

Chapter 10

The Role of Support Networks for Children and Adolescents With Language Developmental Problems

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the role of support networks for children and adolescents with language developmental problems. Support networks include family, school environment, community, and interpersonal relationships as well as digital networks. These networks can provide the necessary tools to children and adolescents with language developmental problems in order to overcome their problems and to be duly incorporated to the society. The assets provided to children and adolescents by the above-mentioned networks can be divided into two categories: external and internal. External assets include family support, empowerment, and proper set of boundaries and expectations. On the other hand, internal assets include proper motivation and school engagement, adaptation of positive values, evolution of social competences, and creation of a positive identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Language developmental problems are a common indicator in the diagnosis and assessment of several genetic syndromes, including Down syndrome, Williams-Beuren syndrome, and Fragile X syndrome, as well as conditions such as autism, aphasia, and dyslexia. The term “language developmental problems” refers specifically to instances of language delay in children that are not due to an underlying medical condition and in which the child’s cognitive intelligence (IQ) falls within the average range as defined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 1994 and noted by Clegg et al., 2005).

These challenges tend to emerge early in life and, in some cases, persist into adolescence and adulthood. At the same time, these language development problems can exacerbate the struggles associated with language disorders and contribute to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression in affected children.

In this context, children struggling with language developmental problems are at increased risk for both bullying in school and stereotyping. In addition, they often face a lack of social acceptance, which can further exacerbate their challenges (Holanda et al., 2015). In support of this, research by Locke et al. (2010) found that high school students with disabilities often struggle with feelings of loneliness, coupled with experiencing a lower quality of friendships and a lower social status compared to their peers (Locke, Ishijima, Kasari, & London, 2010).

In order to limit the above-mentioned situations, children with language developmental problems should be governed and mentored by support networks (such as family, school and society). These networks can help children with language developmental problems to be accepted by their peers, as well as to be incorporated by the society in a smoother way.

Social support is emerging as a critical factor in fostering successful interpersonal relationships among children and adolescents struggling with language development (Fernandez-Villardón et al., 2020). Evidence underscores the universal capacity of human environments to foster language acquisition by providing opportunities for communicative and social engagement. These communicative experiences, in turn, not only fuel the language acquisition process itself, but also help to shape the language model that serves as the foundation for this mechanism. In particular, differences in quality of life between individuals with and without disabilities are manifested across a wide range of dimensions. These include differences in the extent of social networks, opportunities to exercise autonomy, and the range of activities encountered (Sands & Kozleski, 1994).

Support networks include family (parents, siblings, caregivers, grandparents and wider family environment), school environment (teachers, supportive framework for language learning, individualized teaching, classmates), community and interpersonal relationships (neighborhood, city culture, awareness of social issues, friendships) as well as digital networks (computer media, social media, videogames) (Correa, Bonilla & Reyes-MacPherson, 2010).

According to research (Tunali & Power, 1993; Dubow & Ullman, 1989), support networks contribute to the strengthening of self-esteem, to the prevention of school bullying, to the reduction of stereotypes and to smoother adjustment of children and adolescents in adult life. Supportive networks play a crucial role in both increasing children’s skills and strengthening their potentials; at the same time, supportive networks may be useful in the reduction of stress (Theodoratou et al., 2006, 2023a, 2023b) and other psychological issues that children with language developmental problems may face. Moreover, supporting networks can strengthen emotional intelligence (e.g., empathy) as well as social intelligence (e.g., social skills) of children and adolescents with language developmental problems, thus shielding through the

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