# Working with developmental language disorder in preschools and schools

Specialpedagogiska skolmyndigheten

**Working with developmental language disorder in preschools and schools**

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# Preface

All children and pupils should receive the guidance and stimulus they need to achieve maximum possible development. This guidance and stimulus should be based on their individual circumstances and potentials. Consequently, teaching cannot have a single structure for all children and pupils. Instead, the various needs and backgrounds of each child or pupil have to be taken into account.

This text is primarily aimed at preschool teachers and teachers working with children and pupils with developmental language disorder, or DLD.

As part of their work in the Severe Speech and Language Disorders Resource Centre of Sweden's National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, the authors of the present text have had many meetings with preschool teachers and teachers. The need for this text emerged from these meetings.

I hope the text will provide teachers with inspiration for developing learning environments for children and pupils with developmental language disorder.

Stockholm, 2020

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# Introduction

A child's language development starts in its mother's womb. The child becomes familiar with "family noise" and, when born, starts to communicate with its surroundings via body movement, facial expressions and, eventually, babbling. Amongst other things, the child develops its abilities to understand and to express itself.

Human language can be divided into three areas. These are form, content and use. Each area is equally important in language development and describes how, for example, a child both understands and expresses spoken and written language.

Language form covers, for example, phonology and grammar, that is how words are pronounced and inflected as well as how sentences are put together. Gradually, children develop linguistic awareness. Examples of this are when a child discovers that words can rhyme or that words can be of unequal lengths or contain certain speech sounds. This is often noticed when a child is four to five years old. Linguistic awareness continues to develop. The next language area, content, relates to semantics, that is the words, expressions and sentences that are understood and can be used. Use, the third area, includes the ability to communicate and interact with others, that is pragmatics. This latter centres on how eye contact, body language and the spoken and written language are actually used.

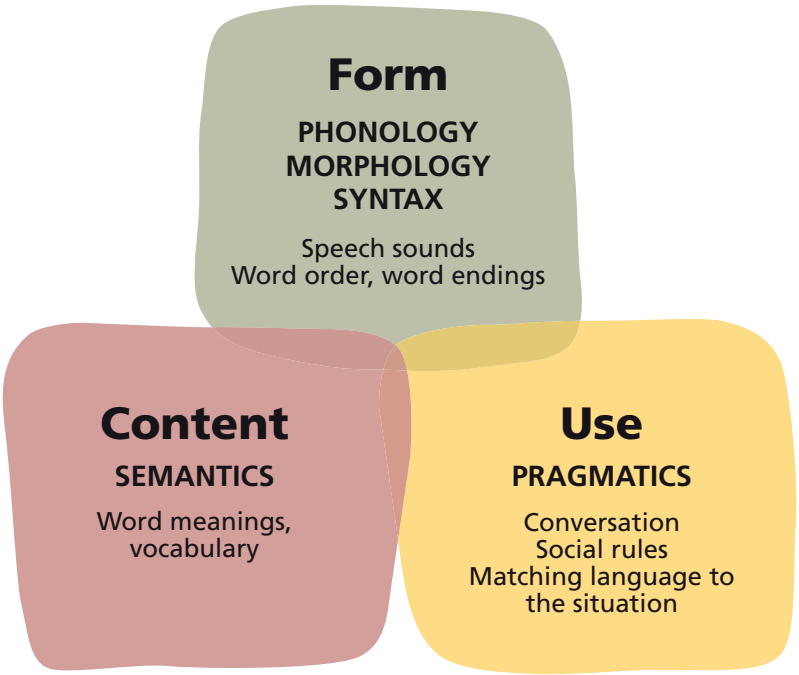
In all these areas, language continues to develop throughout life. For example, a six-year-old child may have a vocabulary of around 6,000 words. By the age of 15, this may have grown to 60,000!

Multilingual children develop all their languages simultaneously. Multilingualism can be an asset in language development. However, it must be borne in mind that cultures can differ as regards: how language is used for interaction; and, what language is considered appropriate in different situations. One example of this is how adults and children speak with each other.

# What is developmental language disorder?

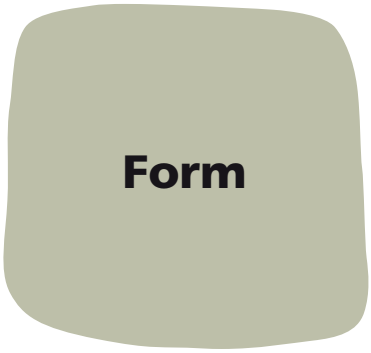
Children and pupils with developmental language disorder, DLD, do not have the same language abilities as other children of the same age. For example, they may find it difficult to understand what others say and, or to speak so that others understand them. This may be evident in one or more of the language areas: form, content and use. Developmental language disorder persists into school age and adulthood. However, the difficulties may manifest themselves differently then, for example as problems with reading and writing.

Developmental language disorder has consequences for: understanding; the possibility of using language as a vehicle for thinking; and, the ability to assimilate the content of teaching. In today's schools, children are expected to be able to: analyse; manage information and concepts; and be able to think about their own learning. All these require good mastery of language.



Difficulties with language form are often noticed first.

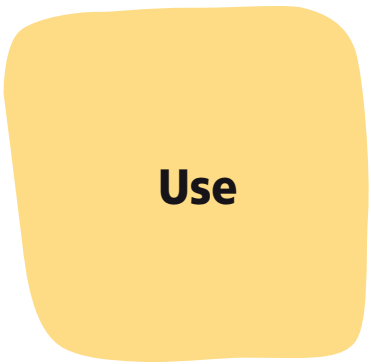
This can be a question of:
- Pronunciation – certain sounds are sometimes lost or replaced by others.
- Sentence formation – words disappear, change places or are replaced by others.
- Unusal stressing of words and sentences or speaking in a monotone voice.
- Difficulty in processing the fact that, although a train is longer than a centipede in the real world, the word "centipede" is actually longer than the word "train".
- Difficulty in hearing the sound with which a word begins or ends.




Mild difficulties with language content often disappear as the child grows older. However, other problems may persist until much later or remain throughout life.

A child with problems in the content area of language may have:
- Difficulties understanding instructions (particularly oral).
- A small vocabulary.
- Difficulty finding words.
- Difficulty arranging words into different categories (for example car, moped and train being in the vehicle category).

If a child has problems using language appropriately, it may, for example, have difficulties:
- Using and interpreting eye contact, body language and facial expressions.
- Waiting for its turn in a conversation.
- Narrating things coherently.
- Understanding irony or figurative expressions.
- Adapting language to situation.




Multilingualism does not lead to developmental language disorder. However, if a child or pupil does not hear a language often enough, this can affect its vocabulary in the language in question. If there is developmental language disorder in one language, it will also be apparent in the other languages. Determining the nature of the disorder requires an assessment of the child's or pupil's use of the first language.

## Developmental language disorder with other difficulties

Most people with developmental language disorder also have difficulties with other things such as: attention and concentration; social interaction; motor skills; and, the processing of sounds. If a person has problems keeping up with or understanding what is being said, it is difficult for them to be attentive and to concentrate. Having to expend a great deal of effort, they soon tire. Language and attention affect each other.

Language is needed to regulate one's own behaviour, that is when: reasoning internally; when planning what is to be done; and, when repeating instructions in working memory. These are called executive functions. People with developmental language disorder often have difficulties with such functions.

Many people with developmental language disorder also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD. This can cause problems with focusing attention and controlling impulses. ADHD can also affect language abilities. This can manifest itself as, for example, interrupting, speaking out loud to no one, suddenly changing subject or thinking out loud.

People with autism have problems interacting and communicating with others, for example: understanding other people's thoughts and intentions; understanding non-verbal communication such as gestures and facial expressions; adapting language to situation; providing the right amount of information; and, maintaining a coherent thread in their narratives. There may also be limited and repetitive patterns in their behaviour, interests and activities. It is common that people with autism also have language disorders.

A number of children with developmental language disorder additionally find it difficult to control and coordinate body movement. For example, they may be late in learning to sit up, crawl or walk; be prone to dropping things, tripping up, and bumping into objects; or, find it difficult to play sports. In the classroom, this may manifest itself as difficulty in cutting with scissors or writing by hand.

Children with developmental language disorder may find speaking in front of others hard. For some, it is so hard that they develop a social phobia and seek to avoid situations where speaking is expected and, or environments where there are lots of people.

The difficulties are interwoven, overlap and change over time. A child with developmental language disorder in preschool years may later be assessed as having extra difficulties with attention, interaction or reading and writing. Other diagnoses, for example ADHD, autism or dyslexia, may then be considered.

## Other possibilities besides developmental language disorder

There are some children who are completely silent and do not speak at all in certain environments. This is called selective mutism. It is not regarded as a language disorder, even if the person in question may have language difficulties. Similarly, a hearing impairment does not in itself result in a language disorder. However, it can mean that a child learns fewer words and is late in language development. It is also the case that people with hearing impairments may have developmental language disorder. Furthermore, a child who does not have a hearing impairment may have difficulties in distinguishing, processing and interpreting sounds. This is called auditory processing disorder, APD.

## Learning to read and write

When children and pupils learn to read, all three language areas are involved; form, content and use. Learning to read is based on the technical element of putting together the sounds of letters to form words. This is called decoding. It is also based on understanding and drawing conclusions from what is read. This is called reading comprehension. Some children with developmental language disorder learn which sounds belong to which letters, but still have difficulty sounding out words. There are also children who read correctly, but do not understand what they read.

Writing a text requires various abilities. Besides having something to narrate, the writer must have a mastery of words and grammar and the ability to use these to form a cohesive text. This is difficult for children and pupils with developmental language disorder. Another difficulty may be an inability to process certain speech sounds and, consequently, link them to the correct letters. There is particular difficulty if the sounds are close to each other. Examples in the Swedish language: the sounds “f” and “v”; “k” and “g” or “p” and “b”. This can cause problems with spelling.

A person with developmental language disorder may have difficulties:

- Connecting letter sounds to form words.
- Forming sentences.
- Understanding the content of what they are reading.
- Reading unfamiliar words.
- ”Reading between the lines”, that is drawing conclusions about things that are not expressly stated.
- Writing cohesive texts.

If the difficulties revolve around reading comprehension and written expression, they are probably developmental language disorder related. If, despite intensive reading training, a pupil still has difficulties with decoding and spelling, the precise diagnosis may be dyslexia, sometimes referred to as specific reading and writing difficulties.

# Identify needs for support

All children and pupils are entitled to teaching that supports and develops what they are good at, regardless of any disability. Compared to others, children and pupils with developmental language disorder have a greater need for explicit teaching. Seeing, taking part in, experiencing and talking about what is in our surroundings enriches the language of these children and pupils. Children and pupils with developmental language disorder often have visual skills that are stronger than their auditory skills. This can be useful in learning.

In the learning environment, it is important to see what works well and what works less well. A survey of the pedagogical environment is needed to establish what are a child's or pupil's strengths and difficulties in relation to the set requirements. The survey needs to look at: how the child or pupil is integrated into the school environment; how resources are allocated; group sizes; how the people in the environment work together; and, the design of the premises. The person doing the survey needs to: investigate various situations; and, speak with others who have anything to do with the child or pupil at the school. The aim is to understand and describe what happens and why in concrete situations. In establishing the language abilities of multilingual children and pupils, enlisting the help of parents, siblings and mother tongue teachers can be useful.

- When does the child or pupil not understand?
- In which situations does the child or pupil have difficulties making himself or herself understood?
- When does interaction with friends and adults work?
- Which subjects work well and why?
- When does the child or pupil manage to work independently?
- What does the child or pupil herself or himself consider works well?

## Plan support activities in the preschool or the school

Based on what the survey reveals, draw up a plan for how the preschool or school is to proceed with the results.

In preschool, it is the work team and the headteacher who jointly determine the structure of support. To establish how support is working, monitor it continuously.

Many local authorities have resource teams that include special needs teachers who can help with observations and proposals regarding how preschools and schools can provide support. Such support can be, for example, guidance for personnel or reducing the size of a class or group. It is vital to clearly state who is responsible for the survey and the monitoring of the support activities. The proposals in this text are what are called additional adjustments, in Swedish "extra anpassningar". Teachers can adopt them in the classroom and they are good for all pupils.

In certain cases, more is required. The school can give special support, in Swedish "särskilt stöd". This entails individual planning based on the pupil's concrete support needs and is more wide-ranging.

- Provide extra time for preparation and dialogue.
- Provide individual reading and writing time with an adult.
- Provide access to smaller classes or groups.
- Provide time for repetition.
- Provide study guidance in the mother tongue.
- An individual resource person may sometimes be necessary.

## Develop an action programme

When a pupil is to receive special support, the school should develop an action programme, in Swedish "åtgärdsprogram". Said programme must clearly set out the support the school offers in order for the pupil to have the opportunity to develop and learn. It must state the period during which the school is to provide support and when the support is to be monitored and evaluated. Evaluation should include whether support has been effective or if the school needs to adapt things further. It is important that pupil and parents can participate so that they know what is expected of the pupil and what the pupil is to work on to fulfil the curriculum's requirements.

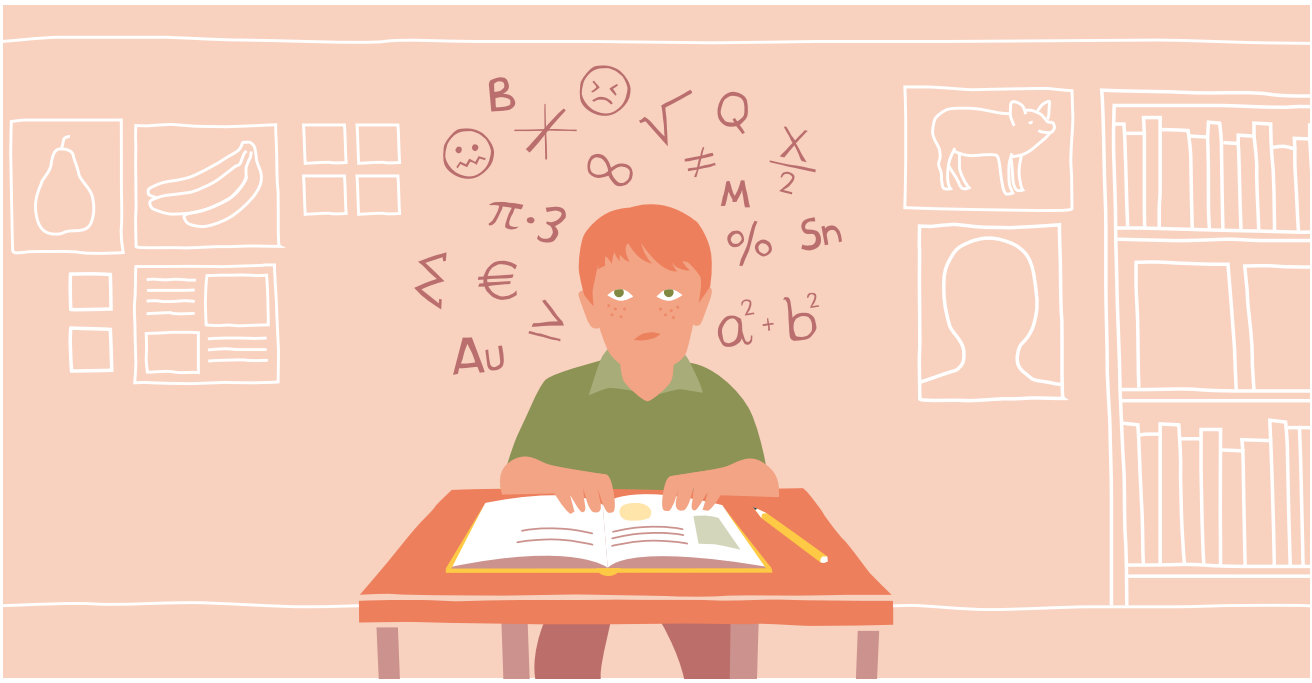
# Grading and assessments

Grading and assessing a pupil with developmental language disorder is difficult, since language is the base of all education. Always take disability into account when: planning; teaching; assessing a pupil's abilities and knowledge; grading; monitoring; and, documenting. Discuss with the pupil how the teaching can be structured so that he or she can develop his or her strengths and then be assessed accordingly.

In reviews and tests, the pupils are always entitled to have the same support as in teaching. Use drawings, digitised images, slideshows, videos, dramatisations, practical work or other methods. It is important that the pupils themselves can be a part of determining how their knowledge should be assessed.

Support could be provided via:

- Adapted tests, for example multiple choice questions.
- Help to get started and to focus on the right things.
- Giving explanations that clarify questions.
- Conducting oral reviews and tests alone or in small groups.
- Subdividing tasks.
- Alternative learning tools such as computers, spell check programs, visual aid programs, etc.
- Giving extra time.



# Teaching tips

## The role of pre-understanding

Creating references for understanding centres on giving the child or pupil the opportunity to create new knowledge by building on what he or she already knows and has experienced. Ask the child or pupil what experience he or she has in the area in question and use this as your starting point. Ask new questions.

- Which words and terms does the child or pupil already know? Which words and terms are new?
- Link to the everyday world and everyday words and expressions.
- Link new knowledge to old knowledge.
- Go on study visits and offer experiences outside preschool or school.

# Adapt activities and tasks

In individual work, a child or pupil with developmental language disorder needs a lot of support and structure. Many tasks centre on language abilities and are thus stressful for children and pupils with developmental language disorder. Reflect on which types of support are most effective and which can help promote independence.

- Set concrete tasks and divide them up step by step.
- Use visualisations, for example a diagram showing the various steps in what the child or pupil has to do.
- Explain and draw representations of words that it may be difficult for the child or pupil to remember or understand.
- Use time aids that show how long the activity or task is to last.
- Ensure that tasks often have similar formats and structures.

## Use various methods and materials

Children and pupils with developmental language disorder need to learn things in several ways, not only through speech and writing. Establish what the child or pupil likes and in which ways he or she has learnt best. Provide several options.

- Use play and games of different kinds, for example computer games.
- Dramatise and use movement.
- Let the child use all his or her senses when learning.
- Use concrete working materials (for example in mathematics).
- Use videos that can provide understanding, clarification and depth.
- Provide visual aids that clarify content, for example graphic representations, demonstrations and models.

## Take listening ability into account

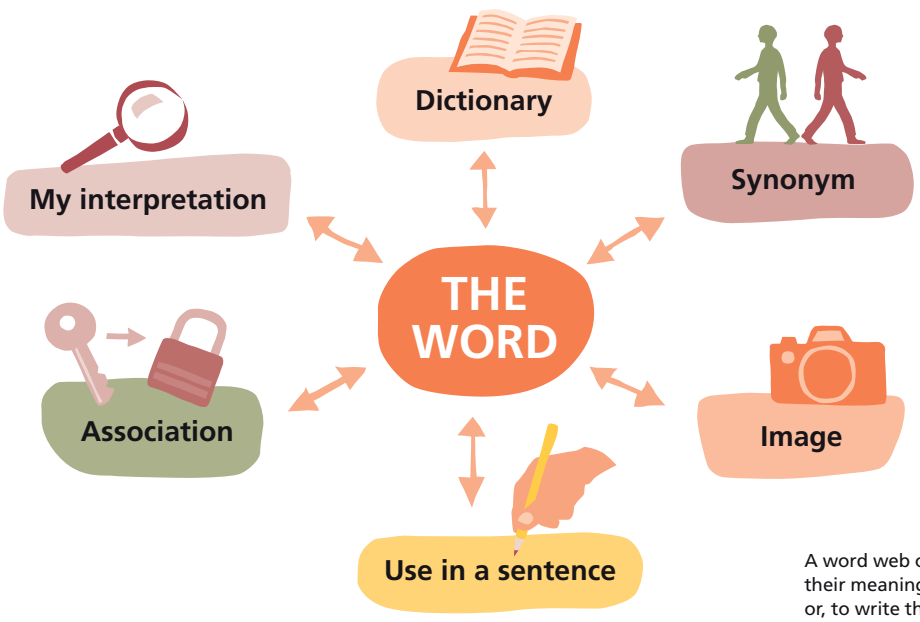
Children and pupils with developmental language disorder have to exert themselves more than others to understand and interpret what is said. Establish how long the child or pupil can be attentive in various situations. Use this as a starting point when planning activities, tasks and lessons.

- Use simple language and short sentences in which most of the words are familiar.
- Adapt speech delivery, not too fast and not too slow.
- Use signing to support spoken language. (In Swedish: ”TAKK, tecken som alternativ och kompletterande kommunikation”.)
- Give clear instructions, step by step.
- Use images to visualise and explain what is said.
- Use clear body language in the form of gestures and facial expressions.
- Draw while you narrate. Such drawing can: focus on the order of events; clarify instructions; or, stress that something is extra important.
- Concentrate on having short sessions with clear starts and clear ends.
- To check that a child or pupil has understood, you can ask him or her to repeat what has been said.
- Include elements where the children themselves can be active.

# Teach vocabulary

As children and pupils with developmental language disorder often have problems learning, understanding and using words, it is important to create the right conditions for expanding and, not least, categorising vocabulary. Remember that there is a difference between understanding a word and actively using it. A long word with several syllables is often easier to understand than a monosyllabic word. Words with several syllables have several things to latch onto and clearer stress patterns. On the other hand, they are harder to pronounce.

- Present new words in a language context.
- Provide language support via associations. Ask questions such as: What is it used for? Where can you find it? Is this a short or a long word? Can you think of a word that rhymes with it?
- Encourage the child or pupil to group words into different categories.
- Give feedback on what the child or pupil says.
- Emphasise new words via intonation.
- Pronounce new words slowly and distinctly.
- Let the child or pupil see, hear, use and describe any new word many times and in many different situations.
- Give the child or pupil good opportunities to understand, explain and repeat keywords.
- Link words used in school subjects to the pupil's previous experience.




A word web can help a child or pupil to remember words and their meanings. It helps to draw a picture; to find a synonym; or, to write the target word in a sentence.

## Practise narration

Children and pupils with developmental language disorder often have problems finding words and narrating coherently. Thus, it may be useful to support any narrative in various ways that help listeners understand the message.

- Practise narration by retelling stories or films and, or making up own stories.
- Ask questions such as: Who was there? What happened? Where and when did that happen? How did it end?
- Use images and photographs that, in the correct order, present the chain of events that the child or pupil is to narrate.
- Practise narrating what happened during the day or over the weekend. Describe a TV programme, a game or a sport.
- Go through the words that are to be in the narrative or text.
- Construct sentences that the child or pupil can imitate or sentences where he or she can fill in the missing words.
- Assist the child or pupil by: helping them find words that mean the same thing and words that belong together; giving the first sound of the word; describing where the object is found or what it is used for; and, asking questions such as "Is it in the kitchen?" "Is it used for cooking food?" "Does it begin with 's'?" "So, are you thinking of a saucepan?"

## Practice and support memory skills

Children and pupils with developmental language disorder often have problems committing things to memory. They can have problems with working memory, that is how much information they can process simultaneously. One illustration of this is difficulty in writing down a telephone number after hearing it. Another is remembering an instruction until it has been carried out. They can also have problems with long-term memory, for example knowledge and words they have acquired earlier.

- Divide what the child or pupil has to learn into smaller sections.
- Give short and clear instructions.
- Use images, concrete materials and, or text to help the child or pupil to remember.
- Plan short working sessions.
- Provide many opportunities for repetition.
- Let the child or pupil demonstrate his or her achievements in the same way that he or she achieved them.
- Guide the child or pupil by helping them to maintain focus on the subject.

To a certain extent, memory can be trained through various games. However, research into digital programs for the training of working memory has not been able to show that such training improves language ability, reading or concentration ability. Doubtless, there is improvement in the narrow areas that are trained, but some children need more practice in pronunciation, others in learning new words and others in play.

# Give time

To solve and, or complete tasks, children and pupils with developmental language disorder usually need more time than do their friends. Where activities are based on interaction, other children and pupils with better language abilities easily take over. Ensure that the right conditions for equal interaction are created.

- It is important that the child or pupil is given sufficient time – neither too little nor too much.
- Provide thinking time for the formulation of answers and contributions.
- Ensure that any group tasks are structured so that everyone has to take part and contribute to the solution.
- Use time and planning aids such as hour glasses, timers and schedules.

## Review the physical learning environment

Many children and pupils can have problems filtering out sounds and visual stimuli that are not important. Examples of such sounds are ventilation, coughing, chairs scraping on the floor or low level chatter. Remember that the physical environment outside the classroom also affects the child or pupil, during breaks and meals for example. It is also important to review the visual environment.

- Ensure there are sets of ear defenders for those who want to use them.
- Use furniture pads on chair legs.
- Use sound-absorbing surfaces in work areas.
- Use materials that do not make extraneous noise.
- Use textiles on the walls of corridors and canteens.
- Ensure that classroom walls do not offer too much visual distraction.
- Try different seating arrangements to see what works better for the child or pupil.

## Teach reading and writing

Reading and writing difficulties are common amongst children and pupils with developmental language disorder. Consequently, they need extra support throughout schooling. Use a structured method for acquiring reading and writing skills.

- Daily reading aloud creates enjoyable reading moments and dialogue.
- Work daily with sounds and letters in many different ways.
- Use the signing alphabet as a visual aid.
- Read and write simple texts together daily, and illustrate them, for example using an interactive whiteboard.
- Let the pupils read lists of common, small words that they recognise like their own name and words like “and”, “but”, “I” and so on.
- Use talking keyboards so that the child hears each sound he or she types.
- Use a text-to-speech program on a computer or tablet.

When the pupil has learnt to read, it is important to keep on working with reading comprehension. Use a structured method in which the pupil receives support via various techniques, for example creating internal images of what has been read.

- Narrate what the text is about and show any pictures that may aid understanding.
- Ask questions – does the pupil have previous experience of what the text is about?
- Go through tricky words.
- If there is a film of the book, let the pupils watch the film first.
- Ask questions about the text while the pupil is reading.
- When the pupil has finished reading, summarise what the text is about.
- Take turns at reading with the pupil. This increases reading comprehension and gives the pupil some rest in reading sessions.
- Support the pupil with reading comprehension strategies. Clarify what the pupil should be thinking about and how.
- Select different types of texts.
- Read in small groups so that pupils can discuss the texts.
- Throughout schooling, continue with reading out loud and talking about books.
- Allow the pupil to write frequently, preferably on computer.
- Give the pupil models for writing different types of texts.
- Use digital spell check programs.

As children and pupils with developmental language disorder often have problems assimilating information they hear, they are seldom helped solely by listening to texts. However, there are pupils who may benefit from both seeing the text and having it read out. What is read out can sometimes be complemented in other ways, for example by using digital programs with symbols and images and other support programs and apps.

## Friends and other relations

Small children play concrete games. Building, running and doing arts and crafts are just a few examples. As they get older, interaction becomes more and more language oriented. Examples include narrating, explaining, arguing and joking. Even if they have a good vocabulary and pronounce words well, children and pupils with developmental language disorder can have problems using language in communication. Such difficulties can be major obstacles when interacting with others.

Of course, the success or otherwise of interaction with others affects how children and pupils see themselves. They wonder, for example: "Am I a person who can communicate, who is listened to and who is allowed to join in?" Self-image is also affected by how a pupil learns things and gets on at school. Many pupils with developmental language disorder work hard both in school and at home, but still do not reach set targets. As a result, they may feel weary, stressed, anxious and sad.

- Set up short play sessions, initially with an adult and then, when the sessions are working, invite in another child.
- Practise taking turns when doing different things, for example throwing the dice in a game, throwing a ball, speaking, putting a piece in a jigsaw.
- Play games that have clear rules so that there is a context for the child's or pupil's participation.
- Provide opportunities for, and encourage, working with a friend.
- Use various methods, like social stories, as support for interaction with friends.
- Dramatise various events.
- Practise generalising, for example "This is what we did then and we can do it now too".
- Speak about different ways of communicating, for example through eye contact, body language and dialogue.
- Praise even small achievements.

# Work closely with parents

Good collaborations between home and preschool or school are a major support for children and pupils with developmental language disorder.

- Ensure that information between preschool or school and home works well. Use, for example, a contact book or a school diary; send emails or text messages. Sometimes, a picture can say more than words.
- Create a shared picture of how the child or pupil is to learn and what support the school or preschool and home can provide. Children and pupils can often themselves describe what is good or what is difficult in the teaching they are getting.
- Agree on what you should prioritise and focus on.
- Agree on how homework is to be done. To learn, pupils with developmental language disorder need extra time and lots of repetition. Nonetheless, they must be given the chance to recover after school.
- Be clear and concrete in communications with parents. Many parents of children and pupils with developmental language disorder have similar difficulties and need structure and visual aids.

# To you as a teacher

Teaching children and pupils with developmental language disorder is a challenge. Teachers can feel inadequate. Language is involved in all learning and it is not always possible to compensate for the difficulties that are encountered. It can be hard for teachers to know how to work and what to prioritise. Start by setting up simple learning outcomes and an ambition level that you think can be attained. Change takes time. Dare to believe that you are making a difference for the child or pupil and his or her development. Enlist the help of your colleagues, the pupil welfare team and, not least, the child's or pupil's parents.

Help is also available from the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools. This takes the form of: advice on issues concerning special needs education; special needs investigations; information; and, courses, distance education programmes, conferences and seminars. Please do not hesitate to contact us!

## Website of Sweden's National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools

Visit the website of the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools: www.spsm.se

For more information about special needs support, please see: www.spsm.se/specialpedagogisktstod

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## Web links

**Autismforum:** habilitering.se/autismforum

**Habilitering och hälsa:** habilitering.se

**Infoteket – Uppsala:** www.lul.se/infoteket

**Levla Lärmiljön:** sök på www.umea.se

**Riksförbundet Attention:** attention.se

**Riksförbundet för döva, hörselskadade barn och barn med språkstörning:** dhb.se

**Skoldatateket:** www.skoldatatek.se

**Skolverket:** www.skolverket.se

**Språkens hus:** www.sprakenshus.se

**Talknuten – Afasiförbundets verksamhet för barn och unga med språkstörning:** www.afasi.se/sprakstorning/om-talknuten

**An equal education for all**

At the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, you receive support in the creation of universally accessible learning environments that allow all pupils to develop. We provide special education support to schools and preschools throughout the country, answer questions, and offer courses and conferences. We also run several special schools, allocate state grants and develop teaching materials.

Developmental language disorder is a disability that manifests itself differently for different children and pupils. Sweden's Education Act, on the other hand, is the same for all. It states that everyone is to receive the support they need. Teaching children and pupils with developmental language disorder and finding the right support for each individual can be a challenge. We hope that this text will help increase understanding of the problems and provide advice on how to create the right conditions for children and pupils with developmental language disorder in preschools and schools.

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