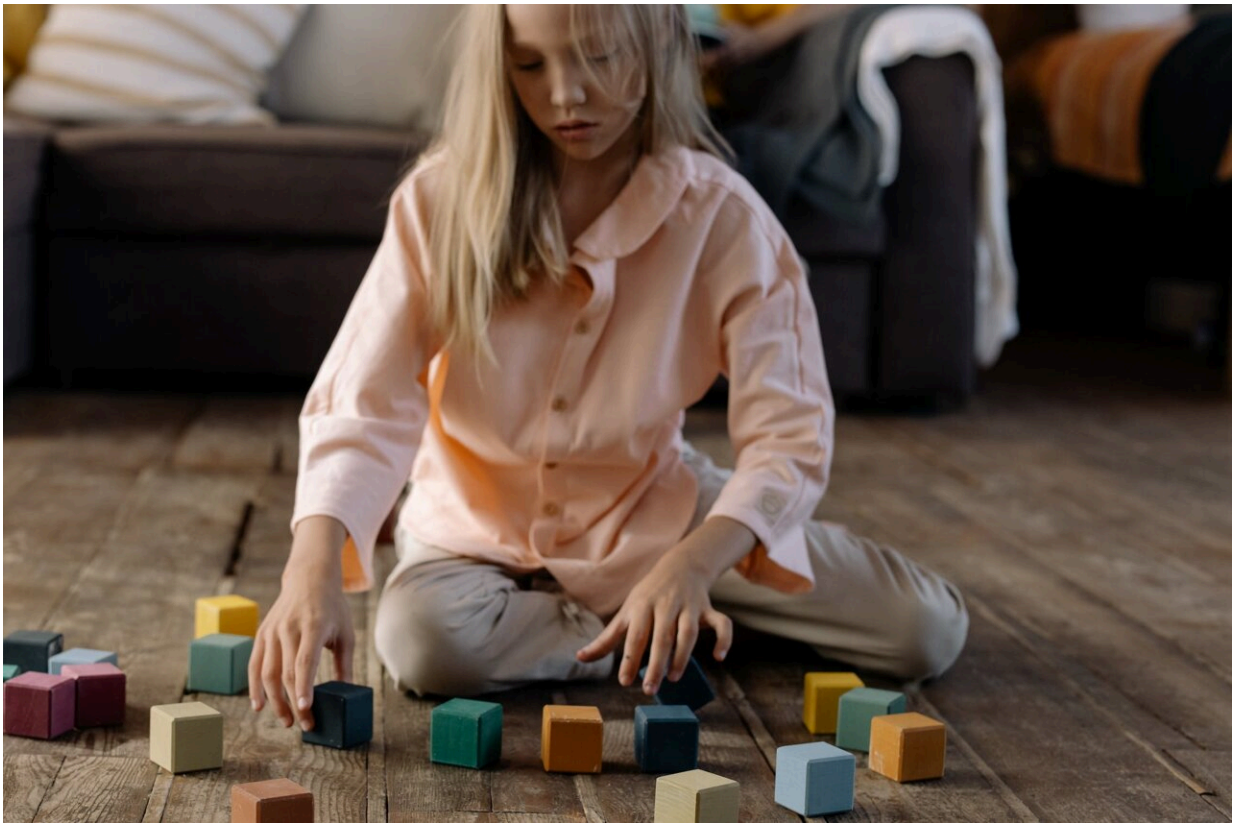


# Gender stereotypes can impact the diagnosis of girls with developmental language disorder

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Detecting and diagnosing developmental language disorders in girls is made more difficult by gender stereotypes and myths. Credit: Cottonbro studio, Pexels

Developmental language disorder (DLN) is a problem involving the acquisition and development of language, and children with it experience

difficulties speaking, communicating, understanding and expressing themselves. It is also considered an "invisible disorder" because the markers of the condition are difficult to diagnose and to understand by professionals and the child's relatives, and some of these issues can be aggravated by gender stereotypes.

A team of experts in the interuniversity Cognition and Language Research Group (GRECIL) in the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, affiliated with the eHealth Center (eHC) at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) and the University of Barcelona (UB), has performed a critical review of various studies to assess the consequences of sexist myths on language and communication among children, and particularly those suffering from DLD.

The researchers have listed the ten most common sexist myths or stereotypes about language and the emotional sphere, including "girls have greater communication and [language skills](#) than boys" and "boys interrupt because they know more things than girls."

"In this study, we examined how sexist stereotypes influence important variables in the study of DLD, such as language and the socio-emotional sphere, based on the importance of working from a feminist perspective in science and in the approach to DLD," said Nadia Ahufinger, a member of the UOC's Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences and of the Docentes Feministas por la Coeducación (Feminist Teachers for Coeducation, DoFemCo) association, and Mari Aguilera, an expert at the University of Barcelona, the authors of the review.

The review also took into account aspects including the relationships between sexist socialization factors and the development of language and socio-emotional skills among children suffering from DLD, also known as specific language impairment (SLI). "These factors can have a negative impact on the detection and assessment of girls and boys with

language difficulties at different stages of their development," Ahufinger said.

The prevalence of DLD is estimated at around 7% in the pediatric population, i.e. one child in fourteen suffers from this type of disorder. "These boys and girls mainly present difficulties expressing and understanding spoken language, but their difficulties also extend to non-linguistic aspects including cognition, memory, academic performance and socio-emotional skills," said Aguilera.

## **Androcentric detection and assessment**

In their review, the experts argue that sexist stereotypes have led to an androcentric detection and assessment of [developmental language disorder](#). This situation has led to a more marked increase in cases of this type of disorder being detected among boys than girls, because boys tend to present more disruptive behaviors.

"According to the scientific evidence, the difference between boys and girls in terms of language acquisition is not large enough to justify the widespread belief or myth that girls have better communication skills and language skills throughout their development, and we must understand that this idea is due to a sexist stereotype," said Ahufinger.

Sexist stereotyping therefore has a major impact on the development and expression of emotionality, as well as on the way people relate to other people, i.e. on social relationships. "The sexist stereotype stems from the belief, which is still widespread even today, that girls/women are emotional and empathetic individuals who are oriented towards other people, and especially towards boys/men, and boys/men are rational individuals, oriented towards their own goals and achievements," said Aguilera.

In the opinion of the researchers, it is therefore necessary to take into account that girls may have language difficulties in the same way that boys do, but that they express them in a different way than their male counterparts.

## **An overrepresentation of boys and underdiagnosis of girls**

According to the experts, studies of this disorder have to date suffered from an overrepresentation of boys in the samples, and the research may or may not identify or respond to the needs of girls.

"Due to this androcentric perspective, we still don't know if there is a profile of language difficulties—emotional, social and involving the various spheres affected—with this disorder that may differ between boys and girls. This aspect can directly lead to an underdiagnosis of girls and imbalances in the design of the intervention," said Ahufinger, adding that, given this situation, a methodology which takes the feminist perspective into account is required.

There is a further problem, since the influence of these [gender stereotypes](#) can encourage families to believe that girls do not have the same need to visit a professional, since according to the myths, girls should not have any difficulties, simply because they are girls. The adoption of these stereotypes in the discipline of communication and language can therefore lead to girls receiving inappropriate treatment, and even to their underdiagnosis.

## **Alternatives for improving diagnosis and therapies**

In order to improve the diagnosis and the therapies required, these experts propose various approaches and alternatives to the current

working models aimed at fostering interdisciplinary work. "Protocols and guidelines that take sexist biases into account in the detection and evaluation of DLD and in work with families must be incorporated so that this population can be treated based on coeducation and real equality," said Ahufinger.

In their review, the experts developed several proposals for carrying out research and for therapies that represent girls and boys on equal terms and include good practices. As a result, from a feminist perspective, explanations of false myths related to sexist stereotypes must be included in these protocols, and widespread and deeply rooted ideas about gender roles must be refuted.

"It is essential to train pediatricians and medical professionals so that they are aware of warning signs in young children that may indicate a possible disorder in the future," concluded the experts, who also stressed that "it is important to work to integrate shared protocols between speech therapists and [medical professionals](#)."

## **A list of the most common sexist myths and stereotypes related to language and the emotional sphere**

These sexist myths are based on the belief that these behaviors are inherent and natural to each sex. However, these attributes have been invented and imposed on each sex in order to subordinate girls and women:

- Girls have greater communication and [language](#) skills than boys throughout their development.
- Boys say what they know, and girls say what other people want to hear.

- Girls like to talk more in private situations and about personal topics and to criticize other people, and boys like to talk more in public situations and about more interesting topics.
- In the public sphere, girls can only talk a little, in a soft and pleasant way, and boys are able to talk at length, confidently and forcefully.
- Girls don't like to give orders, shout or interrupt; they prefer to limit themselves to making suggestions and asking, listening, avoiding arguments and not asking direct questions. In contrast, boys like to argue and debate; they interrupt because they know more things than girls.
- Boys speak based on knowledge and reason, and girls based on opinion and emotion.
- Boys like to run, play and jump more, and [girls](#) like to care for things and stay in one place.
- Girls are more sensitive to other people's feelings, friendlier, and more empathetic, and boys are rational (detached from emotion), and oriented towards their own goals and achievements.
- Girls are emotional, empathetic and oriented towards other people, and especially towards boys. In contrast, boys do not feel as many emotions and they do not like to empathize or care for other people.
- Girls are dependent, and [boys](#) are independent.

The work (in Spanish) is published in the journal *Revista Chilena de Fonoaudiología*.

**More information:** Nadia Ahufinger et al, El impacto de los estereotipos sexistas en el estudio, detección y evaluación del Trastorno del Desarrollo del Lenguaje: Propuestas para su abordaje desde una perspectiva feminista, *Revista Chilena de Fonoaudiología* (2022). [DOI: 10.5354/0719-4692.2022.68921](https://doi.org/10.5354/0719-4692.2022.68921)

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