

Who has a communication disability?

Please read the Important Notice on the reverse of this Fact Sheet.

One in seven Australians has a communication disability. The disability can be present at birth or acquired in later life.

Communication – the process of being able to understand and to be understood – is something most of us take for granted. Communication disabilities can arise from problems with speech, using and understanding language, voice, reading, writing or hearing.

The 2.7 million Australians who have communication disabilities come from every part of our society. They include:

- the baby born with a cleft palate and lip, Cerebral Palsy or Down Syndrome
- the two year old who has not yet started to talk
- the student who wants to leave school because of reading and writing difficulties
- the teacher whose vocal cords are damaged from incorrect use
- the 50 year old man who has to learn to communicate again following a stroke
- the 75 year old woman with deteriorating hearing who lives in a nursing home

In Australia, approximately:

- 386,000 children have speech delay problems
- 577,000 school-aged children have difficulties with language
- 326,000 people stutter
- 2.5 million people have hearing impairment
- 25,000 people have a severe brain injury each year

These people all have one thing in common: they can find it hard to understand or to be understood. Their ability to communicate – talk, hear, read and write – has broken down. Each of them will suffer frustration, anger, embarrassment or grief from time to time as they try to communicate their needs, ideas and opinions.

A communication disability can be mild to severe, affecting both individuals with a communication problem and those around them. It may cause only temporary difficulties, or it may last throughout life. Even a mild communication disability can have serious effects.

For example, not being able to say “s”, “th” or “r” may be a mild problem for a young boy. However, for a 26 year old man who wants to become an air traffic controller, these speech errors could make the difference between achieving his goal or failing. He may also experience problems in his social life when mixing and talking with others. In short, the way he speaks can make his life very difficult.



How can you tell whether someone has a communication disability?

Most people with a communication disability look like anyone else. They may even sound like anyone else. A person with a communication disability isn't just a person who stutters severely, or who can't string a sentence together, or who is totally unintelligible.

A person with a communication disability may have more subtle problems, including:

- tripping or stumbling over words
- occasionally losing their voice
- finding it difficult to follow a conversation when in a group or at a party
- not quite understanding jokes
- being reluctant to speak to new people
- acting aggressively because of frustration
- repeatedly needing directions on how to do something
- difficulty understanding written material

Who can help someone with a communication disability?

A speech pathologist is professionally trained to advise, assess and work with people who have a communication disability. Speech pathologists work in a variety of settings including hospitals, health centres, schools and private practice.

A speech pathologist knows that people with a communication disability are often isolated in society, and their needs are frequently not recognised. Speech pathologists work to give these people a say in life.

For further information:

Contact Speech Pathology Australia - the official body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability.

References

Please contact Speech Pathology Australia's National Office for the references used to create this Fact Sheet.

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