

Language difficulties can last a lifetime

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People who suffer from language difficulties as children may continue to suffer from various emotional and behavioural problems as adults, according to new research by The University of Manchester.

Childhood [language impairment](#) used to be seen as an early years difficulty, with children catching up gradually as they got older. However, new research shows that is not always the case and that many people experience communication difficulties into adulthood. The research, led by Professor Gina Conti-Ramsden, from The University of Manchester, will be presented at an event as part of the annual Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Festival of Social Science.

Professor Gina Conti-Ramsden, Professor of Child Language and Learning at The University of Manchester, said: "Young people who suffer from language impairments are not easy to notice.

"They look like normal, typical people, and in fact they are. They have many skills and are in fact bright, it's just that the one thing they are not good at is language. Language is difficult for them, just like playing the piano is difficult for some people."

"Unfortunately for them everything you need to do in life involves language. To function in today's fast paced society, to maintain relationships, educate yourself and get a job you need language pretty much every second of every day."

Specific language impairment (SLI) is a common disorder affecting five

to seven per cent of the population. Children with a history of SLI have difficulties learning to talk despite adequate hearing and no obvious signs of neurobiological problems.

In order to investigate the effects that having SLI in childhood can have on young adults, Professor Conti-Ramsden began the largest, longest running UK study involving [young people](#) with a language impairment. In the Manchester Language Study, individuals first identified as having a language impairment at 7 years of age were followed up at 8, 11, 16, 17 and 23 years to explore the impact of communication difficulties on their everyday lives.

The study found that a number of young people who had suffered from language problems in childhood often still find it difficult to understand speech as young adults, especially when spoken quickly. The study showed that these young people had difficulty in expressing their needs, leading to feelings of frustration and in some cases chronic distress.

"Our evidence shows that young adults who have difficulties in understanding what is said to them, particularly in rapid conversation, report that they often feel anxious or depressed, or they tend to get angry easily," says Professor Conti-Ramsden.

The study also found that adolescents with a history of SLI perceive themselves as having social problems with peers and behavioural difficulties such as hyperactivity and problems with conduct, such as getting angry and losing their temper.

Professor Conti-Ramsden added: "We found that the lower the ability of adolescents to understand spoken language, the more likely they would report having difficulties in these areas."

These difficulties often translate into problems fitting into modern life,

such as maintaining relationships and getting jobs. According to Professor Conti-Ramsden, more work is needed to make sure that young people with SLI get the help that they need.

"Although speech and language therapy plays an important role in the provision for children with SLI, this generally tends to diminish the older the [children](#) become.

"To my knowledge little specific help is available for [young adults](#) with SLI. Because of their normal non-verbal intelligence, they do not fit into adult learning disability services, and because of the lack of information on the extent of their social functioning, they are likely to fall short of social services or mental health provision."

Professor Conti-Ramsden will discuss her findings from the Manchester Language Study at an event entitled 'Growing up with a [language](#) impairment' on the 6 November. The event is part of the ESRC's flagship annual Festival of Social Science.

Provided by University of Manchester

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