

Literacy difficulties affect more than just English!

I talked to you last month about the effects of phonological awareness deficits on reading and spelling. What is not often discussed are the flow-on effects of this disorder in other areas of education.

Delayed phonological awareness skills can impact on many aspects of schooling via three main routes:

1. Reduced exposure to written words
2. Reduced attention/energy available for writing information down, and
3. Reduced ability to keep pace with advances in the language used in the classroom.

I would like to discuss these and their relationship to overall classroom learning.

1. My child doesn't read for enjoyment!

Initially, reduced exposure to the written word can, at its most extreme, become almost a 'phobia' about the written word. Unless the underlying phonological awareness deficits are addressed, reading skills do not progress at a pace that allows children to read age-appropriate books and therefore be exposed to more complex writing styles.

This is seen in the classroom when the child has difficulty in writing narratives and essays. The children know what they want to say, can often 'tell' a story really well, but just can't put it down on paper.

2. The second effect is a reduction in the amount of time, attention and learning energy that these children have available for any work that is built around language. When spelling and writing require additional time, attention and energy, these must be taken away from somewhere else – usually from memory and /or understanding. As one boy told me “I either spell it correctly but don’t have time to write it all down” or I get it down but don’t understand it”.

Translating spoken language into written words and vice versa, is just like any other skill, the more you do, the better you get. Children with phonological awareness deficits often reduce their exposure and then get locked into a reverse cycle – the less they do, the harder it gets! Sometimes the reduction in reading and writing is not from choice, but rather that the task is just too tiring and requires such concentration and time, that reading is no longer a pleasure but a real chore!

At school however, not reading (or not reading at the same level as others in your class) can have a much greater impact than just in the English class.

Poor language skills and reading difficulties affect all subjects. Maths marks often drop when problem-solving begins. One child told me he never completed a maths test because it took him too long to read the problems. Science becomes a blur when the basic concepts are in a language you can’t understand and any subject that is assessed by assignment is a real struggle. It’s not the calculations in maths or the experiments in science that are the trouble – it’s the language they are wrapped in!

So – how can speech pathologists help? We are sometimes called ‘Speech-Language Pathologists’ which reflects our particular expertise in helping unravel language deficits.

3. That then leads to my third point – children’s language skills must advance to



keep pace with classroom expectations and if a child has fallen behind, specialist help is essential!

At Tyquin Group, we often work with children in the higher primary and secondary grades to enhance their basic understanding and use of language, their ability to remember spoken words and to translate thoughts into words. We also work on maths language, and higher level language skills to 'catch up' those areas missed in the early grades (when these children were concentrating all of their time, attention and energy on reading). We tailor individual programmes for older children and adolescents allowing them to direct the focus of the therapy to WHAT they need WHEN they need it!

Our role as speech pathologist is to ensure language deficits that arise from early and / or ongoing literacy difficulties, do not continue to interrupt the adolescent's progress.