

Communication impairment in Australia

What is communication?

Communication involves speaking, hearing, listening, understanding, social skills, reading, writing and using voice.

What is communication impairment?

People who have difficulty communicating may require assistance with:

Speech: involves saying the sounds in words so that people can understand what is being said. For example, a child who doesn't say words clearly or an adult who slurs their speech after an accident.

Language: involves the exchange of ideas using words, usually in spoken or written form. For example, a child who has trouble understanding and following instructions or an adult who can't find the right words after a stroke.

Literacy: involves reading, understanding what is read and communicating in written form.

Social Communication: is how we communicate and involves interpreting the context of a conversation, understanding non-verbal information and the social rules of communication that are needed to develop a relationship with another person.

Voice: using the vocal cords or voice box to produce speech. For example, a person who frequently loses their voice or a person who has had surgery for throat cancer.

Fluency: commonly known as stuttering. This problem is usually first noticed when a child starts putting sentences together but can continue into adulthood.

Communication impairment is more common than you think...

- Children with autism, Down Syndrome, and Cerebral Palsy often begin their life with a communication impairment
- 20% of four year old children have difficulty understanding or using language
- 14% of 15 year olds have only basic literacy skills
- 28% of teachers take time off work each year because of voice problems
- At least 30% of people post-stroke suffer loss of language (aphasia)
- 85% of those with Parkinson's disease have voice, speech and/or swallowing difficulties
- 13,000 Australians use electronic communication aids to get their message across
- Children with a language impairment are six times more likely to have a reading problem than children without
- 46% of young Australian offenders have a language impairment
- There is a high correlation between communication difficulties and poor mental health
- Three in every 1,000 newborns have hearing loss, which without intervention can affect their speech, language and literacy. Indigenous children have three times more hearing problems than non-Indigenous children



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Causes of communication impairment

There are many different causes of communication impairment. Some causes include:

- Neuro-developmental disorders such as autism, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy
- Other medical conditions such as cleft palate and vocal nodules
- Hearing impairment
- Degenerative neurological conditions such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's Disease
- Damage to the brain due to accident or illness

Sometimes communication impairment can run in families, and sometimes the cause is unknown. It can also sometimes be misunderstood and misdiagnosed.

The impact

The impact of communication impairment can range from mild to severe, with difficulties that can be temporary or last a lifetime. Even mild communication impairment can have a serious impact on how a person functions in their daily life, like speaking in class, ordering a meal in a restaurant or finding a job.

Communication impairment can impact on interactions at home, at work and socially.

Speech and language difficulties can affect learning at school including literacy, numeracy and interacting socially with other children. Long term implications of speech and language impairment include poor academic achievement, risk to mental health, reduced employment options and social isolation.

People with communication impairment can suffer frustration, anger, embarrassment or grief as they try to communicate their needs, ideas and opinions. Others can misunderstand a communication impairment and respond inappropriately or insensitively to the person who is trying to communicate.

Early intervention is the key to preventing or reducing the lifelong implications for many Australians living with communication impairment.

Speech pathologists help

Speech pathologists are the specialists trained to assess, advise, treat and advocate for people with communication impairment, and their families.

How do I become a speech pathologist?

Speech pathology is an accredited undergraduate or entry level masters degree.