

Is it Language Disorder or Learning Disability? A Tutorial for Parents and Professionals

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Recently I read a terrific article written in 2014 by [Sun and Wallach](#) entitled: **“Language Disorders Are Learning Disabilities: Challenges on the Divergent and Diverse Paths to Language Learning Disability”**. I found it to be so valuable that I wanted to summarize some of its key points to my readers because **it bears tremendous impact on our understanding of what happens to children with language disorders when they reach school years.**

The authors begin the article by introducing a scenario familiar to numerous SLPs. A young child is diagnosed with receptive, expressive and social pragmatic language deficits as a toddler (2.5 years of age) begins to receive speech language services, which continue through preschool and elementary school until 2nd grade. The child is receiving therapy under the diagnosis of specific language impairment (SLI), which is characterized by difficulties with acquiring language in the absence of any other known disorders. By 2nd grade the child has seemingly “caught up” in the areas of listening comprehension and complex sentence production but is now struggling academically in the areas of reading and writing. Now his teachers are concerned that he has a learning disability, and his bewildered parent asks “Is it true that my child now has *another problem* on top of his language problem?”

From that scenario the authors skillfully navigate the complex relationship between language disorders and school disability labels to explain that the child does NOT have a new disorder but rather continues to face new challenges presented by his old disorder due to which **he is now struggling to meet the growing language demands of the academic curriculum.**



Here’s the approximate hierarchy of language development in young children:

- Exploration of the environment
- Play
- Receptive Language
- Comprehension of words, phrases, sentences, stories
- Expressive Language
- Speaking single words, phrases, sentences, engaging in conversations, producing stories
- Reading
 - Words, sentences, short stories, chapter books, etc.
 - General topics
 - Domain specific topics (science, social studies, etc)
- Spelling
- Writing
 - Words, sentences, short stories, essays

The problem is that if the child experiences any deficits in the foundational language areas such as listening and speaking, he will most certainly experience difficulties in the more complex areas of language which is reading and writing.

The authors continue by explaining the complexity of various labels given to children with language and learning difficulties under the IDEA 2004, DSM-5, as well as “research literature and nonschool clinical settings”. They conclude that: “the use of different labels by different professionals in different contexts should not obscure **the commonalities** among children with language disorders, no matter what they are called”.

Then they go on to explain that longitudinal (over a period of time) research has revealed numerous difficulties experienced by children with “early language disorders” during school years and in adulthood “in all domains of academic achievement (spelling, reading comprehension, word identification, word attack, calculation)...”. They also point out that many of these children with language disorders were later classified with a learning disability because their “later learning difficulties

[took on] the form of problems acquiring higher levels of spoken language comprehension and expression as well as reading and writing”.



The authors also explain the complex process of literacy acquisition as well as discuss the important concept of “**illusory recovery**”. They note that there may be “a time period when the students with early language disorders seem to catch up with their typically developing peers” by undergoing a “spurt” in language learning, which is followed by a “postsput plateau” because due to their ongoing deficits and an increase in academic demands “*many children with early language disorders fail to “outgrow” these difficulties or catch up with their typically developing peers*”.

They pointed out that because many of these children “may not show academic or language-related learning difficulties until linguistic and cognitive demands of the task increase and exceed their limited abilities”, SLPs must consider the “**underlying deficits that may be masked by early oral language development**” and “**evaluate a child’s language abilities in all modalities, including preliteracy, literacy, and metalinguistic skills**”.

Finally, the authors reiterate that since language is embedded in all parts of the curriculum “intervention choices should be based on students’ ongoing language learning and literacy problems within curricular contexts, regardless of their diagnostic labels”. In other words, SLPs should actively use the students’ curriculum in the intervention process.

In their conclusion the authors summarize the key article points:

- **The diagnostic labels may change but the students linguistic needs stay the same.** Thus clinicians need to a) “identify existing language/literacy needs that may have been *unidentified previously*” and b) provide “relevant and functional interventions that are curriculum-based and literacy-focused”
- “**Early language disorders are chronic and tend to follow children through time**, manifesting themselves differently based upon an individual’s inherent abilities”. Thus SLPs need to be keenly aware regarding the nature and timing of “illusory recoveries” **NOT** to be fooled by them.
- “Definitions of literacy have broadened” so “intervention goals and targeted language learning strategies should change accordingly **to guide effective and relevant intervention**”
- “**Majority of learning disabilities are language disorders that have changed over time**”.

I hope that you’ve found this article helpful in furthering your understanding of these highly relevant yet often misunderstood labels and that this knowledge will assist you to make better decisions when serving the clients on your caseload.

References:

[Sun, L & Wallach G \(2014\) Language Disorders Are Learning Disabilities: Challenges on the Divergent and Diverse Paths to Language Learning Disability. Topics in Language Disorders, Vol. 34; \(1\), pp 25–38.](#)

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