



Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders OAFCCD

The Social Consequences of Language Disorders: When You Don't Know the Rules, You Can't Play the Game

The relationship between behaviour disorders and language disorders is not well understood. However, numerous studies have shown that many children with antisocial behaviour disorders will also have a language disorder. It is therefore important that any plans to help the child should include strategies to address the language disorder.

For children at risk, the importance of communication competence has been established. Language provides the main method of establishing and maintaining social relationships, constitutes a principal means of organizing behaviour and is central to the successful acquisition of many cognitive and academic skills, particularly literacy. It is clear that language acquisition is an integral component in the development of an individual and failure of the language system can have effects upon social, academic and vocational success which will not be alleviated over time if left unmanaged.

- Presence of language disorders in the behavioural disordered school-age child may be as high as 71-89% which is almost 10 times higher than prevalence estimates in the general school population.

The following may be expected:

- Consistent difficulties in listening, particularly for decontextualized material which must be processed quickly.
- Difficulties in understanding multiple meanings of words and figures of speech.
- Difficulties in inferencing (filling-in) for missing information.
- Difficulties in producing syntactically complex sentences.

Long-term studies have repeatedly shown that language impairments remain even into adulthood and create educational, social and vocational problems.

Most frequently cited pragmatics language difficulties among children identified as having behavioural and emotional problems are:

- language output not adapted to listener needs
- difficulties introducing, maintaining, and changing topics

- fewer socially positive utterances produced within interactions
- insufficient verbalization during tasks

It is important that student's who have emotional and behavioural problems should be screened for language problems and provided with detailed assessments, if necessary. When a student does have a language disorder as well as a behaviour or emotional problem, intervention strategies should address the student's language disorder. In addition, parents and teachers will need to understand the implications of a language disorder and how it will impact their behaviour (e.g., the difference between not comprehending instructions or directions and non-compliance, how they can help the child comprehend and express, etc.).

Many students that have exhibited emotional and behavioral problems and weak language skills will need assistance to develop social communication skills. Language rules are complex and are usually learned by children who extract the rules or infer the rules from the way that people speak and behave. Students with language disorders have great difficulty in identifying the rules of social communication and as a result their communication and behaviour may not conform to normal expectations. In order to learn these rules of language and behaviour they will need to have the necessary communication skills identified and taught. They will also need lots of opportunities to practice and learn how to carry the skills over to other settings and situations.

Programs to address the language needs of children with co-occurring language and emotional behavioural problems should:

- teach communicative alternatives
- build event-based/script knowledge for socially or emotionally difficult situations
- provide opportunities for communication success and positive reinforcement
- develop broader and more varied emotional vocabularies

Source: Adapted with permission from: Warr-Leeper, G., Wright, N. and Mack, A. (1994) Language Disabilities of Antisocial Boys in Residential Treatment. Journal of Behavioral Disorders, 19(3),159-170. And *Social Skills Training for School Age Children with Language And Behaviour Deficits* by: Genese Warr-Leeper, University of Western Ontario

The development of this article was supported by a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. OAFCCD Newsletter May 2002

