

Gloss **A**ry

Epilepsy and communication

Epilepsy is a chronic disorder of the brain characterised by recurrent seizures, which affects people worldwide (WHO, 2016). The World Health Organisation defines a seizure as a transient loss of function of all or part of the brain due to excessive electrical discharges in a group of brain cells. Physical, sensory or other functions can be temporarily lost.

Epilepsy affects 1 in 177 young people under the age of 25 so there are around 112,000 young people with epilepsy in the UK (Joint Epilepsy Council, 2011). In 75% of people, seizures are well controlled with medication but 25% continue to have seizures despite treatment.

Epilepsy can be linked with learning, behavioural and speech and language difficulties. This is increasingly recognised and the risks are greater if epilepsy occurs before 2 years of age. Parkinson (1994) found that from a small study of children referred for assessment of their epilepsy, 40% had undiagnosed language impairment of varying degrees of severity.

Epilepsy can cause temporary loss of function in one or more parts of the brain. If these parts are involved with comprehension, organisation and speech processes, communication difficulties can result. These difficulties can be severe, causing general delay in speech, language and communication development or a disordered pattern of communicative abilities.

There are over 40 different types of epilepsy. Some of the epilepsy syndromes which have associated language difficulties are:

- Landau Kleffner Syndrome
- CSWS (Continuous Spike Waves of Slow Sleep)
- Lennox-Gastaut syndrome

- Temporal Lobe epilepsy
- Dravet syndrome

There are a range of communication difficulties associated with epilepsy. For some people, communication difficulties can become more pronounced at times immediately before, during or after seizure activity.

Communication difficulties may include:

- **Comprehension difficulties:** Children may find it hard to understand what others are saying to them or what is expected of them, and may struggle to understand environmental cues, daily routines or activity sequences.
- **Attention and listening difficulties:** Children may have difficulties in attending to spoken language, or to an activity.
- **Expressive difficulties:** It may be hard for children to communicate with others using speech, body language, facial expression and gesture. This may be because of episodes of slurred or dysfluent speech, language delay or disorder, or difficulties with social interaction. Some children may present with a high level language impairment or disorder, where some of the more complex or sophisticated aspects of communication such as inference, non-literal language and humour are confusing. Word-finding difficulties may cause frustration.

Epilepsy may also be associated with pragmatic difficulties, where an individual may struggle with using language appropriately in social situations. Some children may have limited turn taking skills, excessive or restricted topic maintenance, and/or difficulties in greeting, questioning, seeking the attention of others, describing or commenting.

Communication difficulties can also occur suddenly and be unconnected with stress or other obvious 'trigger' factors. They can be caused by changes in medication and/or as a result of epileptogenic activity i.e. electrical activity in the brain which does not necessarily manifest itself as obvious seizure activity.

Over time a child's communication skills may plateau, regress or recover, associated with medication changes or the natural progression of the condition. A child's skills may vary from day to day. A Speech and Language Therapist will be able to look at the pattern of skills and advise on support.

References

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Johnson M and Parkinson G (2002) *Epilepsy, a Practical Guide*. London: David Fulton

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Lees J (1993) *Children with Acquired Aphasias*. London: Whurr

National Institute for Clinical Excellence (2012) *The epilepsies: the diagnosis and management of the epilepsies in children and young people in primary and secondary care*. London Oaktree Press Ltd
<http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG137>

Parkinson G (1994) Undiagnosed language impairment in children with complex epilepsy. *Epilepsia*, supplement 7 Vol. 35: 48

Parkinson G (July 1995) Complex epilepsy and language disability. *Bulletin*. Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

World Health Organisation (2016) *Epilepsy Factsheet*

Please note: Afasic does not hold copies of any referenced material. These publications should be available at academic libraries.

Other organisations which can help

Speech and Language Therapy Service

The David Lewis Centre for Epilepsy

Mill Lane
Warford
Nr Alderley Edge
Cheshire
SK9 7UD

Tel: 01565 640000

www.davidlewis.org.uk

Young Epilepsy

St. Piers Lane
Lingfield
Surrey
RH7 6PW

Helpline: 01342 831342

www.youngepilepsy.org.uk

Epilepsy Society

Chalfont Centre
Chalfont St Peter
Bucks
SL9 0RJ

Helpline: 01494 601400

www.epilepsysociety.org.uk

Epilepsy Action

New Anstey House
Gate Way Drive
Yeadon
Leeds
LS19 7XY

Helpline: 0808 800 5050

www.epilepsy.org.uk

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