



Exploring children's difficulties with language and literacy

Specific language impairment

Narr:

Dr. Susan Ebbels is a Speech and Language therapist who works with school children who have specific language impairment, SLI. We started by asking her about the process of identification and assessment of children with SLI.

Susan:

At pre-school referral predominantly comes through a health visitor, could also come direct from parents or from the GP, might come through the nursery school as well, if they're at pre-school and it would go direct to the Speech and Language Therapy Services and they'd be usually put on the, a waiting list for a while and then seen for an initial assessment and at that point the therapist would decide what to do next.

School age, it would predominantly come through the school and would go, the school would usually refer to Speech and Language Therapy but it's an open referral service that anybody can refer a child who is concerned about a child, but predominantly health visitors at pre-school and teachers at school age and in both cases there would be an initial assessment and then the therapist would decide how to proceed based on that.

First of all you need to find out if there's a language problem, and secondly you need to find out if there's anything else that's causing it in order to call it a specific language impairment as opposed to being a hearing impairment or anything else. So in terms of language assessments there are standardised assessments for different age groups which you can carry out and you would find out whether the child falls within the normal range for their age, , and if they're below in one or more areas you might consider that they have a specific language impairment but you would also want to check out things like their general level of ability, whether they have a hearing impairment and whether they have any other diagnoses or any other difficulties. The primary thing is – do they have a language problem and the next thing is, is there any obvious reason for it?

I think there's a lot of overlap between specific language impairment and other disorders, such as dyslexia or poor comprehension and also other things such as autism and autistic features. The majority of children with a specific language impairment have difficulty reading, either because they have difficulty decoding the words which may stem from phonological difficulties or difficulties with processing sounds, which may be worse than you might get in a case of dyslexia, but also they have problems reading because a lot of them have poor comprehension as well. So a child with a specific language impairment may present as having dyslexia and poor comprehension and other difficulties with language, so it's working out what's the primary cause, and what's the cause and what's the effect. In specific language impairment I think the specific language impairment is the core problem and that causes them to have difficulties with reading.

A child with poor comprehension frequently does actually have other difficulties too which need considering. You need to look at all areas of language. You need to look at their comprehension, their production of language, their ability to process sounds and words and manipulate them, and also a lot of children with specific language impairment have speech difficulties, articulation difficulties as well, so you'd need to consider the whole lot, and maybe dyslexia and poor comprehension is a sub-group almost, and children with specific language impairment have that plus extra problems with language as well.

There are no two children with SLI who really are exactly the same. The cases I've seen where they are very similar have actually been identical twins, so there's a lot of variation in the difficulties, so you can have difficulties with the speech, sounds, you have difficulties with comprehending words, or sentences and grammatical difficulties, or maybe understanding

whole text at the text level, or inferencing, reading between the lines. In terms of expressive language they may have very limited short sentences with lots of grammatical errors, and difficulty structuring what they're saying in a sensible order, sort of at the text level, the sentences may all be okay but it might not be ordered in a particularly coherent fashion, which is verging on pragmatic difficulties um which are the kind of difficulties that children with autism have so there's overlap there as well.

At the word level they might have problems understanding words but also problems retrieving words, so you've got word finding difficulties, which is where children know the words but they can't actually access them. They might know the first sound but they can't actually produce the word, and, then obviously you've got the associated reading difficulties and writing difficulties and spelling difficulties which come as part of all of that, so there's a whole range of difficulties. Some of them have quite a few difficulties with social skills and interacting with other people appropriately and it's always difficult to tease out what's the cause and the effect. Are they actually, have they actually got a primary social difficulty or is it because of their language impairment that they are, have difficulties with social situations.

Amongst the children I've worked with I've seen children with all of those difficulties and most of them have a bit of everything, but it's just a case of what their primary problem is.

The main split it seems to me is the children who've got difficulties mainly with the grammatical side of language, formulating sentences, understanding sentences, and those who've got more of a phonological problem with the speech sounds and who have lots of literacy difficulties. There have been some children I've known who have had very severe difficulties with the language side but extremely good literacy and good spoken speech sounds and phonological awareness, but then there are others who have severe difficulties with phonological awareness and speech sounds and associated literacy difficulties but might actually be okay with their comprehension of, of language, so, and of course there are some poor children who have severe difficulties in both areas and I think those children are the worst hit.

Narr:

Next, we asked Susan to share her views on the usefulness of SLI as a diagnostic category.

Susan:

I'm not sure how useful the diagnosis of specific language impairment is. It certainly is useful to have a diagnosis of a primary language impairment and I think there are children whose primary difficulty is with language. The specific bit is a bit of a problem because it's assuming that they don't have any problems with anything else and it's just the language and I don't see any reason why they couldn't have problems with anything else. They might just be unlucky and you know happen to have got two disorders, a language impairment and a hearing impairment or something. That doesn't mean they don't have a language impairment, so I think the diagnosis of language impairment is important, or maybe primary language impairment because many other disorders do involve a language impairment as well. That's useful for the first stages. From the point of view of actually intervention and what you do with these children and what educational placement they have etcetera, then I think it is more useful to get down to actually what areas of language do they have a problem with and how severe is it, but I'm not sure that you could actually split it into these separate diagnoses because there's so much overlap. Some children can have a severe difficulty in one area, a mild difficulty in another, a moderate difficulty in another and all different variations so I think I would probably stick with a primary language impairment with a main difficulty in the area of comprehension or in the area of phonological awareness or something like that, but I think it is still a useful diagnosis partly because its not a very well recognised disorder even though its actually very common, far more common than autism for example and so it is useful to have some kind of diagnosis that people can talk about as a, as a shorthand but it doesn't actually tell you what is, what the child needs in itself but it does say they need, they need something and this is a specific, this is a problem that they need help with.

The area of language I think that's most important for educational purposes is comprehension, well actually for all purposes I think comprehension is the one to really check

out because if you've got comprehension problems you can't understand what's happening in the curriculum, you can't understand what people are saying to you therefore you have misunderstandings and your friendships break down and it has huge implications everywhere, so that I think is the most important but also the least well recognised or diagnosed. Other areas of course are also important. If you have difficulty formulating what you're trying to say that can lead to difficulties with accessing the curriculum. At least you will understand what you're being told though but you may not be able to express your ideas and therefore you'll have difficulties gaining qualifications etcetera, so I think all areas need to be investigated but I think comprehension, if that, if you have problems with comprehension then that's actually the most devastating of all because that impacts on everything, all areas of your life.

Narr:

We then asked Susan to describe the characteristics of some children with SLI. Susan remembers one particular child, who had problems with comprehension and grammar, and as a result understood very little of what people said.

When I first met him he was eleven. He's still one of the severest cases I've seen actually, but he would try and pick up on things that you said so, we have a video of him and at one point the interviewer says Where do you live? – and he says – Manchester United. So he's obviously giving you his favourite football team but it's a place and very little understanding. When I worked with him for a little while I realised he had no understanding of pronouns so things like he, she, it, so if you were telling a story or he was reading a story or you were talking to him, he might understand the first sentence but your second sentence starts using he and she, he had no idea who he referred to, so he could have been anybody at all as far as he was concerned, so very little made any sense to him.

I started trying to work on him indicating when he didn't understand and realised that actually he didn't know what understanding was. He'd never really understood so couldn't indicate that he hadn't understood, the whole world was all confusing, but this was a particularly, a child with particular strengths in visual skills and also in phonological skills, so his handwriting was absolutely beautiful. His spelling was great, his reading was very good so he could read out loud but didn't understand a word of what he read. He could write beautiful passages of text which made no sense at all and had no grammatical structure to them, so he was a child who was really very very impaired, but on the surface could be seen as being quite able and actually he wasn't actually picked up until he was six because he was in school and his literacy seemed to be okay, and he was very good visually so he could follow what all the other children were doing and so if the teacher gave instructions he followed those instructions but he didn't understand them. He just copied everybody else. He was very good at copying and because his speech was so good he wasn't picked up at all and actually his comprehension was atrocious and I think it's those children who are the most concerning because they're often the children who can turn into behavioural difficulties.

I remember seeing a child once who was thirteen referred to speech language therapy for the very first time, had never been referred before, had been excluded from three schools, and when I assessed her discovered that she had again atrocious comprehension. She really was understanding virtually nothing but had such huge behavioural problems presumably because she was understanding nothing, that she was being excluded and behaviour was seen as the issue, but in a child who has behavioural problems I think it's really worth looking at comprehension and seeing if there is something there. They may come across as okay but under the surface there's huge problems.

Narr:

Susan also told us about two other children, both of whom had difficulties with phonology.

One child that I saw who had very good comprehension, could understand most of what, what you said, could follow stories and answer questions but extremely poor articulation, very poor speech, and very little phonological awareness, couldn't even write simple consonant, vowel, words, found it difficult to identify the first sound of a word for example, very difficult to understand him, and one thing which brought me up short when I was trying to help him, with writing, was I realised that he couldn't actually segment a sentence into words. He could

segment it into syllables but not words. He didn't really know where the word boundaries were. That's at the very severe level but you can have children who really don't even know where one word finishes and the next word starts and then how on earth can you start to write anything and children who have got these kinds of difficulties with the sounds and phonology also tend to be the ones who might have problems with word finding as well. They might possibly know the first sound of a word but they can't actually access the word.

Just thinking of another child actually who had interesting difficulties, he seemed to not have the connection between sounds and meaning, so like for example, thinking of his reading, he would look at the word woman and read it as lady. He would see the word pub and say bar, so he was reading the word. It was that written pattern connected to a meaning for him and that meaning was connected to a sound pattern which he said, but there didn't seem to be no direct link between the sounds and the written word. Sometimes he could tell you how to write a word which he'd seen written down but he had no idea how to say it, so there seemed to be missing links basically. He was, he had a lot of difficulties but he was quite good to work with because he had quite a lot of the sort of components, but he didn't have a lot of the links between them so you could try and teach him those links and then he made quite good progress.

Narr:

What's Susan's experience In terms of how children feel about diagnosis and assessment?

Susan:

In terms of how children feel with diagnosis, there's how the children feel and how the parents feel as well. It very much depends again on age. I think at the younger ages the children are pretty much unaware of really what's going on and what it means. For the parents its often a great relief to have a diagnosis because, it's quite a misunderstood disorder and it can be quite a relief that there is actually a name for this and there are people who can do something about it. For the children I think at the younger ages they don't really understand what it is and what it means, but they can be quite appreciative of the help. The problem is as the children get older they do get more aware and they do start to understand what their difficulties are and this can actually have quite a negative impact on their self-esteem, so often the more you increase their awareness of their difficulties the, the lower their self-esteem goes and that can be quite a tricky balance because you want the children to understand their difficulties and the difficulties that they may well have in the future, but you don't want to cause them too much pain either, so it, it is difficult. We have some children here who have reached the age of fifteen and still think they have no problems at all and don't really understand and they're going to be leaving school at sixteen and they'll be going to local FE colleges or the world of work and they really need to understand their difficulties to help other people understand and they're quite happy with how they are but then you work on that and you help them see what the problems are and then that can cause a whole set of issues in itself because they've got to suddenly come to terms with the fact that they are different. They do have problems and they often don't want to do that.

Nar:

Finally we asked to Susan to point up some simple ways that teachers might be able to recognise someone with specific language impairment.

There are a few areas, which seem to be particularly impaired in most children with a languaging problem, language problem. The main one of these is sentence repetition. When I've tested children in a school almost every child in the school, regardless of what their profile is, has a problem repeating sentences and I think you can have, that's because you need to do so many things correctly. You need to understand it first in order to be able to repeat it. You might be able to understand it but if you have a, more of an expressive language problem you won't be able to say it back, so you'll still get a low score but for a different reason, so sentence repetition seems to capture most children with a language impairment regardless of what the underlying profile is, so I think that's probably one of the sort of key markers really. Another marker that's been put forward is non-word repetition and that certainly picks up all the ones who have got any kind of phonological problem. I found that it doesn't pick up all of

the children with a comprehension grammatical problem only who don't particularly have phonological difficulties, so if you just went for non word repetition I think you would miss some children, maybe not so much at the younger age but certainly with the age group that I'm working with. When I tested twenty children here a while ago on non-word repetition about half of them actually had no difficulties with it, so these are older children so, but they all had difficulties with sentence repetition, and so I think that's one of the key ones. The other marker that's been put forward is difficulty with the past tense and certainly most children with a language impairment do have problems with the past tense, so that's another one and that's something that that teachers could look out for. I mean doing a sentence repetition test or a non-word repetition test requires taking the child out to a quiet room and doing a little test, but listening out for difficulties with past tense is something that everybody could do and is another key thing that often is a problem so that's, that's something that you can, you can listen for in an older child. You wouldn't expect a three or four year old to be getting them all correct anyway, but you certainly would expect a seven, eight, nine year old to be getting all their past tenses correct and certainly not missing off the past tense. They might make a few errors with things like goed instead of went, but they would be saying goed and not just go, which actually a child with a language impairment might. They might miss of the tense altogether, so that's, that's another key area that other people can listen out for.