

# More support needed for two children in every class with hidden language disorder

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Children with a common but regularly undiagnosed disorder affecting their language and communication are likely to be finding the transition back to school post-lockdown harder than most, according to a team of

psychologists.

Two [children](#) in every class of 30 are estimated to have Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) (around 8%), yet public awareness, diagnosis and referral to speech and language therapists all remain low in the UK.

DLD is a condition where children have problems acquiring their own language for no obvious reasons. Unlike temporary language delay (which reflects the natural variation of age at which children learn to speak and communicate), DLD is a lifelong condition with significant impacts for individuals in childhood and in later life, in particular their [mental health](#).

Common challenges for children include difficulty understanding what others say and struggling to articulate their ideas through speech. This can result in problems interacting and learning to play with peers, which researchers believe exacerbates mental health concerns and was the focus of a new study from the psychologists at the University of Bath.

Published today [Wednesday 31 March 2021], the new research which drew on insights from specialist schools around the UK, focused on social challenges experienced by children with Language Disorders. It highlights regular struggles for [young people](#) in resolving disagreements and accessing group play, which the researchers say might be mitigated by adjusting / adapting playtimes according to children's specific needs. This might include space for quieter reflection, potentially with options for drawing or [board games](#).

Lead researcher, Dr. Vanessa Lloyd-Esenkaya from the University of Bath, who used to work as a learning assistant in primary schools helping young people with [language](#) and communications challenges, explains: "We think of playtime as being a period of release for kids and a chance for them to relax with friends, and it is, but it can also create new

challenges for children to deal with.

"This study finds children with Language Disorders can struggle to keep up with group games that have multiple rules—the type you'll often see forming spontaneously and at a fast pace on a school playground. They also frequently misinterpret social cues, have difficulties resolving conflicts independently, and find it hard to understand and regulate emotions, according to parents and specialist school staff.

"This year, more than ever, children have had to adapt to changing environments. Protecting children from mental health difficulties is at the forefront of all our minds. This study is timely because children with Language Disorders, such as DLD, were already at risk of developing mental health difficulties before the pandemic hit. It's important we find ways to better help children with their peer relationships to enhance their wellbeing."

The researchers say that early referrals for DLD are particularly important in order to help put the right support in place for young people and stress the positive impacts such interventions can make.

Dr. Lloyd-Esenkaya adds: "Research shows that for every £1 spent on Enhanced Speech and Language Therapy £6.43 is returned in savings over children's lifetimes. Language is engrained into every aspect of our lives and so DLD has a huge impact on everyday functioning, but with the right support people with DLD can thrive. It's likely that teachers will have kids in their class who have DLD but don't have a diagnosis. Schools can support children with Language Disorders by providing alternative spaces to play at lunchtime such as drawing or board game clubs and using visual resources, such as wall charts and social stories, to help children work through their emotions and any peer conflicts."

Dr. Yvonne Wren, Director of Bristol Speech and Language Therapy

Research Unit comments: "It is easy to mislabel children with DLD but it is vital that these children are identified to ensure they get the right help and support. This hidden disability can have a major impact on children's progress at [school](#), both socially and academically."

**More information:** Vanessa Lloyd-Esenkaya et al, What is the nature of peer interactions in children with language disorders? A qualitative study of parent and practitioner views, *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/23969415211005307](https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415211005307)

Provided by University of Bath

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