

Supporting speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

Information, tips, and resources for EYFS,
primary, and secondary aged pupils

Speech, language and communication skills are
fundamental to pupils' achieving their social,
emotional, and educational potential. ¹

Although easily taken for granted, these are the
most complex skills we will ever learn. ²

Did you know...

SLCN is the most common type of primary need in schools,
affecting approx 1.4 million children ³

10% of all children have long term SLCN. That's around 3 children
in every classroom with SLCN significant enough to impact them
accessing the curriculum. ⁴

81% of pupils with SEMH: social, emotional, and mental health needs
have (often significant) **unidentified** communication difficulties. ⁵

Between 75% and 100% of pupils at risk of exclusion/excluded
pupils have (often significant) **unidentified** language difficulties ^{6,7,8}

If you are at all concerned about
a pupil's behaviour or learning, ask...

“Could it be language?”

If in doubt, please contact a speech and
language therapist for advice/assessment



Some facts about language skills and education..

Oral language skills are the foundations for reading, writing, and learning in general. Therefore, by improving your pupils' spoken language skills, you will also improve their attainment across all areas of the curriculum.

- Spoken vocabulary at age 5 is the most important factor in predicting literacy outcomes at age 11. ^{9,10}
- Vocabulary at age 13 strongly predicts both maths and English literature GCSE results. ¹¹
- Pupils cannot leave primary school with standard levels in reading, writing, & maths without competent language skills. ²
- Yet, there has been a decline in oral language competence and up to 50% of children start school with language needs. ^{12, 13, 14, 15}
13, 14, 15
- Over 60% of teachers surveyed also reported an increase in the number of pupils with poor vocabulary. ¹⁶

This means that many children simply do not have the oral language foundations on which to map written language ¹⁶

Various language difficulties can make it very difficult for children to read and write

Semantic (word meaning); syntactic (sentence structure); pragmatic; and phonological (speech sound) difficulties make it very difficult to decode words



...and a limited understanding of language also makes it very difficult for children to make sense of what they read. ^{17,18, 19}

[Find out more here](#)

How might this relate to behavioural difficulties?

Where there are concerns about a pupil's behaviour, there should be assessment to determine whether there are any causal factors, such as... unidentified speech, language, and communication needs (DFE, 2019) ²⁰

Persistent, disruptive behaviour is the most common reason for exclusion, yet there are clear correlations between excluded pupils' characteristics and an increased risk of unidentified communication difficulties (E.g., in care/eligible for free school meals/SEND). ^{21, 22}

...yet currently, only 0.3% of pupils with significant, long term SLCN have been identified. ⁴

Why can language difficulties be so hard to spot?

Sometimes they are masked by other diagnoses, e.g. dyslexia, ASD, ADHD, SEMH, which commonly co-occur with language disorders. ^{23, 24}

Often, young people develop subtle, yet very effective coping strategies that can mask some significant difficulties, e.g...

- Using facial expressions and/or gestures (nodding/smiling) appropriately despite not understanding.
- Repeating language back verbatim and/or using learned phrases in the correct context despite being unable to use the same vocabulary in other sentences/context.
- Using distraction in non-obvious ways, such as making people laugh, or changing the subject to one which they understand.

The frustration that arises from unidentified language difficulties cannot be underestimated...

On reaching adolescence, many of these pupils simply don't have the skills to cope with the increased complexity of social/school/family relationships, and it is at this stage when difficulties are often labelled as being 'behavioural' rather 'communication' problems.

Challenging what we 'know'

- Sometimes pupils appear to be ignoring us, but they might only be able to follow 1 or 2 words/steps in instructions, or perhaps do not understand certain concepts/vocabulary.
- Sometimes pupils misread/react to social situations inappropriately, but they might struggle to understand social rules and inferred/ambiguous/implied language (jokes/sarcasm, etc).
- Sometimes pupils appear lazy, but understandably, if they struggle to understand/keep up with what is said in class, they will also struggle to sustain their attention.

Some common indicators of language difficulties...

- Poor vocabulary; particularly a limited understanding/use of verbs
- Limited understanding/use of grammar
- Unable to express emotions/opinions/ideas effectively due to poor vocabulary | not sequencing/including all key information
- Literacy and/or behavioural difficulties
- Difficulty with maths vocabulary/complex concepts
- Not following verbal and/or non-explicit rules
- Unable to start, join or repair conversations.
- Slow processing/not retaining information



Supporting pupils with behavioural difficulties

Another common, yet often hidden indicator that a pupil may have language difficulties, is being unable to understand and respond to some question-types; many of which are used to discuss behaviour...

- Why did X happen
- Why should/n't we...?
- Why did/didn't you....?
- How do you think X feels?
- Why should/shouldn't we...?
- What might X say?
- What could you do instead?
- How do you know....?

To understand and respond appropriately to these questions the pupil need to use a complex, high level cognitive and language skills (explaining, inferring, prediction, reflection, justification, problem solving, etc.) They might also struggle to explain why or how they find them difficult and instead, respond with...

"I don't know"
or shrugs

Misinterprets
events/intent

Changes
the subject

Gets angry
&/or swears

Withdraws or
gets upset

Looks or
walks away

Repeats same
behaviour

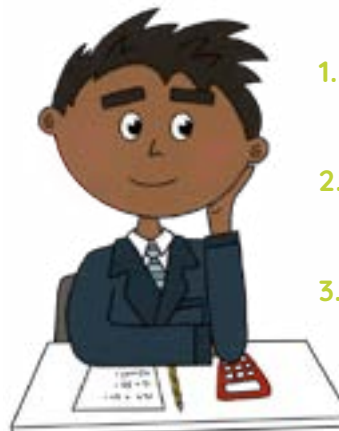
Mumbles or
no response

Links to resources:

[Find out more about questioning](#) | [Questioning resource pack](#)
[Teaching pupils when and how to ask for help/seek clarification](#)

Action plan: check out the links below, and the CPD, resources and further reading pages for more information, ideas, and tips!

1. Develop your staffs' understanding of SLCN: [Training](#) | [Free CPD-1](#) | [Free CPD-2](#) | [How to address your school's skills gap](#)
2. A guide for every teacher on language disorder (DLD) Identification/support/classroom strategies: [Download here](#)
3. The links between SLCN and: [behaviour](#) | [SEMH](#) | [Mental health](#)
4. A whole school approach to developing communication: [EYFS-1](#) | [EYFS-2](#) | [Primary](#) | [Secondary](#) | [All stages](#)
5. Communication friendly classrooms [Audit tool](#) | [Checklist](#)
6. Screen pupils with any SEMH/behavioural/educational probs: [EYFS](#) | [Primary-1](#) / [Primary-2](#) | [Secondary-1](#) / [Secondary-2](#)
7. Explicitly teach vocabulary: [EYFS](#) | [Primary-1](#) [Primary-2](#) | [Secondary](#)
8. Tools to help define/monitor pupil's spoken language [Primary: communicating the curriculum](#) | [Primary & secondary](#)



1. **Chunk** information into smaller, logically sequenced parts.
2. **Check** pupils have understood expectations and what they need to do.
3. **Chill!** Try and pause more when speaking... some pupils need 10-15 seconds to process what has been said.

Resources/information/CPD

1. [Receptive language: Including..](#)

- Vocabulary/Concepts
- Narratives
- Sequencing
- Understanding
- Verbal Reasoning
- The role of memory in lang development
- Memory Skills

2. [Expressive language: including..](#)

- Talking
- Use of grammar

3. Vocabulary:

- [Video: Effective teaching for all learners](#)
- [Vocabulary teaching: top tips](#)
- [Blog: planting the seeds of vocabulary](#)
- [Free samples of WordAware programmes](#)
- [Teaching school related vocabulary](#)

4. Literacy

- [SLCN and Literacy Difficulties.](#)
- [Reading/writing is much more than spelling!](#)

5. School support/resources/CPD

- [Typical development: ages & stages](#)

- [RCSLT: 3 levels of SLCN in schools](#)
 - [SLCN support pack for schools](#)
 - [Free language resources](#)
 - [Hundreds of free SLCN resources](#)
 - [10 strategies to support pupils in school](#)
 - [Blog: Why it's important to focus on SLCN](#)
 - [Blog: Developmental language disorder](#)
 - [DLD information leaflet for schools](#)
 - [What schools need to know about SLCN](#)
 - [DLD: support for educators](#)
 - [Supporting pupils with DLD in schools](#)
 - [Blog: Supporting pupils with SLCN in school](#)
 - [Inclusion for pupils with SLCN](#)
 - [Videos to explain SLCN](#)
 - [Various SLCN podcasts](#)
- ### 6. SLCN and behaviour
- [Understanding the links between communication and behaviour](#)
 - [Free course: SLCN and mental health](#)
 - [Blog: SpeechLink Don't exclude me...](#)
 - [Article: Thinking differently about behaviour](#)
 - [Q&A with young person with SEND](#)
 - [The challenging behaviour foundation](#)

- [The links between SEMH & SLCN](#)
- [Supporting pupils with SEMH & SLCN](#)

7. Restorative justice

Around 10% of your pupils will have significant (identified/unidentified) SLCN; many of whom will also exhibit behavioural difficulties.

Here are some resources to help explain the links between SLCN behaviour, and SEMH, and to help you screen pupils understanding of the types of questioning used in RJ approaches.

If in any doubt, pls contact a speech and language therapist to help you design your RJ approach

- [Blanks levels of questioning explained](#)
- [Video explaining questioning-types](#)
- [Questioning resource pack](#)

8. Charities

- AFASIC: [resources/training/information/free helpline for parents](#)
- ICAN: [resources/training/research/free helpline for parents/practitioners](#)
- NAPLIC: [information/conferences/research](#)
- DLD and Me: [information/resources/CPD](#)
- RCSLT: [The role of SALT in schools](#)

References and further reading

1. [University of Cambridge \(2009\) Cambridge Primary Review](#)
2. [ICAN and Communication Trust \(2013\) A generation adrift](#)
3. [DFE \(2019\) Special Educational Needs in England](#)
4. [Norbury, C et al., \(2016\) 'The impact of nonverbal ability on prevalence and clinical presentation of language disorder: evidence from a population study'](#)
5. [Hollo A., Wehby J. & Oliver R. M. \(2014\) Unidentified Language Deficits in Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A Meta-Analysis. Exceptional Children Emotions](#)
6. [Clegg, J., Stackhouse, J., Finch, K., Murphy, C. & Nicholls, S. \(2009\). Language abilities of secondary age pupils at risk of school exclusion: a preliminary report. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 25, 123-139.](#)
7. [Clegg, J. \(2004\). Language and behaviour: an exploratory study of pupils in an exclusion unit. British Psychological Society Conference, Leeds university](#)
8. [Ripley, K. & Yuill, N. \(2005\). Patterns of language impairment and behaviour in boys excluded from school.](#)
9. [Feinstein, L., and Duckworth, K. \(2006\) Development in the early years: Its importance for school performance and adult outcomes \(20\) London: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.](#)
10. [Save the Children \(2016\) Early language development. Time to change the story](#)
11. [Spencer, S., Clegg, J., Stackhouse, J., and Rush, R. \(2017\). Contribution of spoken language and socioeconomic background to adolescents' educational achievement at age 16 years.](#)
12. [Oxford language report \(2021-22\) Closing the Word gap](#)
13. [Basic Skills Agency \(2002\): Summary Report of Survey into Young Children's Skills on Entry to Education](#)
14. [Locke A., Ginsborg, J. and Peers I. \(2002\) Development and Disadvantage: Implications for Early Years IJCLD Vol. 27 No](#)
15. [Law J et al., \(2011\) Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage.](#)
16. [ICAN \(2009\) Speech, Language and Communication Needs and Literacy Difficulties. I CAN Talk Series - Issue 1](#)
17. [Bishop, D. and Adams \(1990\) A Prospective Study of the Relationship Between Specific Language Impairment, Phonological Disorders and Reading Retardation](#)
18. [Stackhouse, J. \(1989\) Relationships between spoken and written disorders in Mogford, K. and Sadler, J. \(eds\) Child Language and Disability - Implications in an educational setting](#)
19. [Frith, U. and Snowling, M. \(1983\) Reading for Meaning and Reading for Sound in Autistic and Dyslexic Children](#)
20. [DFE \(2019\) Pupil behaviour in schools in England. Research Report](#)
21. [Department for Education \(2017\) Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2015 to 2016. National tables: SFR35/2017](#)
22. [RCSLT \(2018\) Exclusions review: Call for evidence Written evidence submitted by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists](#)
23. [RCSLT \(2019\) Understanding the links between communication and behaviour](#)
24. [Bishop, D. \(2014\) Ten questions about terminology for children with unexplained language problems](#)