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Perspective

Social Communication Disorders: Diagnosis and Therapy

George Papadopoulos*

Department of Communication Disorders, Athens Medical University, Athens, Greece.

ABOVE THE STUDY

Social Communication Disorders (SCD) sit at the intersection of language, cognition, and social interaction, making both diagnosis and therapy inherently complex. Recognized formally in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), SCD refers to persistent difficulties in the social use of verbal and nonverbal communication that cannot be better explained by structural language deficits or by Autism Spectrum Disorder. This distinction is conceptually useful, but in practice, the boundaries are often blurred, requiring careful, multidimensional evaluation.

From a diagnostic perspective, the defining features of SCD include challenges in using language for social purposes (e.g., greeting, sharing information), adapting communication to context (e.g., speaking differently in a classroom versus a playground), following conversational rules (e.g., turn-taking, topic maintenance), and understanding implicit or nonliteral language such as idioms, humor, or inference. These are not peripheral skills; they are central to participation in education, relationships, and daily functioning.

The difficulty lies in the fact that these abilities develop along a continuum and are influenced by cultural norms, personality, and context. What is considered appropriate communication in one setting may not be in another. As a result, overdiagnosis is a real risk when clinicians apply rigid criteria without considering sociocultural variability. Conversely, underdiagnosis can occur when children with subtle but impactful pragmatic difficulties are overlooked because their vocabulary and grammar appear age-appropriate.

Differential diagnosis is particularly challenging. SCD shares features with language disorders, attention-deficit conditions, and especially autism. The key distinction from autism lies in the absence of restricted, repetitive behaviors or intense sensory interests. However, this boundary is not always clear-cut, especially in young children or in those with milder presentations. A comprehensive assessment must therefore include detailed developmental history, direct observation across contexts, and input from caregivers and teachers. Standardized tools can support diagnosis, but they must be complemented by functional analysis of real-world communication.

Another critical issue is that SCD is often identified later than other communication disorders. Because early language milestones may appear typical, difficulties may only become evident when social and academic demands increase such as in school years where inferencing, group interaction, and narrative skills are required. This delayed identification can impact intervention outcomes, underscoring the need for early screening of pragmatic skills, not just vocabulary and grammar.

Therapeutically, SCD challenges traditional models of speech-language intervention. Unlike articulation or grammar-focused therapy, pragmatic skills cannot be taught effectively through isolated drills. They are inherently context-dependent and require practice in dynamic, interactive settings. Evidence-based approaches therefore emphasize naturalistic and functional interventions such as structured play, peer-mediated activities, and real-life communication scenarios.

Social skills groups are a common intervention format, providing opportunities for guided interaction with peers. When well-designed, these groups can support turn-taking, perspective-taking, and conversational repair strategies. However, their effectiveness depends on careful facilitation and opportunities for generalization beyond the therapy setting. Skills learned in a clinic do not automatically transfer to classrooms or social environments without intentional support.

Individual therapy also plays a role, particularly in targeting specific skills such as understanding figurative language or managing conversational breakdowns. Visual supports, social narratives, and video modeling can help make abstract social rules more concrete. Increasingly, interventions are incorporating metapragmatic training teaching individuals to reflect on communication itself, which can enhance self-monitoring and adaptability.

Family and school involvement are essential. Caregivers can reinforce strategies in daily interactions, while educators can create supportive classroom environments that scaffold communication. Simple adjustments such as explicit

Correspondence to George Papadopoulos. Department of Communication Disorders, Athens Medical University, Athens, Greece. E-mail: george.papadopoulos@amu.gr

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instructions, visual cues, and structured group work can significantly improve participation.

From a broader perspective, there is a growing recognition that therapy should not aim to "normalize" communication at the expense of individuality. A neurodiversity-informed approach values different communication styles while supporting functional effectiveness. The goal is not conformity, but competence and confidence in navigating social interactions.

In conclusion, social communication disorders require a nuanced approach that integrates careful diagnosis with contextually grounded therapy. The field is moving toward more holistic, participatory models, but challenges remain in defining boundaries, ensuring early identification, and achieving meaningful generalization. Ultimately, success lies in balancing clinical insight with respect for individual variation, ensuring that intervention supports both communication and identity.