The Holistic Assessment

Considering Co-occurring Developmental Conditions in SpLD Assessment

Mrs Armande Fryatt

Director of Inclusion

The Assessment Practice Ltd

What is a holistic assessment?

- Considers the whole learner and how needs interact
- Looks beyond isolated scores to real-life functioning
- Uses multiple evidence sources to build a complete picture

What is meant by developmental difficulties?

Developmental difficulties are challenges that affect how a person grows, learns, and develops skills over time.

In the context of learning:

- They impact areas such as **language, coordination, attention, memory, or social skills**
- They usually **begin in childhood** and may continue into adulthood
- They can affect how someone **learns, processes information, and manages everyday tasks**

SpLDs are developmental in nature

SpLDs are developmental, meaning they begin in childhood as part of how the brain develops—not as a result of poor teaching, injury, or events later in life. They are lifelong patterns of strengths and challenges that remain relatively stable over time, although individuals can develop strategies to manage them.

This is why we need to take a detailed history.

Principles of assessment practice

Relevant factors to consider when working with individuals with co-occurring difficulties:

- Consider the individual's age and capacity to engage with the assessment process.
- Work within your professional competency.
- Refer on if necessary (put information in the report) – do not use diagnostic terms (DLD, DCD, ADHD, ASD) pre-16, or ADHD for 16-17 year olds.
- Follow the SASC Guidance for DCD and ADHD.

Why is background information important?

- Gives essential developmental, educational, and medical context.
- Helps interpret test scores accurately.
- Distinguishes long-term differences from situational factors.
- Highlights strengths, interests, and coping strategies.
- Ensures recommendations are tailored and realistic.
- Pertinent information from background history helps inform the diagnostic decision.
- Uses screening data to help inform next steps.

The Diagnostic Decision

- Clearly outline any documented diagnosis which is confirmed in the Background Information section of the report.
- Persisting effects of pre-existing, confirmed diagnoses should be discussed here.
- Consider the overlap of features of SpLDs and how they impact on the individual.

What does Delphi tell us?

Dyslexia frequently co-occurs with one or more other developmental difficulties, including developmental language disorder, dyscalculia, ADHD, and developmental coordination disorder.

*Julia M. Carroll, Caroline Holden, Philip Kirby, Paul A. Thompson, Margaret J. Snowling, the Dyslexia Delphi Panel. 2025– quoted SASC.

Let’s look at each of these in turn:

- Developmental Language Disorder
- Dyscalculia
- ADHD
- Developmental Coordination Disorder

Developmental Language Disorder

- Developmental language disorder (DLD) is a type of speech, language and communication need (SLCN) that affects the way that children understand and use language.
- DLD increases the risk of a range of negative impacts on education, employment, and social and emotional problems, but appropriate support can make a difference.
- DLD affects 7.58% of children.
- Speech and language therapists (SLTs) teach strategies to children with DLD and those around them, which aim to reduce the impact of their difficulties and develop their language abilities to their maximum potential.

Clinical information on developmental language disorder (DLD) | RCSLT

How does DLD impact on dyslexia and vice versa?

- **Language weaknesses (DLD)** → make reading and spelling harder (key in dyslexia)
- **Poor phonological skills** (sound awareness) affect both decoding and language development
- **Limited vocabulary** reduces reading comprehension and written expression
- **Slow language processing (DLD)** → impacts reading fluency and understanding
- **Dyslexia difficulties with decoding/spelling** → reduce exposure to new words and language growth
- **Reading avoidance** → limits vocabulary and grammar development (worsening DLD profile)
- **Working memory challenges** can affect both language organisation and literacy tasks

Poor early language skills are implicated as a risk factor for dyslexia (SRF2025 p.14)

Combined impact:

- Greater difficulty with **reading comprehension**
- More pronounced **writing and expression difficulties**
- Needs overlap → **integrated support is essential**

Dyscalculia

- In dyscalculia, the most commonly observed cognitive impairment is a pronounced and persistent difficulty with numerical magnitude processing and understanding that presents in age-related difficulties with naming, ordering and comparing physical quantities and numbers, estimating and place value.

https://www.sasc.org.uk/media/kj5hyoxl/sasc-maths-difficulties-guidance-march-2025-final.docx

How does dyscalculia impact on dyslexia and vice versa?

- **Dyscalculia (number understanding difficulties)** → can make maths language (e.g. symbols, word problems) harder to process
- **Weak sequencing skills** affect both number order (dyscalculia) and reading/spelling patterns (dyslexia)
- **Working memory difficulties** impact both calculation steps and reading/writing tasks
- **Dyslexia (literacy difficulties)** → affects understanding of maths vocabulary and instructions
- **Reading difficulties** can make worded problems especially challenging
- **Spelling and decoding issues** may affect recalling maths facts and recording answers accurately

Reading difficulties can also predict mathematics difficulties SRF2025 p.16

Shared challenges and combined impact

Shared challenges:

- Processing speed and memory demands
- Following multi-step instructions
- Organisation of written work

Combined impact:

- Increased difficulty with worded maths problems
- Slower progress in both literacy and numeracy
- Requires joined-up support across language and maths

Diagnostic criteria for ADHD (DSM-5)

A persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development as characterised by:

Inattention (6 or more specified symptoms that have persisted for at least 6 months to a degree that is inconsistent with developmental level and that negatively impacts directly on social and academic/occupational activities).

and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity (6 or more specified symptoms that have persisted for at least 6 months to a degree that is inconsistent with developmental level and that negatively impacts directly on social and academic/occupational activities.

See pp 59-60 of the DSM-5 Manual

ADHD & dyslexia: how they interact

- **ADHD → Dyslexia**
  - Reduced focus → more reading errors
  - Poor working memory → harder decoding & comprehension
  - Disorganisation → inconsistent use of reading strategies
- **Dyslexia → ADHD**
  - Reading effort → fatigue → loss of attention
  - Slow processing → frustration & avoidance
  - Can look like inattention or disengagement
- **Combined Impact**
  - Slower, less accurate reading
  - Difficulty with writing & organisation
  - Increased fatigue and frustration

Attention skills and mathematics

Attentional skills usually correlate with mathematics performance and inhibitory control/information filtering/shifting is important to mathematics development.

SRF2025 p.21

Diagnostic criteria for DCD:

- The acquisition and execution of coordinated motor skills is substantially below expected given chronological age and opportunity for skill learning and use.
- The motor skills deficit significantly and persistently interferes with activities of daily living and impacts on academic/school productivity, prevocational and vocational activities, leisure and play.
- There is an onset of symptoms in the early developmental period.
- The motor skills deficits are not better explained by intellectual disability* or visual impairment and are not attributable to a neurological condition affecting movement.

*If motor difficulties are in excess of what could be accounted for by intellectual disability, and criteria for DCD are met, DCD can be diagnosed as well.

DCD & dyslexia: how they interact

- **DCD → Dyslexia**
  - Poor coordination → difficulty with handwriting & letter formation
  - Motor planning issues → slower writing and increased effort
  - Organisation difficulties → messy or hard-to-structure written work
- **Dyslexia → DCD**
  - Spelling and reading difficulties → more reliance on writing effort
  - Increased cognitive load → worsens coordination and fatigue
  - Hesitation with written tasks → impacts fluency and confidence
- **Combined Impact**
  - Slow, effortful writing and reading
  - Poor handwriting + spelling difficulties
  - Increased fatigue and reduced output

Why is qualitative information important?

- Adds context to test scores by explaining the reasons behind them, not just the results
- Supports accurate diagnosis by distinguishing SpLD from other influencing factors
- Clarifies variability by explaining differences and inconsistencies across test results
- Captures lived experience by showing how difficulties impact everyday learning

Types of qualitative information

- **Approach** – confidence, hesitation, organisation
- **Strategies** – use of coping methods (e.g. sounding out, chunking)
- **Errors** – types, consistency, self-correction
- **Attention** – distractibility, stamina, persistence
- **Speed** – pace, pauses, effort, overload
- **Response** – frustration, resilience, flexibility
- **Support** – improvement with prompts, repetition, breaks

Is there any good news?

- **Complementary strengths** – profiles can balance each other
- **Flexible thinking** – multiple approaches support problem-solving
- **Resilience** – builds persistence and coping skills
- **Self-awareness** – better understanding of strengths and needs
- **Creativity** – more “outside the box” thinking
- **Practical skills** – hands-on, spatial, or big-picture strengths
- **Strategy use** – effective use of coping tools

Thank you for watching!

- Any questions?
- Feel free to email me:
- training@assessment-for-dyslexia.co.uk