Specific Language Impairment (SLI)

What is SLI?

Specific Language Impairment (SLI) is a developmental disorder of language affecting around 7% of preschool children. Children with SLI experience significant problems when learning to talk. They are usually intelligent and healthy children, who for some unknown reason do not develop language skills with the same ease or speed as their peers. They may have difficulties with expression (talking), understanding language, or both.

The difficulties children with SLI experience in acquiring language cannot be explained by a hearing deficit, intellectual impairment, physical abnormalities or by a childhood developmental disorder affecting language acquisition, such as autism, Down syndrome or global developmental delay.

What causes SLI?

While the underlying cause of SLI is largely unknown, studies have shown that the disorder tends to run in families, suggesting a possible genetic link.

There is research from brain imaging studies to support the idea that SLI is a neurological (brain based) disorder. While SLI primarily affects language development, it is common for the brain controlled processes of working memory and processing speed, to be simultaneously impaired.

What are the impacts of SLI?

Living with SLI will present challenges to an individual’s performance in many areas of their life. School aged children with SLI are very likely to experience learning and literacy difficulties. Challenges in understanding and producing spoken language will usually result in reduced school performance in a range of learning areas.

The impact of SLI on an individual’s emotions, behaviour and self-esteem is very significant. Even though children with SLI want to interact and form friendships, their difficulties with communication can lead to decreased social interaction and withdrawal.

CHILDREN WITH SLI…….
- Have normal intelligence, hearing and thinking skills
- Often have a family member who also has SLI
- Are able as other children in many ways
- Are usually late to talk (limited or no words at age 2)

THEY MAY HAVE DIFFICULTY…….
- Producing words to explain their ideas and thoughts
- Using the correct words in their talking
- Remembering the words they want to say
- Speaking in a way that is easy to understand
- Learning new words incidentally
- Listening for long periods of time
- Following instructions and directions
- Joining in and making friends
- Learning the content of most curriculum areas
- Developing reading and writing skills

THEY MIGHT FEEL…….
- Frustrated or angry
- Emotionally vulnerable and isolated

THEY NEED…….
- Help to develop and enrich their language skills
- To develop strategies to cope with their difficulties
- To learn in an environment that understands their difficulties and supports their needs
Specific Language Impairment

What is the long term prognosis?

Often the impacts of SLI are long term and most children severely affected do not usually simply “catch up” to other children their age without help. The prognosis for children with SLI heavily depends on the nature and severity of the language problems experienced and the timing of the intervention received. With intensive support children with SLI can make considerable gains. In addition to mastering language specific skills, some individuals living with SLI will develop strategies to cope and be very successful in life despite their language problems. Others may experience, language, literacy and behavioural difficulties that persist into the school years, adolescence and adulthood.

What help is available?

Children with SLI require specialised help to support their language growth and reach their full potential. Early detection in children is very important for optimising the success of intervention. Before commencing formal schooling, children with SLI should access intervention with a speech pathologist who will work with a child’s family to stimulate and develop language skills. In Western Australia (WA) children can access government funded speech pathology services through the Department of Health’s Child Development Service. Alternatively, families can seek the services of a private speech pathologist.

When they commence school, some children may be eligible to attend a specialised public school located in the metropolitan areas of WA called a Language Development Centre (LDC). Within the LDC, teachers and speech pathologists work together and develop the language, literacy and social skills of children with SLI during their early years of schooling.

Rather than attend the LDC, some children with SLI may go to their local schools. Regardless of a child’s educational placement, it is important that schools provide a learning environment that understands and supports language and learning difficulties. Support for children with language needs in public mainstream schools is available through an Outreach Team, a government funded service connected to each LDC. Within this service, teams of professionals work to expand the knowledge and leadership skills of staff within mainstream schools so they are better equipped to support the needs of students with language difficulties.

“IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD AND A WHOLE SCHOOL TO OPTIMISE LANGUAGE GROWTH.”

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It is important to remember that children with SLI are usually as able as other children their age, except for the difficulty they have with talking.