

Speech and language needs

Including developmental language disorder (DLD), and how tutoring can help

Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) · for parents and carers of primary aged children

Speech, language and communication needs are the **most common type of special educational need** in primary schools. Some are short term and resolve with time or therapy. One lasting form, **developmental language disorder (DLD)**, affects around **2 children in every class of 30**, yet most parents have never heard of it. Language difficulties are not caused by parenting and say nothing about a child's intelligence. They are often hidden, because children learn to nod along.

Four different things

"Speech and language" covers several separate skills, and a child can struggle with one or several:

Speech

Making the sounds of words clearly, and fluency (including stammering).

Understanding language

Following what others say: words, sentences, instructions and stories.

Using language

Finding the right words and putting them into sentences to explain, tell or ask.

Social communication

Using language with other people: taking turns, staying on topic, reading the situation.

Why it matters for learning

Almost all teaching happens through spoken language. A child who understands only part of each instruction misses a little of every lesson, and the gaps build. Reading comprehension, writing and maths word problems all depend on language. Friendships can be affected too.

Strengths worth noticing

Language difficulties do not limit what a child can think. Many are strong visual and practical learners, creative, observant and keen to join in when they are given the words.

Often found alongside

Dyslexia, ADHD, autism, dyspraxia and anxiety.

Signs of DLD at primary age

- Difficulty following instructions, especially long ones; seeming not to listen.
- A smaller vocabulary, or struggling to find words ("the thingy, you know").
- Muddled sentences, or grammar that sounds younger than their age.
- Difficulty retelling a story or event in the right order.
- Reading words well but not understanding what they have read.
- Short, simple written work despite plenty of effort.
- Frustration, withdrawal or behaviour difficulties, often mistaken for the main problem.

"Every child learns, some just need a different path."

Nicola, Moss Grove Tutoring

Working alongside therapy

Tutoring is not speech and language therapy. If your child has a speech and language therapist, Nicola can practise the targets they set, which is often what makes therapy stick. If your child has not been seen and there are concerns about speech sounds, stammering or understanding, a referral is the first step.

What sessions look like

- **Language pitched just right:** short sentences, key words stressed, and time to think.
- **Visual supports:** pictures, symbols, diagrams and Makaton signs alongside speech.
- **Checking understanding** by asking your child to show or explain, not “do you understand?”
- **Pre teaching vocabulary:** learning next week’s topic words before class, a powerful boost.
- **Building sentences** with colour coded approaches such as Colourful Semantics.
- **Story structure:** who, where, what happened, how it ended, for both telling and writing.
- **Talk before writing**, so ideas are clear in speech before they go on paper.

Working together

A short update after each session shares the new words and sentence patterns your child is working on, so you can use them at home. With your permission, Nicola can link with your child’s teacher, SENCo or therapist so everyone uses the same approach.

Being realistic

DLD is long term. Children make real progress with the right support, but it does not disappear. Tutoring does not replace speech and language therapy or the support your child is entitled to at school.

Consistency matters most: regular weekly sessions build on each other.

Small things that help at home

- Get attention first, then keep instructions short and in the order they happen.
- Comment on what your child is doing rather than firing questions.
- If they make a mistake, repeat it back correctly without correcting them.
- Give time; count to ten in your head before helping.
- Share books every day and talk about the pictures and the story.
- Teach new words in real situations, and use them again and again.
- Turn off background noise when you want to talk.

Getting help

Speak to your GP, health visitor or school about a referral to the NHS children’s speech and language therapy service; in some areas parents can refer directly. **Your child does not need a diagnosis to receive SEN support at school;** support should be based on need.

Where to find out more

Speech and Language UK:
speechandlanguage.org.uk

RADLD, raising awareness of DLD: radld.org

NHS: nhs.uk, search “speech and language therapy”

SENDIASS: free, impartial advice on SEN support in school. Search “SENDIASS” with Gloucestershire or Herefordshire.

About Nicola

Nicola has worked in primary schools since 2003 and has been a Higher Level Teaching Assistant since 2008, specialising in special educational needs, including running nurture groups. She has trained in speech and language support for children aged 5 to 11, and uses Makaton and PECS.