Specific Language Impairment (SLI) is considered as a “pure” form of language disorder, one in which language alone is affected. However, current research disputes this idea and suggests that SLI may cause problems in other areas as well.

Although SLI is often regarded as a childhood disorder it has been shown that difficulties can be longstanding and persist into adolescence1 (defined here as age 14-19). This is a time of change and increased demands for communication2 and yet there is a paucity of SLT services available to this group of young people3. It is therefore important to gauge whether SLI is in fact a “pure” disorder or whether it will indeed cause problems in other areas such as behaviour, social skills and emotional health.

Behaviour

- A literature review studying SLI in adolescents states that individuals with SLI are at a higher risk of problem behaviours, including aggression and conduct disorders4.
- One study found that 19 year old boys with SLI scored higher for delinquency and aggression compared with typically developing (TD) peers5. Language impairment at age 5 directly predicted age 19 delinquency, but had no predictive effect on aggression.
- These two papers agree that SLI is somehow associated with problem behaviour in adolescents, but it is not clearly exactly how.
- Other studies disagree with the above results: one study interviewed adolescents with SLI and found that there was no significant difference in the number of adolescents who had been in serious trouble at school or with the law6.
- Another study found that relatively few adolescents with SLI referred to behaviour problems when interviewed7. However, it must be questioned whether an interview is an appropriate method to discover such issues, as young people may not want to disclose personal information to a researcher.

Language serves many functions in social interactions and it therefore seems likely that any form of language impairment will impact on an adolescent’s social skills.

- The review found that adolescents with SLI are at risk of poorer quality friendships and score lower on a range of measures of social skills compared to TD peers8.
- Language at age 7 was a significant predictive factor for friendship outcome at age 16. However, the strongest predictor was measures of difficult behaviour.
- Therefore SLI is not the most important factor impacting on social skills.
- A longitudinal study supported the review: there was an increased incidence of social difficulties among those with persistent language impairment9.
- The cause of this again remains unclear, although it was found that prognosis was worse for those with a low nonverbal IQ than those with a history of SLI.

Conclusion: SLI does not directly cause problems with social skills. Nonetheless, it has been demonstrated that SLI has some impact on behaviour, which in turn has been found to impact on friendship quality. Therefore, although other factors such as nonverbal IQ play a role, SLI may be an indirect cause of social skills.

Social Skills

- Adolescents were only at greater risk of psychiatric impairment when SLI had persisted into school years9. Resolved SLI had no impact.
- Psychiatric problems were better predicted by past performance IQ than by SLI9.
- This is supported by a further study which did not find a significant association between early language scores and emotional health7.
- Despite finding an increased risk of emotional problems in adolescents with SLI, each of these studies reported that most of this group had positive outcomes.

Conclusion: these papers all agree that SLI is not significantly associated with poor emotional health, and therefore it cannot be seen as a direct cause. However, it has been suggested that social skills may impact on emotional outcomes9, as those with poorer friendship quality and fewer supportive peers may be more likely to show signs of anxiety or depression. As discussed above, SLI is associated with poor social skills. It may therefore be an indirect cause of problems with emotional health.

Emotional Health

It is important to remember that there is considerable heterogeneity within the SLI population and therefore in the outcomes discussed. However, general trends of increased risk of difficulties are reported in the literature.

As seen in the diagram below, each of the factors discussed interacts and impacts on the others, but is not necessarily a direct cause of difficulties.

Conclusions

- Persistent SLI is associated with higher risks of problems with behaviour, social skills and emotional health in adolescence.
- SLI does not directly cause these problems.
- More research is needed in order to be clearer on the causes of these problems in adolescents with SLI, and to find out how best to prevent them.
- It is important that professionals working with this group are aware of the possible associated difficulties so that adolescents are seen holistically and are provided with the correct support and intervention.

References