

What is a Communication Disability?

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

Being able to communicate effectively is something most Australians take for granted. Few of us understand what communication is, or have ever imagined what it would be like not to communicate effectively.

There are five areas of communication:

- Speech - the physical production of sounds
- Language - understanding what words mean, putting sentences together, writing clearly, understanding written language
- Pragmatics - the social conventions for how we interact with each other
- Fluency - the smooth rhythm and pattern of talking
- Voice - the production of sound by vibrating the vocal cords.

Communication includes being understood as well as understanding others, either in speaking and listening, or in reading and writing.

What do we mean by a disability?

Communication disability occurs when one or more of the areas of communication is ineffective. A communication disability can be temporary or permanent. It can be mild, moderate or severe, and be present from birth or acquired later in life.

According to the World Health Organisation, disability is "any restriction or lack of ability (resulting from an impairment) to perform an activity in the manner or range considered normal for a human being."

Some impairments which can result in a communication disability include:

- Speech-language - such as the 50 year old man who has a stroke, which damages the language centre of the brain or the five year old child who can only make up two word sentences.
- Hearing - such as the 70 year old woman with deteriorating hearing whose speech becomes unclear as a result.
- Physical - such as the child with Cerebral Palsy who cannot say words properly.
- Intellectual - such as the adolescent with Down Syndrome whose immature language ability leads to poor reading skills.
- Cognitive - such as the twenty year old with a head injury who has difficulty thinking things through and making a decision.



The range of communication disabilities

Problems of speech can include difficulty producing speech sounds in words and sentences or the total inability to make the mouth movements required to say words.

Problems of language can include poor vocabulary skills, the inability to sequence words and sentences logically together to make meaningful conversation or the inability to understand and follow instructions.

Problems in pragmatics can include poor use of eye contact, not knowing how to break into a conversation, or using an inappropriately friendly voice with strangers.

Fluency problems can be seen in the three year old who has a mild stutter and the adolescent who does not speak in class because of a severe stutter.

Voice problems can include a harsh, raspy voice due to vocal nodules in a child or a complete loss of voice due to voice strain in a singer.

The extent of the problem

One in seven Australians has a communication disability, yet their needs are not always recognised. This is because communication itself and communication disability are often poorly understood by society.

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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