

Adolescent Language Disorder

What is typical adolescent language?

By the time a child reaches his teens, he is expected to have mastered all areas of language. As a result, he should have the social language skills needed to:

- take part in conversations with adults and children of his own age.
- pay good attention as a listener.
- ask and answer questions.
- provide all information that a listener needs.
- tell personal stories that inform and entertain.
- change speaking style depending on the situation (e.g., according to the age of the listener, whether the conversation is polite or informal, etc.).
- understand a partner's point-of-view.
- share messages tactfully and concisely.



In school, the adolescent needs language skills to:

- speak and write clearly, carefully, and efficiently.
- use specialized vocabulary for different subjects.
- understand new words.
- summarize information.
- follow stories or plays.
- make persuasive speeches.
- provide explanations and give reasons to support thoughts and ideas.
- solve problems, and predict outcomes.

What does an adolescent language disorder look like?

Adolescents with a language disorder may have trouble communicating with other teens and with adults, both at school and at home. They may have particular difficulty in the classroom, especially as they get older. This is because the older grades require improved writing skills, a bigger vocabulary, the use of more complex sentences, and advanced communication skills (e.g., persuading, negotiating). Adolescents may also have trouble communicating clearly when writing and speaking. Having a language disorder in adolescence may lead to poor self-esteem, poor academic and social success, and a high dropout rate.

The adolescent with a language disorder may:

- avoid speaking.
- have limited vocabulary.
- have trouble understanding a message.
- use incorrect grammar.
- have difficulty asking for clarification.
- struggle to talk about thoughts and feelings.
- have difficulty coming up with the right words.
- have difficulty organizing information.
- have difficulty telling stories.
- have difficulty getting a message across clearly.
- struggle to stay on topic.
- have trouble understanding idioms, riddles, jokes, sarcasm, and slang.
- have difficulty problem-solving, thinking up possible solutions, and making likely predictions.

What causes a language disorder?

There are many causes of speech and language disorders, but often the cause is unknown. Language disorders can be due to a brain difference that makes learning and understanding language difficult, or to hearing loss, autism, cerebral palsy, neurological disorders, traumatic brain injury, or mental retardation. Language disorders are not caused by cultural differences or by learning two or more languages at the same time.

How is an adolescent language disorder treated?

In an evaluation, a speech-language pathologist (SLP) can see how well an adolescent communicates in different ways (i.e., writing, speaking, and reading) and in different situations (e.g., with friends, during class discussions, or in written assignments). The SLP can then identify strengths and weaknesses, come up with goals to help meet specific needs, provide the treatment to meet those goals, and help in recommending a suitable educational program.

What can caregivers do to help?

There are many ways that caregivers can help adolescents communicate better:

- Have the teen repeat or summarize spoken directions before performing a task.
- Use written instructions and reminders too.
- Use written schedules, picture schedules, or both. Let the teen help set the schedule.
- Give clues to help a teen work out likely meanings of new words, e.g., “What did he mean when he said he was going to ‘refurbish’ the broken coffee maker?”
- Be an example of good speech. Speak clearly and in full sentences, using good grammar.

- Ask questions that cannot be answered with just a 'yes' or a 'no,' e.g., "Tell me about school today."
- Encourage the teen to express his opinions, negotiate outcomes, and explain choices and behaviors.
- Talk through your own thoughts when solving problems. Talk about the choices you had (good and bad), and how you came to your decision.
- If a child has difficulty talking about emotions, give examples using "I" sentences. For example, "I felt frustrated when the dishes weren't finished last night, and I had to do them before I went to work this morning." Using "I" to describe how you feel (instead of "you," to blame the child) helps make a child less defensive, and more likely to talk with you.
- Be an active and willing listener. Sometimes, a teen may not even be asking for a solution, but just wants to know that you understand their issues. Talk about the teen's feelings, and let him know that you are listening and have time to listen.

For more information, please contact the Division of Speech Pathology at (513) 636-4341 or visit our website at www.cincinnatichildrens.org/speech.