

Researcher unifies efforts on invisible language disorder

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A Western researcher is hoping to unify parents, teachers and language professionals in identifying and treating a hidden language disorder that impedes children's basic communication skills.

The Developmental Learning Disorder (DLD) Diagnostics Toolbox is a unique, international online resource designed to promote common terminology, generate discussion and build awareness about DLD.

"Advocacy starts when parents know their kid has DLD and they find other parents," said Lisa Archibald, a Communication Sciences and Disorders professor. "That's the power—one parent saying to another, 'My kid has this,' and the other saying, 'Mine, too, we have to do something about this.' If we are not doing a good job of giving parents the answers they need, we're not equipping them to become active in helping their children."

A term that came into use only a few years ago, DLD is a 'hidden' condition where a child has difficulty using and/or understanding language, thus causing them to fall behind other children their age, even though they are often just as smart.

Most individuals with DLD will develop the language skills necessary to communicate in daily situations. Carrying on a brief conversation might be effortless, but some may struggle using proper grammar or identifying sounds. They may even know fewer words than other children their age.

It is estimated that DLD affects 7 percent of Grade 1 students—making it five times more prevalent than autism.

Given the attention on language in schools, DLD should be easy to identify. But it's not for a number of reasons, Archibald said.

DLD has been given different names in the past, which has sometimes made it confusing for parents and professionals alike to discuss the condition. People also misidentify DLD as laziness or lack of attention.

That's the importance of this new toolkit, Archibald emphasized, because a first step in addressing this issue includes proper diagnosis within the international community of speech-language pathologists and therapists.

The toolkit will focus on identifying DLD in school children, although other age groups dealing with this lifelong disorder will be explored.

Archibald said pathologists and therapists around the world must seek a unified way of researching and discussing the issue.

"There are still questions about when this term should be used or not," said Archibald, a member of the Raising Awareness DLD international committee and a founding member of DLDandMe. "Until now, there has been no avenue to ask practice-based questions. We need to figure out how to take what we know and apply it to our everyday work. There needs to be consensus."

Consistency in diagnosis can then allow for advocacy in helping families and teachers address the disorder.

Archibald vows to be the "go-to" person when it comes to DLD.

"Clinicians need to feel supported. They need to have the confidence to diagnose," she said. "I am hoping that my being accessible can make a big difference."

More information: Developmental Learning Disorder (DLD) Diagnostics Toolbox: www.uwo.ca/fhs/lwm/news/index.html

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