Research and clinical practice clearly demonstrate that many reading disabilities are language-based. Because the language deficits associated with reading disabilities are often present during the preschool years, these deficits can serve as early indicators of risk for reading disabilities. This exchange briefly reviews the language basis of reading disabilities and provides a checklist of language deficits frequently associated with reading disabilities. It is intended that this checklist be used by professionals for the early identification of reading disabilities.
CLINICAL EXCHANGE

The Early Identification of Language-Based Reading Disabilities

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Traditionally, reading/learning disabilities have been identified primarily on the basis of reading problems (Crichtley, 1970; Thomson, 1984). As a result, most children with these disabilities have not been identified until they have entered school and experienced significant difficulties learning to read. Unfortunately, such reading failure is frequently accompanied by a host of negative consequences (Spear-Swerling & Sternberg, 1994; Stanovich, 1986). Children who encounter early reading problems often become less motivated to read, develop lower expectations of their abilities, and gain less practice reading than do good readers. Consequently, they may fall farther and farther behind their peers in reading and academic achievement.

Current research suggests, however, that children at risk for reading disabilities can be identified before experiencing failure in learning to read (Bedian, McAnulty, Duffy, & Als, 1990; Catts, 1991). This work indicates that in many cases, reading disabilities are language-based disorders (Catts, 1989a; Kamhi & Catts, 1989; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987). These disorders generally manifest themselves in terms of difficulties in oral language development. Children at risk for reading disabilities may demonstrate early problems in expressive morphology or syntax (Bishop & Adams, 1990; Scarborough, 1990). Others may have difficulties in understanding words and sentences (Catts, 1993; Menyuk, Chen, Liebergott, & Karp, 1982). D’Agostino & Belanger, 1991; Tallal, Curizz, & Kaplan, 1989). The latter problems in the comprehension of language can significantly influence children’s ability to understand what they read. Written language is highly decontextualized and its comprehension relies heavily on a well-developed vocabulary and a clear understanding of the structural components (e.g., function words) and rules of language (e.g., syntax, pragmatics).

Some children at risk for reading disabilities will not show early difficulties in expressive language or comprehension. However, many of these children will have problems in what has been termed phonological processing (Catts, 1989a; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987). These problems include a lack of sensitivity or awareness of the speech sounds in words (e.g., phonological awareness) (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Fletcher et al., 1994). Phonological processing deficits further include problems in word retrieval (Badia, McAnulty, Duffy, & Als, 1990; Wolf, 1984), verbal short-term memory (Torgesen, 1995), and speech production (Catts, 1989a; Snowling, 1981). These various deficits have been shown to be closely related to children’s ability to learn to recognize printed words. A lack of awareness of the sounds in words and/or difficulties storing and retrieving phonological information may impact children’s ability to learn sound-letter correspondence and its use in decoding printed words (Stanovich, 1988).

Most of the language deficits described above can be observed in at-risk children before the beginning of formal reading instruction. As a result, these deficits may serve as...


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EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF LANGUAGE-BASED READING DISABILITIES:
CHECKLIST

Child's Name: ________________________ Birthday: ________________________
Date Completed: ___________________ Age: ________________________

This checklist is designed to identify children who are at risk for language-based reading disabilities. It is intended for use with children at the end of kindergarten or beginning of first grade. Each of the descriptors listed below should be carefully considered and those that characterize the child’s behavior/history should be checked. A child receiving a large number of checks should be referred for a more in-depth evaluation.

**Speech Sound Awareness**
- doesn’t understand and enjoy rhymes
- doesn’t easily recognize that words may begin with the same sound
- has difficulty counting the syllables in spoken words
- has problem clapping hands or tapping feet in rhythm with songs and/or rhymes
- demonstrates problems learning sound-letter correspondences

**Word Retrieval**
- has difficulty retrieving a specific word (e.g., calls a sheep a “goat” or says “you know, a wooly animal”)
- shows poor memory for classmates’ names
- speech is hesitant, filled with pauses or vocalizations (e.g., “um,” “you know”)
- frequently uses words lacking specificity (e.g., “stuff”, “thing,” “what you call it”)
- has a problem remembering/retrieving verbal sequences (e.g., days of the week, alphabet)

**Verbal Memory**
- has difficulty remembering instructions or directions
- shows problems learning names of people or places
- has difficulty remembering the words to songs or poems
- has problems learning a second language

**Speech Production/Perception**
- has problems saying common words with difficult sound patterns (e.g., animal, cinnamon, specific)
- mishears and subsequently mispronounces words or names
- confuses a similar sounding word with another word (e.g., saying “The Entire State Building is in New York”)
- combines sound patterns of similar words (e.g., saying “escavator” for escalator)
- shows frequent slips of the tongue (e.g., saying “true blush” for blue brush.)
- has difficulty with tongue twisters (e.g., she sells seashells,)
Comprehension
____ only responds to part of a multiple element request or instruction
____ requests multiple repetitions of instructions/directions with little improvement in comprehension
____ relies too much on context to understand what is said

Expressive Language
____ talks in short sentences
____ makes errors in grammar (e.g., “he goed to the store” or “me want that”)
____ lacks variety in vocabulary (e.g., uses “good” to mean happy, kind, polite)
____ has difficulty giving directions or explanations (e.g., may show multiple revisions or dead ends)
____ relates stories or events in a disorganized or incomplete manner
____ may have much to say, but provides little specific detail
____ has difficulty with the rules of conversation, such as turn taking; staying on topic, indicating when he/she does not understand

Other Important Factors
____ has a prior history of problems in language comprehension and/or production
____ has a family history of spoken or written language problems
____ has limited exposure to literacy in the home
____ lacks interest in books and shared reading activities
____ dies bit engage readily in pretend play

Comments