

# IDEA Disability Category Tip Sheet

## Speech or Language Impairment



This tip sheet defines *speech or language impairment* under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and shares strategies for success. To learn more, review the additional resources and check with state law for additional eligibility requirements.

### What Does IDEA Say?

According to [IDEA Sec. 300.8\(c\)\(11\)](#) ...

“Speech or language impairment means a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.”

### Did You Know?

Speech or language impairments often coexist with other disabilities (e.g., autism, emotional/behavioral disorder, learning disabilities). Recognizing this overlap means that strategies supporting speech and language development can benefit many learners.

Percent of eligible students ages 5-21 served under IDEA, Part B\*



### How a Speech or Language Impairment May Impact Students



**Expressive language:** Difficulty expressing thoughts, ideas, or needs through spoken or written language. Students may struggle with vocabulary, sentence structure, or organizing their thoughts.



**Receptive language:** Challenges in understanding or processing spoken or written language. Students may have trouble following directions, grasping complex concepts, or comprehending what they read or hear.



**Articulation:** Difficulty producing specific speech sounds correctly, which can affect overall intelligibility. This may involve substituting, omitting, adding, or distorting sounds.



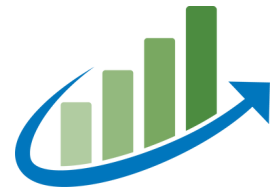
**Fluency:** Difficulty with fluency, also known as stuttering, involves disruptions in the flow of speech. It may include repetitions of sounds, syllables, or words as well as prolongations or blocks in speech.



**Pragmatic language disorder:** Challenges with the social use of language, including difficulties with conversation skills, understanding nonverbal cues, and adapting language to different social situations.

\*See [U.S. Department of Education, 2024](#)

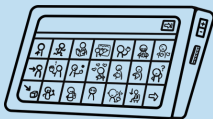




## Key Terms



**Assistive technology device** is any product, piece of equipment, software program, or system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities, including general communication and speech, of persons with disabilities.

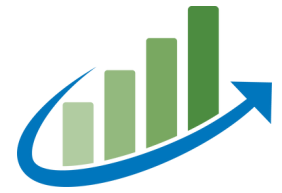


**Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)** includes all tools used to augment, or add to, someone's speech or used instead of speech (alternative).

## Strategies for Success

- ✓ Consult with the speech-language pathologist to understand the student's current goal or target level (e.g., sound isolation, words, phrases, sentences).
- ✓ Plan for frequent opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback on speech and language skills throughout the day and across settings.
- ✓ Provide feedback and error correction discreetly, such as through one-on-one moments or subtle nonverbal cues.
- ✓ Ask students to repeat multistep directions to allow time for processing, check for understanding, and increase opportunities to retrieve and utilize new vocabulary.
- ✓ When a student mispronounces a word, model the correct pronunciation clearly and invite them to try again up to three times. Offer specific praise if successful; if not, move on without drawing attention to the difficulty, fostering a supportive environment for articulation practice.
- ✓ Practice active listening by focusing on the content of what the student is saying rather than how they say it.
- ✓ Offer alternative participation methods by providing options for class participation, such as writing responses or using nonverbal signals.
- ✓ Set aside 5 minutes daily for casual conversation with students who use AAC devices and their peers. This dedicated time promotes social communication skills, encourages device familiarity, and builds a positive teacher-student relationship.





## Where can you learn more?



**Speech and Language Impairments Information Brief** (Center for Parent Information & Resources). This fact sheet provides information on the characteristics of speech or language impairments, tips for teachers, and resources to learn more.



**Center on Inclusive Technology and Education Systems (CITES) Website**. CITES Center aims to empower school districts to build and maintain technology systems that include every student, particularly children and youth with disabilities who require assistive technology and accessible materials.



**Understanding Receptive Language Activity and Understanding Expressive Language Activity** (IRIS Center). These brief activities are designed to help users understand how a language disorder can affect a student’s receptive and expressive language and their subsequent ability to succeed in the classroom.



**UDL Guidelines: Action and Expression: Expression and Communication** (Center for Applied Special Technology). This tool focuses on strategies to support diverse learners in expressing their knowledge and communicating effectively.



**PROGRESS Center Website**. The PROGRESS Center website includes information about developing high-quality IEPs and additional tip sheets in this series.