but families of children with DLD often share that the social impact is just as great. Children and teens with DLD experience different, often more subtle and easily missed, social challenges than their peers with autism. Kids with DLD tend to have typical interests for their age and to be strongly socially motivated. Their challenges usually stem from the complexities of conversation, which advance as the peer group gets older. It's very important for families and school professionals to be aware of the social implications of DLD and prepare to offer support.

How DLD impacts friendships

When children are little, they relate to each other by doing things together. Preschoolers can happily play together in a sandbox side by side while not talking to each other much.

*I made good friends
in after-school activities
like film-making club and
the talent show.*

*It helps to get involved
in activities outside the
classroom. —Lexi*

As they grow, language plays an increasingly important role in social interactions. Play schemes and games get more complex, requiring giving and receiving instructions and negotiating plans. In middle and later childhood, kids spend a lot of time conversing in groups without a game, toy, or sport to mediate the interaction. **The more language dominates the interaction, the harder social interactions are for kids with DLD.**

Families of children with DLD often report observing their child struggling to keep up with peer conversations. There are lots of reasons why conversations with peers are challenging.

- The peers may talk too fast, talk at the same time, or use words or expressions the child with DLD doesn't know.
- Kids with DLD often need more time to formulate something to say than the

conversational flow allows.

- When kids with DLD do get a chance to break in, kids with DLD may use the wrong words or say something that seems off-topic because the conversation has moved on while they were formulating their words.
- Social communication is also very nuanced. Kids and teens often don't say exactly what they mean. Indirect statements, slang, figurative language, and sarcasm are all language challenges.

Kids and teens with DLD are vulnerable to misunderstanding their peers and feeling hurt or responding inappropriately. Strong friendships can weather the storm of communication breakdowns, but sometimes miscommunications can seriously strain or even end a friendship. This is why it's so important for DLD to be understood as a condition that impacts the child throughout their day, in and out of school, and to provide the child with support for building their communication skills in social as well as academic contexts.

Supporting your young child

Children with DLD often do best socially in one-on-one situations. Group conversations raise a host of additional challenges. If you see your child seems to like or relate fairly well with a particular child, plan to invite that child to play at your home or at a neutral space like a local park. Do this often. Prioritize building opportunities for your child to socialize outside of school and outside of organized activities.



You might feel like you're always the initiator and other children don't invite your child for playdates or events very often. That's ok. Don't give up. Building relationships takes time and experimentation. Relationships will also change over time. A peer who seemed to be a good friend in first and second grade may no longer work out in fourth grade. Your

Being part of a sport team has helped our son tremendously to build social relationships and having close neighborhood friends. We guide him to initiate making plans with his friends, provide him with suggestions for friend activities, and host get-togethers for him.

—Jackie

their friend to do. Open conversation can be difficult for kids with DLD so activities are central. It's easier to talk to a peer when you can both focus on the activity, rather than just trying to chat or figure out what the other person likes to do. Some ideas for language-light activities to include:

- Baking
- Crafts
- Sports (Sports activities can be causal, like playing HORSE instead of basketball or making up a silly version of a basic game like balloon volleyball.)
- Water play (e.g. sprinklers, water balloons, etc)
- Creative physical play (e.g. make an obstacle course, the floor is lava, etc)
- Sand, dough, slime, or other sensory play

persistence in supporting social opportunities will benefit your child.

When you do arrange a playdate or hangout for your child and a friend, you can take some steps to set your child up for success. Have some language-light activities available for your child and

- Building toys (e.g. Legos, Magnetiles, etc)
- Card or board games with little or no text
- Dance/karaoke

Don't worry or feel guilty if your child and their friends go right to screens for playtime. Kids today play together inside video games. In fact, digital worlds like those inside Minecraft or Roblox are very important social environments for today's kids. It's normal to worry about your child's screen time. Here's a good rule of thumb- if the screen helps your child build a connection with a friend, there's value to that time. If your child is using the screen as an alternative to connecting with others, you may want to put limits on that time. (It's still wise to understand that solo time might be an important source of stress relief for your child.)

Supporting your teen

When your child moves into the teen years, the social scene will likely get more complicated. This is true for all kids, and DLD adds additional layers to the minefield of adolescence. Some teens with DLD cope by staying fairly quiet and remaining on the outskirts

The language difficulties still show up. Particularly if I'm anxious about something, I struggle to formulate words. —VR

of social interactions. Others dive right in, which can lead to both highlights and breakdowns. One of the primary ways you

can support your teen socially is to help prevent withdrawal and isolation, which can lead to serious mental health problems.

You may not be able to be the initiator anymore, but you can help your teen find inroads to social opportunities. Support hobbies and activities that feel natural and rewarding for your teen. That can be anything. Don't judge your teen's interests or try



to steer them to an activity you wish they'd like. For example, maybe your teen loves anime and you totally don't see the appeal. It's ok! You don't have to like it too, but if you give your child the opportunity to attend anime clubs and events, they'll have the chance to build relationships with kids who share their

Our son (now 11) will often come in from a conversation with peers and say "that made no sense." We will then break the conversation down for him so he understands.

—Kim

interests. This has a lot more value than pushing or bribing your child to do a more conventional activity like join a sports team against their will. To the extent that you are able, help your teen try many different activities in which they can potentially discover an interest and a context for connecting with peers. The following are activities that teens with DLD sometimes find enjoyable and successful.

- Activities involving animals: horseback riding, volunteering at a shelter
- Solo sports: swimming, diving, golf, tennis, fencing, martial arts, gymnastics, dance, mountain biking, skiing, ice skating, archery

- Arts: drawing, painting, sewing, knitting, beading, pottery
- Care of younger children: babysitting, leading or assisting with youth groups
- Mechanical: fixing things, building, designing inventions, woodworking
- Cooking and baking
- Nature activities: hiking, kayaking, paddle boarding

Relationships as protective factors

Research on the wellbeing of children and teens with language disorders has shown that positive peer relationships offer protection against the effects of negative experiences. Multiple studies have shown that children and teens with a few close relationships report lower levels of victimization. In other words, feeling connected to friends decreases the impact of difficult experiences like exclusion or bullying. It's important for kids and teens to feel valued by peers, even if that reinforcement comes from only one or a small group of friends. As professionals, we often hear families feel concerned that their child or teen with DLD has a limited social circle. Be assured that quality matters far more than quantity. If you see that your child or teen has a few social connections, help them invest in strengthening those connections rather than worrying about breaking into larger groups.

Chapter 5: Key Takeaways

- DLD impacts children and teens socially as well as academically, even though they tend to have typical interests and levels of social motivation.
- Families can help their child or teen with DLD find opportunities to build relationships by facilitating their participation in high-interest, language-light activities.
- Positive peer relationships help protect kids and teens with DLD from the worst effects of exclusion or bullying. One or two good friends can have a big impact on your child's wellbeing.



Chapter 6: Adulting with DLD

As parents and caregivers, we can't help but worry about what will happen to our children with disabilities when they grow up. We have endless questions. Will she go to college? Will he be able to have a career and live on his own? Will they find a partner and navigate the challenges of a relationship? Though no one can peer into your child's future and answer these questions for you, researchers have studied the long-term outcomes of children with language and learning disabilities and they have found some encouraging results. Kids don't outgrow DLD, but DLD in adulthood doesn't limit the individual's potential for a happy, independent adult life.

Communication challenges in adulthood

Even after the school years, life continues to include plenty of language challenges. Adults need to communicate effectively in all work settings and in their private lives in order to live independently and be part of a community.

It's important to feel connected to others who are having the same experiences as you.—Lexi

Adults with DLD typically continue to find reading comprehension and written expression difficult. This can impact adult achievements like passing the written driver's test or creating a resume to apply for employment. They may struggle to understand spoken or written information in complex contexts, like a doctor explaining a medical condition or an accountant explaining tax laws. They may also continue to have some social communication difficulties and may feel most comfortable relaxing in small, familiar groups or in individual hobbies. Fortunately, adult life also offers more choices than the school years, when academics are compulsory. Successful adults with DLD tend to have strong self-awareness that they use to choose situations for themselves in which they can leverage their strengths.

What happens to kids with DLD when they grow up?

Thanks to the work of many dedicated longitudinal researchers over the past several decades, we can make some general statements about outcomes for people with DLD. Before we dive into the available information, however, it's important to emphasize that DLD doesn't predetermine outcomes. In every study conducted on groups of children with DLD as they grew up into adults, some achieved great things and some had significant life difficulties. Lots of factors influence the trajectory of a person's life. Cognitive and linguistic abilities play a role, but overall that role is small. The severity of a person's DLD has been found to play a role in outcomes to an extent, but so does the level of support provided to the individual during their education, training, and

employment experiences.

*Don't give up!
You know your child best.
Be their voice and then also teach them to be their own voice.—Kim*

Young adults with DLD go to college and even graduate school, though they do these things at lower rates than their nondisabled peers. **Studies**

from the 1990s compared to more recent studies show that educational outcomes for people with



DLD are improving as more supportive programs in higher education have become available. Adults with DLD tend to be employed at the same rates as the general population. Common employment categories include trades, information technology, retail, administrative, and food service. Fortunately, no significant differences have been found in job satisfaction between adults with DLD and those without. Your child with DLD has the same chances at finding a job they enjoy as their peers.

Studies of adults with DLD show that they tend to get married or live with a partner and become parents at the same rate as their nondisabled peers. They may have smaller social circles than the general population

but they show typical levels of empathy, kindness, helpfulness, and general prosocial behavior. **Perhaps the most encouraging finding, which is consistent among multiple studies, is that young adults with DLD didn't differ from the general population in personal happiness or satisfaction with their family life, job, social life, or living situation.** They didn't view life negatively or view themselves as faring less well than others. Adults with DLD report that they experience a range of challenges associated with their communication disorder, but they do not report a lower quality of life than the general population.

*At college, I did
all my course work
on my own.
I used what I learned from
high school and my
speech-language
pathologist to help guide
me through
my assignments.
Sometimes I used the
tutoring center
in college. That all worked
for me. —VR*

How can I help keep my child on the path to the best outcomes?

Just by reading this book, you are already taking an important step in putting your child on a positive long-term path. Longitudinal research on children with learning disabilities shows that supportive, trusted, engaged adults play a critical role in promoting long-term success. Keep learning about DLD, keep advocating, and make sure your child knows you are in their corner.

More specific insights can be found in an illuminating study by Roberta Goldberg and colleagues from the Frostig Center, an organization and school for students with learning differences. The researchers followed a group of students with learning disabilities for 20 years, identified those who were successful in adulthood, and studied the traits that determined success. The researchers identified several success attributes, each of which is a part of the individual but can be facilitated by their loved ones as they grow up. The following four qualities were found to be strongly tied to successful adulthood. As you help your child navigate life with DLD, focus on helping them build these traits.

- **Self-awareness:** Successful adults with learning disabilities acknowledge and understand their disability but they see it as only one part of themselves. They identify with the disability but also with other traits and strengths. In other words, they can compartmentalize their disability so that it doesn't dominate their self-concept. *You can help your child build a view of themselves that includes DLD but doesn't put DLD at the center. This sets them up for the ability to self-advocate while also viewing themselves as capable.*
- **Perseverance:** Learning and language disabilities make life hard, so succeeding over the long term requires perseverance. For successful adults with learning disabilities, a critical part of perseverance developing proactivity. They learn



to anticipate challenges they may experience due to their disability and to plan ahead to set themselves up for success. Proactivity is tied to self-awareness and self-advocacy.

- **Goal-setting:** Successful adults with learning disabilities show strength in setting goals and working towards them in a step-by-step progression. They understand that they may not succeed at first and that a sustained effort may be needed to reach their goal. They value their progress along the way, even when gains seem small.

- **Social support systems:** Successful adults with learning disabilities tend to have positive social support systems. This includes you, other family members, other significant adults (e.g. coaches, group leaders) as well as friends, classmates, and coworkers. Make social relationships a priority in your child's life. In the day to day grind, tonight's tutoring session or next week's research paper can seem more important than going out for ice cream with the other kids. In the long run, your child's positive connections with others may play a bigger role in their wellbeing than their academic achievement.

Chapter 6: Key Takeaways

- Children with DLD will likely grow into adults who have plenty of potential but still have some difficulty with complex spoken and written communication.
- DLD doesn't close doors. Adults with DLD can go to college, get married or live with a partner, manage their own household, choose a career, and enjoy social networks. Most importantly, adults with DLD report the same levels of life satisfaction than the general population.
- You can help your child on the road to wellbeing in adulthood by cultivating their self-awareness and self-determination, and by being there for them every step of the way. Your love and support does make a difference.



Resources

Websites About DLD

DLD & Me: <https://dldandme.org/>

Raising Awareness of DLD: <https://radld.org/>

The DLD Project: <https://thedldproject.com/>

Websites About the Special Education System

Wrights Law- Parental Rights in Special Education: <https://www.wrightslaw.com/>

SPAN Parent Advocacy Network: <https://spanadvocacy.org/>

Understanding the Special Education Process by the Pacer Center: <https://www.pacer.org/parent/understanding-the-spec-ed-process.asp>

Websites About Dyslexia & Other Learning Issues

International Dyslexia Association: <https://dyslexiaida.org/>

The Reading League: <https://www.thereadingleague.org/>

Understood.org: <https://www.understood.org/>

Yale Center for Dyslexia: <https://dyslexia.yale.edu/dyslexia/what-is-dyslexia/>

Understanding Dyslexia Article for Teens: <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/dyslexia.html>

Instagram Accounts about DLD

@RADLDcam: <https://www.instagram.com/radldcam/>

@dldseeme: <https://www.instagram.com/dldseeme/>

@thedldproject: <https://www.instagram.com/thedldproject/>

@dld.and.me: <https://www.instagram.com/dld.and.me/>

@dld_diagnostics: https://www.instagram.com/dld_diagnostics/

YouTube Videos & Channels About DLD

RADLD Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/RADLD>

Living with DLD as a Teenager, Moor House School & College: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzZEHpMJ_JE

Living with DLD, BoysTown Hospital: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrOISXtCgVA>

Parent of a Child with DLD, BoysTown Hospital: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MKUgQUhDPM>

Living with DLD: Paula's Story, BoysTown Hospital: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsujzcxsDJ4>



References

- Adlof, S. M. (2020). Promoting reading achievement in children with developmental language disorders: What can we learn from research on specific language impairment and dyslexia? *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 63(10), 3277-3292. https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_JSLHR-20-00118
- Alonzo, C. N., McIlraith, A. L., Catts, H. W., & Hogan, T. P. (2020). Predicting dyslexia in children with developmental language disorder. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 63(1), 151-162. https://doi.org/10.1044/2019_JSLHR-L-18-0265
- Bishop, D. V. M. (2014). Ten questions about terminology for children with unexplained language problems. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 49(4), 381-397. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12101>
- Bishop, D. V. M., Snowling, M. J., Thompson, P. A., & Greenhalgh, T. (2016). CATALISE: A multinational and multidisciplinary Delphi consensus study *Identifying language impairments in children*. PLoS ONE, 11(7). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0158753>
- Bishop, D. V. M., Snowling, M. J., Thompson, P. A., & Greenhalgh, T. (2017). Phase 2 of CATALISE: A multinational and multidisciplinary Delphi consensus study of problems with language development: Terminology. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 58(10), 1068-1080. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12721>
- Botting, N., Faragher, B., Smikin, Z., Knox, E., & Conti-Ramsden, G. (2001). Predicting pathways of Specific Language Impairment: What differentiates good and poor outcome? *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 42(8), 1013-1020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-7610.00799>
- Camarata Stephen, M., Nelson Keith, E., & Camarata Mary, N. (1994). Comparison of Conversational-Recasting and Imitative Procedures for Training Grammatical Structures in Children With Specific Language Impairment. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 37(6), 1414-1423. <https://doi.org/10.1044/jshr.3706.1414>
- Catts, H. W., Adlof, S. M., Hogan, T. P., & Weismer, S. E. (2005). Are specific language impairment and dyslexia distinct disorders? *Journal of speech, language, and hearing research: JSLHR*, 48(6), 1378-1396.
- Conti-Ramsden, G., Durkin, K., Toseeb, U., Botting, N., & Pickles, A. (2018). Education and Employment Outcomes of Young Adults with a History of Developmental Language Disorder. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 53(2), 237-255.
- Conti-Ramsden, G., Mok, P. L. H., Pickles, A., & Durkin, K. (2013). Adolescents with a history of specific language impairment (SLI): Strengths and difficulties in social, emotional and behavioral functioning. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 34(11), 4161-4169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2013.08.043>
- Cross, A. M., Joannis, M. F., & Archibald, L. M. D. (2019). Mathematical Abilities in Children With Developmental Language Disorder. *Language, Speech & Hearing Services in Schools*, 50(1), 150-163. https://doi.org/10.1044/2018_LSHSS-18-0041
- Doust, C., Gordon, S. D., Garden, N., Fisher, S. E., Martin, N. G., Bates, T. C., & Luciano, M. (2020). The association of dyslexia and developmental speech and language disorder candidate genes with reading and language abilities in adults. *Twin Research and Human Genetics*, 23(1), 23-32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/thg.2020.7>
- Dubois, P., St-Pierre, M.-C., Desmarais, C., & Guay, F. (2020). Young Adults With Developmental Language Disorder: A Systematic Review of Education, Employment, and Independent Living Outcomes. *Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research*, 63(11), 3786-3800. https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_JSLHR-20-00127
- Gillam, S., Holbrook, S. S., & Westenskow, A. (2016). The Language of Math: Part of the Informational Discourse Continuum. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 1(1), 118-127. <https://doi.org/10.1044/persp1.SIG1.118>
- Goldberg, R. J., Higgins, E. L., Raskind, M. H., & Herman, K. L. (2003). Predictors of Success in Individuals with Learning Disabilities: A Qualitative Analysis of a 20-Year Longitudinal Study. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice (Wiley-Blackwell)*, 18(4), 222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5826.00077>
- Hassink Johanna, M., & Leonard Laurence, B. (2010). Within-Treatment Factors as Predictors of Outcomes Following Conversational Recasting. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 19(3), 213-224. [https://doi.org/10.1044/1058-0360\(2010/09-0083\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/1058-0360(2010/09-0083))
- Johnson, C. J., Beitchman, J. H., & Brownlie, E. B. (2010). Twenty-Year Follow-Up of Children With and Without Speech-Language Impairments: Family, Educational, Occupational, and Quality of Life Outcomes. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 19(1), 51-65. [https://doi.org/10.1044/1058-0360\(2009/08-0083\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/1058-0360(2009/08-0083))
- Leonard, L. B. (2019). A 200 Year History of the Study of Childhood Language Disorders of Unknown Origin: Changes in Terminology. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 5, 6-11. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1044/2019_PERS-SIG1-2019-0007
- Lewis, B. A., Freebairn, L., Tag, J., Ciesla, A. A., Iyengar, S. K., Stein, C. M., & Taylor, H. G. (2015). Adolescent Outcomes of Children With Early Speech Sound Disorders With and Without Language Impairment. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 24(2), 150-163. https://doi.org/10.1044/2014_AJSLP-14-0075
- Lyons, R., & Roulstone, S. (2017). Labels, identity and narratives in children with primary speech and language impairments. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 19(5), 503-518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549507.2016.1221455>
- Lyons, R., & Roulstone, S. (2018). Well-being and resilience in children with speech and language disorders. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 61(2), 324-344. https://doi.org/10.1044/2017_JSLHR-L-16-0391
- McGregor, K. K. (2020). How We Fail Children With Developmental Language Disorder. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 51(4), 981-992. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_LSHSS-20-00003
- McGregor, K. K., Goffman, L., Owen Van Horne, A., Hogan, T. P., & Finestack, L. H. (2019). Developmental Language Disorder: Applications for Advocacy, Research, and Clinical Service. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 5, 38-46. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1044/2019_PERSP-19-00083



McGregor, K. K., Smolak, E., Jones, M., Oleson, J., Eden, N., Arbisi-Kelm, T., & Pomper, R. (2022). What children with developmental language disorder teach us about cross-situational word learning. *Cognitive Science*, 46(2), 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.13094>

Meyers-Denman Christina, N., & Plante, E. (2016). Dose Schedule and Enhanced Conversational Recast Treatment for Children With Specific Language Impairment. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 47(4), 334-346. https://doi.org/10.1044/2016_LSHSS-15-0064

Norbury, C. F., Gooch, D., Wray, C., Baird, G., Charman, T., Simonoff, E., . . . Pickles, A. (2016). The impact of nonverbal ability on prevalence and clinical presentation of language disorder: Evidence from a population study. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 57(11), 1247-1257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12573>

Porter, K. L., Oetting, J. B., & Pecchioni, L. (2020). Caregivers' Perceptions of Speech-Language Pathologist Talk About Child Language and Literacy Disorders. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 29(4), 2049-2067. https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_AJSLP-20-00049

Redmond, S. M. (2011). Peer Victimization Among Students With Specific Language Impairment, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and Typical Development. *Language, Speech & Hearing Services in Schools*, 42(4), 520-535.

Rescorla, L. (2011). Late talkers: Do good predictors of outcome exist? *Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews*, 17(2), 141-150. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ddrr.1108> (Developmental delay)

Simkin, Z., & Conti-Ramsden, G. (2009). 'I went to a language unit': Adolescents' views on specialist educational provision and their language difficulties. *Child Language Teaching & Therapy*, 25(1), 103-121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659008098663>

Snowling, M. J., Hayiou-Thomas, M. E., Nash, H. M., & Hulme, C. (2020). Dyslexia and developmental language disorder: Comorbid disorders with distinct effects on reading comprehension. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 61(6), 672-680. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13140>

Tomblin, J. B., Records, N. L., Buckwalter, P., Zhang, X., Smith, E., & O'Brien, M. (1997). Prevalence of specific language impairment in kindergarten children. *Journal of Speech & Hearing Research*, 40(6), 1245-1260. <https://doi.org/10.1044/jslhr.4006.1245>

Tomblin, J. B., Zhang, X., Buckwalter, P., & O'Brien, M. (2003). The stability of primary language disorder: Four years after kindergarten diagnosis. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 46(6), 1283-1296. [https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388\(2003/100\)](https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388(2003/100))

