# SIRG: Language, Communication and Mental Health

Melanie Cross, Speech and Language Therapist, Advisor to the Royal College of Speech and Langauge Therapists on Child Mental Health

*Emerging Minds Summit Conference, October 2022*

# What we'll consider today

Our remit and our research

Our key findings

Your thoughts on the implications of this work and what we can do next

# We wanted to find out what research young people with SLCN, their families and the professionals that work with them, would like.

**SIRG core group members**:  Dr Hannah Hobson, Vicki Jeffries, Melanie Cross, Dr Melanie Forster

**Collaborators:** Masters students from the University of York who helped facilitate online workshops with stakeholders and supported the compiling and analysis of the survey responses.

**Contributors:** families and their children who experience SLCN and mental health difficulties (identities anonymised), plus professionals and colleagues

## Sincere thanks to all who supported and contributed to this work

# What are Speech language and Communication Needs (SLCN)?

**Speech Language and Communication Needs** (SLCN) is an 'umbrella' term it describes difficulties across one or many aspects of communication

**Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is a form of SLCN**

**Perhaps the most common neurodevelopmental disorder you've never heard of?**

**DLD is 5 times more prevalent than autism** (dldandme.org)

# Developmental Language Disorder

**What we already know about the relationship between SLCN and SEMH**

- **81%** of children with emotional/behavioural difficulties have SLCN (Hollo et al, 2014)

- **Half** of children in mental health settings meet criteria for language disorder (Camarata et al 1998), and a third of children referred for emotional difficulties have an **unsuspected SLCN** (Cohen et al 1998)

- Children and young people who have experienced very negative early experiences, such as **trauma**, are at risk of having poorer pragmatic skills, particularly narrative skills (Ciolino et al, 2020).

# Jack

Unfortunately having a disorder such as DLD can leave children like Jack vulnerable to mental health issues. It can leave them feeling **different and isolated** from their peers. Jack has frequently referred to himself as stupid and it breaks my heart when I hear him say this. By the very nature of their disorder, children are **unable to voice the feelings** they may be suffering inside with, and are often unable to understand and process the emotions they are feeling. With Jack the struggle he has with his emotions almost went under the radar, as he was unable to voice them and **violent outbursts were the norm**, which left me feeling confused and worried as to why they were happening. Of course, a neurotypical person would say I'm feeling angry, sad, worried about this, but **Jack is unable to process and voice these emotions** like a neurotypical person and instead the fear and frustration builds inside and erupts into violent behaviour.

VICKI, PARENT OF A CHILD WITH DEVELOPMENTAL LANGUAGE DISORDER

# What we did

**We consulted with a wide range of individuals through various activities:**

Written analysis of completed surveys

Contributions from attendance at online workshops

Direct discussions from a face-to-face Conference Day

# Main research questions identified

**1. Why do SLCN and mental health needs go together?**

**2. Are there specific at-risk groups?**

**3.** What are the clinical and practice implications of supporting those with mental health needs and unrecognised SLCN?

**4. How can we better support the mental health needs of those with SLCN?**

# 1. Why do SLCN and mental health needs seem to go together?

- Are there shared risk factors, such as trauma?
- Does language give us skills that are good for strengthening our mental health, such as for regulating emotions?
- Are there shared genetic factors?

*"How do language problems affect students' emotional regulation?"* – Survey respondent, Classroom teacher

# 2. Are there specific 'at risk' groups?

- Such as those with DLD,
- autism,
- those from vulnerable populations such as young offenders
- and looked after children?

*"The public health advantage to understanding the shared risk factors between mental health and speech and language needs is that you could intervene in one specific risk factor and have a positive effect on multiple outcomes"* – Workshop attendee, Academic

# 3. What are the clinical and practice implications of supporting young people with mental health needs and unrecognised SLCN?

"*We don't learn about any of these speech and language needs – so we don't understand it, and then medical professionals are not going to label it as a language need. We don't get taught about the role of SLT – it gets mentioned once in stroke management. What language needs are, and how common they are, could be taught to medics. It's a long-term way of getting some clinicians involved, but raising awareness would help filter through some knowledge about these conditions and what SLTs do*". – Workshop attendee, Medical student

"*I feel that communication needs are often only considered within mental health services when looking at neuro developmental assessments . The value of understanding communication profiles is not appreciated.*" – Survey respondent, mental health nurse

**3. What are the clinical and practice implications of supporting those with mental health needs and <u>unrecognised</u> SLCN?**

What do mental health professionals need to know? Is early identification of these young people an issue in services? Is there a training/awareness need?

Will assessments and interventions used in mental health services be effective, if a young person has unrecognised SLCN?

How do we support mental health professionals to make effective changes and adapt resources?

*"What are the essential language demands, vocabulary needed, comprehension level etc for young people to engage effectively in mental health therapies e. g. talking therapies?"* – Survey respondent, Speech and language therapist

*"How can I best support C/YP with language difficulties in the mental health work I deliver (how could their mental health be impacted?)?"* – Survey respondent, IAPT worker

# 4. How can we better support the mental health needs of those with SLCN?

"People talk about "postcode lotteries" and difficulties accessing certain treatments and services, which could impact both families getting mental health treatments and speech and language therapy – could looking at problems accessing support in some places predict outcomes?" – Workshop attendee, Medical student

"It would be great if there could be research on building and developing relationships with friends. This is something we're worried about that if our son can't communicate well that people won't want to be friends with him..." – Workshop attendee, Parent of a child with SLCN and ADHD

*[Is it hard/okay or easy to understand the help people give you?]* "I would say okay, because when people are trying to explain you things that you have to understand, there are some things that it's like okay, I'm a bit confused. You haven't really made it too clear. Basically [*they should*] use words where it's like okay – okay, I understand what you're trying to say. Because sometimes you got one of those people who use some random words that I'm like, 'woah, I don't even know what it means'." – Young person with autism

# Why might this research be difficult to complete?

The challenges:

- It will involve **different professional groups**, with different commissioning arrangements, with different service priorities, working with different IT and terminology/diagnostic systems, who are all very busy …. how can we collaborate across these boundaries?

- We need to **include those with SLCN** as well as those with mental health needs - how can we do this effectively?

- How do our **'measures'** of language and mental health affect each other? How can we separate them out? How might this impact upon intervention priorities?

- How might language and mental health **influence each other across the lifespan**? What is the impact of early intervention in childhood into adulthood?

"When I have been associated with research projects, one the of the things that happens all the time is that researchers will send out questionnaires for families to fill in. And if I am working with this family I'll get a call from the parents, saying I got this in this the post, I don't know what it is. Or they'll say I've done this, can you take a look – and when you look, you realise they've totally misinterpreted the questions. So the information the researcher gets back might not be valid!" – Workshop attendee, Speech and language therapist

"Co-morbidity means getting a control group is tricky, as does the fact that they may be receiving multiple 'interventions' ." – Survey respondent, speech and language therapist

# Your thoughts on the implications of this work and what we can do next-(small group work)

**1. Discuss the broad implications of any one of the research questions identified (10 mins)**

**2. Then the specific implications for your work (10 mins)**

e.g. 'How can we make treatments and intervention resources more accessible to those with SLCN?'

And 'How can we make sure the tools we use are suitable?'

**Please write all your ideas on post its and choose someone to feedback verbally some ideas from your group (5 mins)**

**Take away message from the workshop: What can you do next to help?**

How can you take forward something you have discussed/thought about?

What are the personal and professional implications for you?

Can you help progress and support this work further?

# The full SIRG report

Hobson, H., Cross, M., Jefferies, V., & Forster, M. (2022, May 19). **What is the future of research on language and communication needs and mental health?** A report by the Special Interest Research Group for Language, Communication and Mental Health. Retrieved from psyarxiv.com/sdf8n
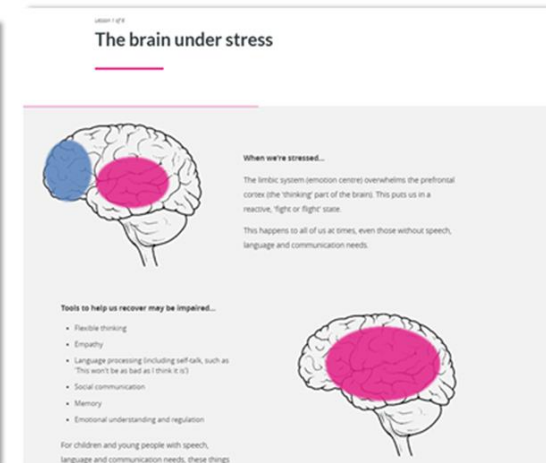
A video summary is also available
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Aq3iGbQ6jnALZm8UJ2Seoc3edErp606R/view

And please **contact us** if you want to be involved further melaniespeechie@gmail.com or melanie.forster@york.ac.uk

# If you want to learn more

- **Fact sheets** https://www.rcslt.org/policy/uk-wide/fact-sheets-on-speech-and-language-therapy

- **Free online learning** https://www.rcslt.org/learning/mind-your-words/



**MIND YOUR WORDS**
Children and Young People's Mental Health

The brain under stress

Training for collaborating to support children and young people who have Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs and Speech, Language and Communication Needs - for SLTs and others working with these children

# Resources

- Engage with Developmental Language Disorder (E-DLD) connects people affected by DLD to academic research **engage-dld.com**
- Spreading the word about Developmental Language Disorder **dldandme.org**
- Raising Awareness of Developmental Language Disorder or 'DLD'. **radld.org**
- Afasic supports and provides information for families with children and young adults who have Speech Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) with a focus on Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) **afasic.org.uk**
- I CAN is the children's communication charity **ican.org.uk**

# References

- Camarata S, Hughes CA, Ruhl KL. Mild/Moderate Behaviourally Disordered Students. Lang Speech Hear Serv Sch. 1998;19:191–200.
- Cohen NJ, Barwick MA, Horodezky NB, Vallance DD, Im N. Language, achievement, and cognitive processing in psychiatrically disturbed children with previously identified and unsuspected language impairments. J Child Psychol Psychiatry Allied Discip. 1998;39(6):865–77.
- Ciolino, C., Hyter, Y. D., Suarez, M., & Bedrosian, J. (2020). Narrative and Other Pragmatic Language Abilities of Children With a History of Maltreatment. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_PERSP-20-00136
- Conti-Ramsden G, Botting N. Emotional health in adolescents with and without a history of specific language impairment (SLI). J Child Psychol Psychiatry Allied Discip. 2008;49(5):516–25.
- Hollo, A., Wehby, J. H., & Oliver, R. M. (2014). Unidentified Language Deficits in Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A Meta-Analysis. Exceptional Children, 80(2), 169–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440291408000203
- Norbury, C. F., Gooch, D., Wray, C., Baird, G., Charman, T., Simonoff, E., Vamvakas, G., & Pickles, A. (2016). The impact of nonverbal ability on prevalence and clinical presentation of language disorder: evidence from a population study. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 57(11), 1247–1257. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12573
- Yew SGK, O'Kearney R. Emotional and behavioural outcomes later in childhood and adolescence for children with specific language impairments: Meta-analyses of controlled prospective studies. J Child Psychol Psychiatry Allied Discip. 2013;54(5):516–24.