



Raising Awareness of Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) in Early Years Settings



As early years practitioners, we know just how much happens in those first few years of life – play, exploration, discovery, and... language! For most children, language develops naturally, but for some, it's not so straightforward.

Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is one of the most common childhood conditions you've probably never heard of – and it affects around 1 in 14 children. That's two in every average classroom. It's a lifelong condition that makes it harder for children to understand and/or use spoken language.

And yet, many children with DLD are missed in the early years. Why? Because they might look and act just like their peers, and because delays in language can be put down to shyness or quietness – let's change that!

■ So, what is DLD? ■

DLD stands for Developmental Language Disorder. It means a child has persistent difficulties with understanding or using language, and those difficulties are not linked to hearing loss, learning disability, or other medical causes.

■ Children with DLD may struggle with:

- Following instructions
- Understanding questions
- Using words and sentences clearly
- Expressing their thoughts
- Joining in play or conversations

■ Spotting the signs in your setting ■

You don't need to be a speech and language therapist to notice when something's not quite right. Here are a few things to look out for:

■ Understanding language (Receptive):

- Not following instructions unless they're broken down simply
- Appearing to "switch off" or not respond
- Struggling with "what," "where," or "why" questions

■ Talking (Expressive):

- Using fewer words than their peers
- Trouble putting words into a sentence
- Getting stuck trying to find the right word
- Missing little words (like *is*, *the*, *a*) or using the wrong tense

■ Social and play skills:

- Finding it hard to join in group play
- Frustration when they can't express themselves
- Relying on pointing, gestures, or copying others





What should you do if you're concerned?

The most important thing is not to wait and see. If something doesn't feel right, trust your instincts. *Here's what you can do:*

- Observe the child during different parts of the day – free play, group times, transitions.
- Chat with your SENCo or setting lead about what you're noticing.
- Talk to parents or carers. Be honest, kind, and clear. Share your observations and listen to theirs.
- Use supportive strategies straight away:
 - Keep language simple and clear
 - Use gestures, visuals, and routines
 - Give extra time for responses
 - Repeat and model back correct language
 - Create lots of chances for communication through play
- Get support - Livewell Speech and Language offers Request for Help phone calls - 01752 434844. Additionally, the Early Years Communication and Language Support Team can offer advice, tools, and training to help you support children with language needs – including those with DLD.

💛💜 DLD Awareness Day – Friday 17th October 2025 💛💜

Every year, DLD Awareness Day shines a light on this often-overlooked condition.

Here are some simple ways to take part:

- Wear purple and yellow, the official DLD colours
- Share facts and posters in your staffroom or on parent boards
- Post on social media using #DLDday and #ThinkLanguageThinkDLD
- Talk to your team – even one conversation can make a big difference!

By joining in, you're helping break the silence around DLD and making sure all children's voices are heard and understood.

■ Want to know more? ■

You can explore these brilliant websites to learn more about DLD:

- www.radld.org – Raising Awareness of DLD
- www.afasic.org.uk – Support for parents and professionals
- www.speechandlanguage.org.uk

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