

ECEY6006

Supporting Children with Additional Learning Needs

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GDD - Global Developmental Delay



What is Global Developmental Delay (GDD)

Global Developmental Delay (GDD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder marked by considerable delays in two or more areas of development, such as cognitive growth, speech and language, motor abilities, social skills, and daily living activities (WHO, 2020). Timely identification and diagnosis are crucial since developmental challenges can greatly impact educational success, emotional health, communication skills, independence, and overall life outcomes (Berk, 2023).

Recent statistics emphasise the growing significance of efficient diagnostic systems. Research indicates that developmental disabilities impact around 1-3% of children globally, with an uptick in referrals for neurodevelopmental evaluations throughout the United Kingdom (NHS, 2023). In Wales, the heightened demand on pediatric and neurodevelopmental services has led to extended waiting periods for assessment and intervention (Welsh Government, 2021).

Possible signs of GDD

Children with GDD may show one or numerous signs;

- Weak, fine or gross motor skills
- Late speech and communication skills
- Struggles with learning and memory
- Late social interactions
- Issues with self-care abilities
- Variations in sensory processing

There are a number of reasons that can cause GDD, they are intricate and involve multiple factors. Studies conducted point to genetic conditions, neurological issues, premature births, prenatal substance exposure, environmental deprivation, and metabolic disorders as factors that contribute to this condition (Brown and Percy, 2017). Nevertheless, in numerous instances, a specific cause remains unidentified, which complicates the diagnostic process.

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Understanding GDD

Global Developmental Delay indicates developmental delay in a many aspects of a child's development. Developmental milestones help track if children are developing as expected. (Tassoni, 2022).

Developmental Milestones and Early Identification

Recognising GDD at an early stage depends significantly on monitoring development and tracking milestones. Health visitors, parents, nursery practitioners, early year teachers, and pediatricians all play a role in identifying developmental issues. Delays in reaching these milestones could suggest developmental issues that need further evaluation. A significant advantage of monitoring milestones is that it enables professionals to detect developmental challenges early on. Early intervention is closely linked to better cognitive, social, and educational results, thanks to the brain's neuroplasticity during development (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). On the other hand, milestone frameworks do have their drawbacks.

Development can vary greatly among children, meaning some may naturally progress at a slower pace without facing long-term challenges. Additionally, cultural differences can shape developmental expectations. For instance, bilingual children might show signs of delayed language development even though their cognitive abilities are where they should be for their stage and age (Snowling and Hulme, 2021). This highlights the potential for milestone systems to lead to over-identification or misassessment if not analyzed with care.

Social Model of Disability

The social model shares that disability arises mainly from societal obstacles instead of individual limitations. In this view, children with GDD face challenges because educational systems, environments, and attitudes do not meet their varied needs.

One of the key advantages of the social model is its promotion of inclusion and its ability to lessen stigma. Instead of concentrating solely on diagnoses, it encourages professionals to adapt development and teaching methods and settings to enhance participation. Nonetheless, some contend that the social model might overlook the real cognitive or developmental challenges faced by certain children. As a result, many experts support a comprehensive biopsychosocial approach that integrates both medical and social viewpoints.

Medical Model of Disability

The medical model shows disability mainly as a deficit or impairment found within the child. In the context of GDD diagnosis, this model emphasises the identification of neurological or developmental irregularities that necessitate treatment or intervention. Nonetheless, the medical model has faced criticism for placing too much emphasis on deficits and limitations. It may lead professionals to "label" children instead of acknowledging their abilities and potential (Mittler, 2012). Medical approaches can sometimes neglect environmental factors such as poverty, trauma, educational disparities, and social exclusion.

Diagnostic Overlap

In Diagnosis another significant drawback relates to the overlap of symptoms. GDD exhibits traits similar to autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), speech and language disorders, sensory processing challenges, and intellectual disability. As a result, misdiagnosis and delays in diagnosis are quite common.

Delayed Diagnosis and Waiting Times

Recent studies show that waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessments are on the rise throughout Wales and the UK (Welsh Government, 2021). Prolonged delays limit chances for early intervention and can have a detrimental impact on family wellbeing. Parents frequently express feelings of frustration, stress, and emotional fatigue during the long and untimely assessment procedures.

Inclusive Practice and Welsh ALN Legislation

The Welsh Government enacted the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 to replace the SEN framework.

The ALN system encourages person-centred planning, early identification, and collaboration among multiple agencies.

The ALN Code for Wales (2021) highlights:

Early intervention Child-centred practice Collaboration with families Inclusive education Individual Development Plans (IDPs) Inclusive practice is especially important for children with GDD, as educational obstacles can show developmental challenges.

Research indicates that inclusive early years settings enhance social participation, confidence, communication, and emotional wellbeing (Nutbrown and Clough, 2014).

Independent Critical Analysis

While current diagnostic systems offer useful frameworks for recognising developmental delays, they are not without their weaknesses.

A significant issue is the conflict between diagnosis and inclusion. Diagnostic labels can facilitate access to support services, yet they may also lead to stigma and lower expectations.

Moreover, an increasing dependence on medical terminology risks framing childhood differences as pathological. Some researchers contend that developmental norms are socially constructed and shaped by Western educational standards (Thomas and Loxley, 2022). Also, there is a concern that families from underprivileged communities may face unequal access to services. Children from minority ethnic backgrounds might encounter extra challenges due to language barriers and culturally biased assessment tools. As a result, effective identification and diagnosis should extend beyond merely deficit-focused models.

Critical Evaluation of Diagnostic Systems

Diagnostic systems play a crucial role in recognising developmental delays. A key advantage is their standardisation. Standardised evaluations enable professionals to measure developmental progress against age-related expectations, enhancing consistency and reliability across all services (Hallahan et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the multidisciplinary approach to assessment is a notable strength as it allows experts from various fields to share their knowledge, experience, and insights. Nursery practitioners, early years educators, flying start practitioners, speech therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists, and pediatricians can work together to create a comprehensive understanding of a child's needs.

Despite these advantages, diagnostic systems also have notable weaknesses.

Dependence on Standardised Testing

Numerous assessment tools heavily depend on normative developmental expectations that might not truly reflect cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic diversity. Children from underprivileged backgrounds may achieve lower scores due to environmental influences rather than neurological issues (Maulik and Darmstadt, 2007).

Also, standardised assessments may focus more on deficits than on the child's strengths. Critics contend that diagnostic frameworks frequently label children as "problems" needing correction instead of acknowledging the variety of developmental pathways (Thomas and Loxley, 2022).

ALN WEBINAR AGENDA

Additional Learning Needs webinar scheduled to start at 5pm on Monday 11th 2026,
Webinar Introduction – Gwawr

ADHD poster and presentation, followed by question and answers – Gemma

Dyslexia poster and presentation, followed by question and answers – Cody

Bobbie poster and presentation, followed by question and answers – Down Syndrome

Joelle poster and presentation, followed by question and answers – Autism

Gwawr poster and presentation, followed by question and answers – Global delay

Webinar closure – Gwawr

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