

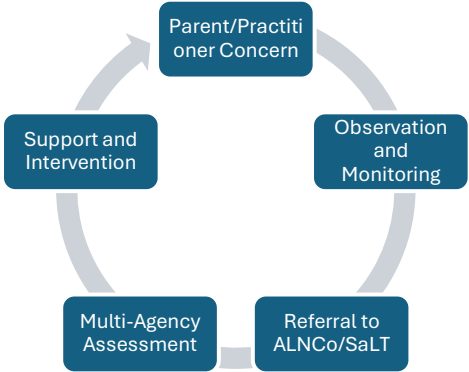
What is Developmental Language Disorder?

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects how a child understands and uses spoken language, and these challenges are not mainly caused by another medical issue (Bishop *et al.*, 2017). In early years settings, DLD can affect a child's ability to communicate, play, build friendships, express emotions, and later develop literacy skills (McGregor, 2020). In Wales, DLD is addressed through the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system, established by the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018, rather than the English SEND framework (Welsh Government, 2021). While DLD may need specialist assessment and support, focusing solely on a medical model can make it seem as if the problem lies solely with the child, rather than considering wider environmental factors. Modern inclusive practice now often takes a social model approach, stressing the importance of communication-friendly environments, accessibility, and support that puts the child at the centre (Welsh Government, 2021).

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)

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Medical Model 	Social Model 
Difficulty located within child	Barriers located within environment
Focus on diagnosis and deficits	Focus on accessibility and inclusion
Child adapts to system	System adapts to child
Specialist-led intervention	Collaborative inclusive practice
Impairment viewed as problem	Participation viewed as priority



Strategy: Communication-Rich, Play-Based Environments

Creating communication-rich, play-based environments is an important way to support children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) in early years settings. These environments encourage language development by promoting responsive adult-child interactions, play, visual supports, and accessible learning experiences (Speech and Language UK, 2024). Oral language approaches can improve children's communication, participation, and engagement in learning, especially when there are regular opportunities for interaction and shared communication (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). The Curriculum for Wales also promotes child-centred and inclusive learning that supports communication, participation, and overall development through meaningful interaction and play-based teaching (Welsh Government, 2023).

Several important theories support the idea of communication-rich environments. Vygotsky believed that language develops through social interaction and support within a child's environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Bruner also highlighted the value of guided participation and adult support in children's learning and communication (Bruner, 1983). Montessori promoted well-prepared learning spaces that encourage independence, interaction, and accessible opportunities (Montessori, 1967). Today, communication-supportive practice shows a broad understanding that children's communication can be improved through responsive environments and meaningful interaction (Education Scotland, 2025).

The effectiveness of communication-rich environments often relies on practitioners' knowledge, staffing, and how consistently strategies are used. Inclusive communication methods can help remove barriers, but some children with DLD may still need specialist support and targeted Speech and Language Therapy (Speech and Language UK, 2024). The Speech, Language and Communication Framework says that practitioners need strong knowledge, confidence, and ongoing professional development to support children's speech, language, and communication needs (SLCF, 2023). Education Scotland (2025) also highlights the need to regularly review and adapt communication-supportive environments to ensure they remain accessible and inclusive. Communication-rich practice should focus not only on activities but also on creating environments that actively remove barriers to participation, interaction, and communication.

Identification and Diagnosis

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is often first noticed when children have ongoing trouble with expressive or receptive language, such as a limited vocabulary, difficulty following instructions, or problems joining in social situations (Bishop *et al.*, 2017). In early years settings, practitioners and parents usually spot these issues through daily observation and interaction. Dockrell and Lindsay (2020) point out that identifying language impairments well depends on practitioners having a good understanding of speech, language, and communication needs, as well as access to the right psycho-educational support. However, how much practitioners know about DLD and how confident they feel can vary a lot between settings, which may lead to delays in identification and uneven support.

Current Welsh ALN practice focuses on teamwork between practitioners, parents, Additional Learning Needs Coordinators (ALNCoS), Speech and Language Therapists (SaLTs), and health professionals to support early intervention and person-centred planning (Welsh Government, 2021). Identifying DLD early can help children get the support they need for communication and education, which may lower future barriers in literacy, participation, and social interaction (Public Health England, 2017). However, Calder *et al.* (2024) found that no single early sign reliably predicts later DLD, underscoring the complexity and limitations of early assessment. Some difficulties may also be missed in quieter children or mistaken for behaviour problems, especially if practitioners do not fully understand DLD.

Assessment in Wales can be more challenging due to bilingualism and the difficulty of distinguishing language disorder from normal multilingual development. Paradis (2010) notes that similarities between bilingual language development and language disorder can make assessment harder, especially if the methods used do not reflect linguistic diversity. Hamdani *et al.* (2025) also point out that multilingual children can be identified accurately when assessments are culturally and linguistically suitable. However, using the wrong assessment methods can lead to misidentification and unfair diagnoses. Even though awareness of speech and language difficulties is growing, uneven access to specialist services and long waiting times can delay support. This means that barriers may come not just from the child's language difficulties, but also from broader systemic and environmental issues related to identification and assessment.

Barriers to Learning and Participation

Children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) often face challenges in learning and participating in activities because they have difficulty understanding and using language. These communication barriers can make it hard for them to follow instructions, join in play, share their needs, and take part in classroom activities (Speech and Language UK, 2024). Such difficulties can also affect how they develop early reading and writing skills, especially in classrooms where language is a big focus (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). More recently, inclusive practice has started to recognise that these barriers are not just about the child's language difficulties. Sometimes, the problem stems from environments that do not provide sufficient communication support or responsive interaction (Goodley, 2025; Welsh Government, 2021).

Children with DLD may also face social and emotional challenges, such as frustration, lower confidence, and difficulty making friends due to communication differences (Speech and Language UK, 2024). When children struggle to share their thoughts, feelings, and needs, they may feel more isolated or have their behaviour misunderstood at school (Speech and Language UK, 2024). In Wales, rights-based ALN practice highlights the need for participation, inclusion, and person-centred support to help reduce these barriers (Welsh Government, 2021). This approach aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that all children should be able to express their views and participate fully in education and society (UNICEF UK, 2023). As a result, children with DLD may face even more barriers if communication environments, systems, or practitioner understanding do not support inclusive participation well (Goodley, 2025; Welsh Government, 2021).



DLD can have a big impact on children's communication, participation, and learning in early years settings. Today, Welsh ALN practice is recognising more often that barriers are not just caused by a child's difficulties, but also by environments that are hard to access and support systems that are not consistent. Identifying DLD early, using inclusive practices, and creating communication-rich environments can help reduce these barriers and support children with DLD to take part more fully.