

Handout 3

Language Disorder or Language Difference

- A **language disorder** is “an inability to understand and process language either expressively or receptively” (Tompkins 2002, 6). **Language disorders** may affect the form, content, or the functional use of language. Language disorders make it difficult for a child to speak or understand any language; therefore, **it is not possible for a bilingual child to have a language disorder in one language and not in the other**. A child should be considered to have a language disorder only if language behaviors are exhibited that are atypical of peers from the same cultural group who speak the same dialect and who have similar opportunities to hear and use the language. Assessment personnel must become sensitive to the complex factors involved in the identification of bilingual children with disorders of voice, fluency, articulation, and language.
- A **language difference** is having the ability to speak another language that is different from the language used for instruction or used by the majority of people. **Language differences are not an indication of a language disorder**. For example, there are differences in understanding and using a language that are influenced by a child’s linguistic and cultural experiences with a first language (Roseberry-McKibbin 2002) or with a variety of the standard language (Hirsh-Pasek, Kochanoff, and Newcombe 2005). When a child speaks another language or a variety of a standard language, such as regional dialects, it is highly recommended that teachers work in collaboration with the child’s family, specialists, and others involved in that child’s care and education in order to determine whether the child has a language difference or a language disorder. The same team should identify the best instructional strategies for that particular child, should that child be determined to have a language disorder, disability, or other special needs.

General Characteristics and Early Warning Signs

Language Disorder	Language Difference
Has difficulty: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Producing and/or understanding language2. Using and understanding “body language”3. Communicating with members of own language/cultural group4. Putting together well-formed, grammatical sentences5. Progressing with academics	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Has a different pronunciation of English2. Understands and uses the rules of “body language” for the home language3. Has no difficulty communicating with members of own language/cultural group4. Has no impairment in the ability to learn and use rules of grammar5. May have difficulty with academic expectations

The above content was adapted from Zina Yzquierdo McLean, Department of Special Education, Vanderbilt University.