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What Are Communication Disorders?

There are two types of **communication disorders**: Those that affect speech (speech disorders) and those that affect language (language disorders). Problems producing speech sounds (articulation), controlling sounds that are produced (voice), and controlling the rate and rhythm of speech (fluency) are generally considered **speech disorders**. Problems with using proper forms of language (phonology, morphology, syntax), using the content of language (semantics), and using the functions of language (pragmatics) are generally considered **language disorders**.

SPEECH DISORDERS

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA; 1982) has developed formal definitions of each speech disorder:

Articulation disorder is defined as “the abnormal production of speech sounds” (p. 949). When a student says, “The wabbit wan don the woad,” or “poon” for “spoon,” or

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“gog” for “dog,” he or she may be using spoken language appropriately but is not producing sounds correctly.

Voice disorder is defined as “the absence or abnormal production of vocal quality, pitch, loudness, resonance, and/or duration” (p. 949). Students with voice disorders sometimes sound hoarse or speak loudly or in a high or low pitch.

Fluency disorder is defined as “the abnormal flow of verbal expression, characterized by impaired rate and rhythm which may be accompanied by struggle behavior” (p. 949). S-saying th-the f-first s-sound o-of a-a w-word and th-then s-saying th-the w-word illustrates this problem.

LANGUAGE DISORDERS

All other communication problems are considered language disorders. ASHA (1982) defines three kinds of language disorders—specifically, problems related to form, content, and function. Language **form** refers to the utterance or sentence structure of what is said—phonology, morphology, and syntax. Language **content** refers to meanings of words and sentences, including abstract concepts—semantics. Language **function** refers to the context in which language can be used and the purpose of communication—pragmatics. Problems can be **receptive** (related to hearing, listening to, or receiving language) and **expressive** (related to producing or expressing language).

Language Form, Function, and Content

Phonology is concerned with the smallest units of language (phonemes or speech sounds); **morphology** is concerned with the smallest units of meaningful language (morphemes or words and parts of words); and **syntax** is concerned with combining language units into meaningful phrases, clauses, or sentences (grammatically correct language). Problems with phonology, morphology, and syntax are evident when students are unable to differentiate

sounds (/b/ versus /p/), words (cat or cap), or grammatically correct sentences ("John go to the movies" versus "John goes to the movies") or to produce appropriate sounds, words, or sentences.

Semantics is concerned with word and message meanings (vocabulary, comprehension, following directions). Problems with semantics are evident when students are unable to identify appropriate pictures when word names are provided ("Find the grapes"), answer simple questions ("Are apples fruits?"), follow directions ("Draw a line over the third box"), tell how words or messages are similar or different ("How are apples, oranges, and pears alike?"), or understand abstract concepts ("What is love?").

Pragmatics is concerned with the use and function of language in varying settings (i.e., following social conversational rules). Problems with pragmatics are evident when students are unable to use language in social situations to express feelings, create or understand images, give or request information, or direct actions of listeners.

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFICATION

Professionals use a number of criteria to identify communication disorders, and they may be concerned with receptive as well as expressive problems. Identification of speech problems is usually accomplished by listening to oral reading or speech samples or by asking students questions. Most language disorders are identified by poor performance on language tests or from analyses of written and oral schoolwork.