

Developmental Language Disorder

(DLD)

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1. Webinar Script

Introduction

Good evening, everyone. Today, I want to talk about Developmental Language Disorder, or DLD, in early years education and care. DLD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects how children understand and use spoken language, with a significant impact on their communication, participation, and learning. In Wales, support for DLD is provided through the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system, which focuses on inclusion, person-centred practice, and helping children take part fully.

In this webinar, I will look at how DLD is identified and diagnosed, talk about some of the challenges children face in educational settings, and discuss how communication-rich, play-based environments can support inclusion. I will also compare how Wales approaches DLD with practices in other countries, especially Scotland and Finland, to reflect on ways to support communication and inclusion in the early years.

Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

In the past, people often saw additional learning needs and disabilities through the medical model, which treated these difficulties as problems within the child. Goodley

explains that this approach mainly focused on diagnosis, impairment, and specialist help rather than broader social and educational barriers.

However, today, many people follow the social model of disability, which says that barriers to participation often come from systems and environments that are not accessible, not just from the child's own difficulties. Mary Warnock played a major role in this change by questioning rigid labels such as 'handicap' and encouraging more inclusive education.

In Wales, this approach is shown in the Additional Learning Needs Code. The Welsh Government says it should support person-centred practice and teamwork between different agencies. Unlike the English SEND system, Welsh ALN practice focuses more on removing barriers to participation and supporting the whole child, not just on diagnosis.

Identification and Diagnosis

Developmental Language Disorder is usually noticed when children have ongoing trouble understanding or using spoken language. Bishop and colleagues note that this can manifest as a small vocabulary, difficulty following instructions, or problems joining in social situations. In early years settings, parents and practitioners are often the first to spot these issues during daily routines and conversations.

Dockrell and Lindsay found that identifying DLD well depends heavily on practitioners' understanding of speech, language, and communication needs. But confidence and awareness among practitioners can differ widely from one setting to another, which can lead to delays and uneven support. Calder and colleagues add that there is no single early sign that reliably predicts DLD later, underscoring the complexity of early assessment.

In Wales, assessment can be even harder because of bilingual and multilingual language development. Paradis points out that bilingual development can resemble language disorders, making accurate assessment challenging, especially if methods do not account for different languages. Hamdani and colleagues also found that using assessments that match a child's culture and language helps identify multilingual children more accurately.

Welsh ALN practice encourages different professionals, parents, ALNCoS, health workers, and Speech and Language Therapists to work together for early intervention and person-centred planning. Still, even with more awareness about speech and language difficulties, there are ongoing barriers. Public Health England stresses that early intervention is important, but some children and families still face delays because of limited access to specialists and long waiting lists.

England's SEND system is under more pressure than Wales when it comes to identifying needs and providing specialist support. Recent Department for Education statistics show that more children are being identified as having SEND, placing extra strain on schools and therapy services. This means that challenges with diagnosis and intervention can come not just from the child's language difficulties, but also from bigger issues in the system and environment.

Barriers to Learning and Participation

Children with DLD often face major challenges in learning and taking part in activities because communication problems can impact many parts of early development. Speech and Language UK notes that these children may have trouble following instructions, sharing their needs, and joining in classroom activities and play. The Education Endowment Foundation also points out that language difficulties can affect how children learn to read and write, as well as their engagement in school, especially in classrooms where language is a major focus.

Today, inclusive education practices recognise that barriers are not just caused by a child's difficulties. Goodley explains that hard-to-access environments and systems that focus on what children cannot do can worsen exclusion and limit participation. In Wales, the ALN Code also supports person-centred and inclusive methods that aim to lower barriers and make learning more accessible.

Children with DLD can also face social and emotional challenges. Speech and Language UK point out that speech and language problems are linked to confidence, mental health, and relationships with other children. When children have trouble sharing their thoughts and feelings, they may feel frustrated, become isolated, or have their behaviour misunderstood at school.

In other countries like Finland, early years education is placing greater emphasis on play, participation, and well-being rather than on formal assessments. UNESCO also says that inclusive education should focus on making learning accessible and encouraging participation for everyone. This means that helping children with DLD is not just about giving them extra support, but also about creating classrooms where communication is easier, and everyone understands the importance of making communication accessible.

Communication-Rich, Play-Based Environments

A key way to help children with DLD is to create communication-rich, play-based environments. Speech and Language UK explain that these settings support language growth through responsive adult-child interactions, visual aids, play, and accessible ways to communicate. The Education Endowment Foundation also found that oral

language approaches can improve communication, participation, and engagement in learning.

Many theorists back this approach. Vygotsky believed children learn language through social interaction and support. Bruner stressed the value of guided participation and help from adults. Montessori encouraged well-prepared spaces that foster independence, interaction, and easy access to learning. In the same way, the Curriculum for Wales and Ireland's Aistear framework both focus on child-centred, play-based learning and meaningful interaction in early years education.

However, communication-rich environments do not work on their own. Education Scotland says that supporting communication effectively means reflecting and adapting over time to ensure true inclusivity. The Speech, Language and Communication Framework also points out that practitioners need confidence, knowledge, and ongoing training. Even with these practices, some children with DLD may need specialist Speech and Language Therapy and extra support.

This means that inclusive communication should focus not just on activities, but on building environments that improve access, participation, and interaction for every child.

So, to sum up, Developmental Language Disorder can have a big impact on children's communication, participation, and learning in early years settings. These days, Welsh ALN practice is more aware that barriers are not just about the child's challenges, but can also come from systems and environments that are hard to access. Early identification, inclusive practice, and the creation of communication-rich environments are all important for reducing barriers and helping children with DLD take part more fully.

Questions & Answers.

- 1. To what extent can communication-rich environments fully meet the needs of children with DLD?*

Creating communication-rich environments can help children with DLD take part more, interact better, and have easier access to communication. The Education Endowment Foundation finds that oral language approaches can improve both communication and learning. Education Scotland also points out the importance of environments that support responsive communication.

However, communication-rich practice by itself might not meet all children's needs. Some children with DLD may need targeted Speech and Language Therapy or specialist support. The Speech, Language and Communication Framework also stresses that staff

need confidence and training, since inclusive strategies work best when practitioners have the right knowledge and resources.

Therefore, communication-rich environments are very valuable in inclusive early years settings. They work best when combined with skilled staff, teamwork across agencies, and specialist support when needed.

2. Why might children with DLD continue to experience barriers despite increased awareness and inclusive practice?

Even though more people are aware of DLD, there are still barriers because of broader systemic and environmental issues. Calder and colleagues point out that it is complex to identify DLD in young children. Dockrell and Lindsay add that how well practitioners understand and feel confident about DLD can differ between settings. As a result, identification may be delayed, or support may be inconsistent.

Assessing DLD can be even harder in bilingual or multilingual settings. Paradis explains that because bilingual language development can resemble language disorders, assessment can be complicated if culturally appropriate methods are not used.

Goodley's work on the social model shows that barriers come not just from a child's difficulties, but also from systems and environments that are hard to access. So, even with more inclusion policies, children with DLD may still face barriers if communication access, specialist support, or practitioner training are not consistent.

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