

Speech Pathology Australia



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**INQUIRY INTO GENERAL HEALTH SCREENING OF CHILDREN AT PRE-
PRIMARY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL**

SUBMISSION

TO

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

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TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. The adequacy and availability of screening processes for speech motor skills difficulties.
2. Access to appropriate services that address issues identified by an appropriate screening process.

1. The adequacy and availability of screening processes for speech motor skills difficulties

The early identification of children with speech and/or language disorders is of critical importance. Oral language skills are critical to literacy and learning skills, as well as social and emotional development. Oral language competency is known to underpin the transition to literacy. There is strong evidence that preschool oral language deficits may pre-dispose a child to ongoing reading and academic difficulties throughout childhood and adolescence.

Speech Pathologists have the knowledge and skills needed to identify children whose oral language skills may pre-dispose them to later literacy difficulties.

Following, is the current situation of the screening of speech motor skills difficulties in Western Australia. Due to the inherent difficulty in isolating speech motor skills from oral language skills, these concepts will be combined for the purpose of this submission.

- Speech Pathologists are generally not employed in government schools in Western Australia. Consequently, teachers and school health nurses are asked to identify children with speech and/or language disorders. Speech pathology services are only used in a very limited capacity for screening purposes.
- Screening conducted by school/child health nurses and teachers is inconsistent in terms of (1) the tools used, (2) the criteria used to assist in decision making, and (3) the schools currently using screening tools across the state.
- For many children, speech and language difficulties are not identified until the child enters pre-primary or primary school. This presents a lost opportunity as it is well documented in the literature that early intervention results in improvements to speech and language skills, with subsequent benefits for the acquisition of literacy.
- A small number of government schools in WA contract speech pathology services

- for the purposes of screening. Arrangements between schools and service providers are private in nature as the Department of Education & Training does not employ Speech Pathologists in mainstream government schools.
- Curtin University, Bentley Health Service, Therapy Focus, some country health services and a small number of private Speech Pathologists provide paid screening services to a very limited number of government schools.

Recommendation

Speech Pathology Australia (WA) calls for a standardised process to the screening of children with speech and language difficulties in Western Australia. This requires specialist training for child health/school nurses and teachers conducting screening assessments as well as the development of a standardised screening tool. There should be an emphasis on screening children before entering school to minimise the impact of oral language difficulties on literacy acquisition. Children identified as being at risk on initial screening should be referred to Speech Pathology services for appropriate management and subsequently screened by child/school health nurses at regular intervals during the early school years.

Access to appropriate services that address issues identified by an appropriate screening process

It is imperative that children identified with speech and language skills that place them at risk of literacy difficulties are seen by a speech pathologist as early as possible. Speech Pathologists possess the necessary skills and knowledge to remediate childhood speech and language delays and disorders, which, if left untreated, are likely to impact on a child's literacy acquisition.

Access to Speech Pathology services for school age children in Western Australia is inadequate for several reasons:

- Publicly funded speech pathology services are mainly provided through the Department of Health which struggles to meet demand. Waiting lists for speech pathology services are typically between 6 – 12 months. The delay imposed by long waiting times is naturally deleterious to the child's educational and social development.
- Due to resource limitations and the subsequent requirement to prioritise services, the Department of Health has shifted its priority to early intervention. Health services provide either no or very limited services to school age children. Availability of services is dependent on the area in which the child resides.
- While the Department of Education and Training (DET) provides consultative speech and language services to teachers of children with speech and language difficulties via the Speech and Language Team, this service only partially addresses the needs of school age children presenting with speech and language difficulties. Therapy services are not provided by the DET to mainstream schools.
- DET funded services also include Language Development Centres however only a limited number of places are available each year and these places are in decline. These centres exist in only five metropolitan schools. Similar services are not provided in rural locations.
- The number of speech pathologists working in the private sector is inadequate to meet demand.
- Many families are unable to meet the cost of private speech pathology services. Private Health Insurance and Medicare rebates are inadequate to meet the costs associated with private services.

A small number of schools whose literacy benchmarks fall short of the national standard, have recognised the potential value of speech pathology services, and have entered into private arrangements with local service providers. However, these arrangements are often ephemeral in nature and are dependent on recurrent funding provided by the school. The exact number of schools receiving speech pathology services in this way is unknown but is thought to represent only a very small percentage of government schools in metropolitan and country WA.

Recommendation

Speech Pathology Australia (WA) advocates for a state-wide policy which mandates the provision of an appropriate level of speech pathology services for all children. Speech Pathology Australia (WA) calls for increased collaboration between the various stakeholder groups, including the Departments of Health and Education and other Child Agencies, in planning, funding and delivering effective speech pathology services for school age children. It is recommended that all government funded schools in Western Australia have equitable access to speech pathology services including publicly funded as well as privately funded services.

Summary

Speech pathology services available to school age children living in Western Australia to identify and remediate speech and language disorders are inadequate and inconsistent. Service availability differs significantly across the state and may be dependent on the age of the child, the local health service area in which the child resides and the school the child attends. If left untreated, speech and language disorders in children lead to difficulty in acquiring literacy and poor long term educational outcomes. Speech and language disorders are also associated with reduced employment prospects, social/emotional and behavioural problems across the lifespan, mental health problems and criminal behaviour leading to juvenile offending and imprisonment.

Timely and appropriate intervention is critical. Speech Pathology Australia (WA) calls for standardised screening processes conducted before the child enters school and an appropriate level of speech pathology services for all school age children.

Speech Pathology Australia (WA) welcomes the opportunity to work with the state government to develop an appropriate policy and service model to address this crucial issue.