

Children with pragmatic language impairment

Also known as semantic-pragmatic disorder

General information

Children with pragmatic language impairment have difficulty in using language appropriately in social situations. This may include difficulties with:

- Following conversational rules (often 'off topic' or 'one sided')
- Changing language according to the needs of a listener or situation (too little or too much background information; adjusting language appropriately to the situation to friends, familiar adults, teachers)
- Extracting salient points from a conversation, story or information
- Understanding jokes, idioms, metaphors and sarcasm (resulting in over-literal comprehension)
- Understanding and using non-verbal communication
- Making and maintaining friendships
- Tendency to be concrete or prefer facts to stories
- Reading comprehension
- Prediction, inferencing and narrative
- Organisational skills
- Intonation (may lack variation)

Children with pragmatic language impairment may say inappropriate or unrelated things during conversations or use unusual language and vocabulary. However, they can have age appropriate complexity of sentence construction and word structure and can appear to have fluent, complex and clearly articulated expressive language.⁵¹

Helping to access the phonics screening check

Possible issues	Ways to help
<p>Children with pragmatic language impairment often have difficulty making sense of new situations or activities</p> <p>There may be difficulties due to raised anxiety because of poor situational understanding</p>	<p>The check needs to be presented as a routine reading session or other familiar task with a well-known teacher</p>
<p>Children with pragmatic language impairment have concrete understanding and struggle to understand higher level aspects of language like inference</p>	<p>Check instructions will need to be given in simple language and children may need you to repeat what they need to do and additional trial items</p>
<p>They may be easily distracted - unusual or novel items, such as the unusual illustrations in the phonics screening check may be particularly distracting</p>	<p>The screen will therefore need to be carried out in a quiet, distraction-free environment</p>
<p>Some children with pragmatic language impairment have good decoding skills and will expect words to be meaningful; therefore they may under perform on the pseudo-words because they are trying to make them into real words ⁵²</p>	<p>Further emphasis that these words are names of monsters or aliens may help to overcome this problem</p>

You should also consider the following in your literacy work with children who have pragmatic language impairments:

- Does the child understand what they can read?
- Is the child able to draw the main theme from a story or conversation?
- Does the child appreciate the difference between real and pseudo words?
- Does the child have difficulty with sequencing and narrative?
- Is the child able to follow jokes, sarcasm and general social chatting?

⁵² Freed et al, 2011

The outcome of the check

Some children with pragmatic language impairment can show hyperlexia. Hyperlexic children are very good at word decoding, well above the expectation for their age but often have poor reading comprehension abilities. This means that they're likely to perform well on the phonics screening check.

It may be difficult for children to maintain their focus across all of the check items if they are distracted, for example on the unusual illustrations.

Some children will make errors and under perform on the pseudo words as they would expect a word to make sense and so turn the non word into a real word.

Responding to the outcome of the check

Reading comprehension must be considered in children with pragmatic language impairment, as it's likely to be well below decoding ability⁵³ and will have long term negative effects on academic achievement if not supported.

Good decoding skills, may mean their difficulties with comprehension may be hidden and overlooked in the early stages of literacy acquisition. In addition to exposing them to story books, they'll need intervention that targets the following areas in order that they begin to develop reading comprehension:

- ✓ Conversation skills
- ✓ Narrative skills
- ✓ Social inference
- ✓ Social adaptation

An evidence resource to inform next steps

Research evidences a high level of variation of literacy for children with pragmatic language impairment;⁵⁴ some well above the norm and some well below. Overall their decoding skills tend to be in the lower end of the normal range.

Intervention that develops conversation and narrative skills, in addition to facilitating understanding of social inference and social adaptation, can bring about significant improvement in pragmatic skills and expressive language. *'Changes in communication skills had a concurrent beneficial effect on literacy skills in the classroom'*.⁵⁵

Additional resources and further support

Publications and resources:

Anderson-Wood, S. and Smith, B. R. (1997): Working with pragmatics Bicester: Winslow.

Black Sheep Press, speech and language therapy resources, various materials for pragmatics, www.blacksheep-press.com

Talkabout resources for developing social communication skills, www.shop.alexkelly.biz

Firth, C. and Venkatesh, K. (1999) Semantic-pragmatic language disorder, Winslow: Bicester

Gray, C. A., White, A. L. and McAndrew, S. (2002) My social stories book, London, Jessica Kingsley

McTear, M. and Conti-Ramsden, G. (1991) Pragmatic disorders in children: assessment and intervention, London, Whurr

Rhyner, P.M. (ed.) (2009) Emergent literacy and language development: Promoting learning in early childhood, New York: The Guilford Press

Social Communication Intervention Project
www.psych-sci.manchester.ac.uk/scip

Social Use of Language Programme for Infants
www.wendyrinaldi.com/wr-sulp-ip.stm

Organisations and websites:

I CAN – www.ican.org.uk

Afasic – www.afasic.org.uk

⁵³ Freed et al, 2011

⁵⁴ Freed et al, 2011

⁵⁵ Adams C., 2004

Case Study

Kaleem has pragmatic language difficulties and does not stop talking. He has lots to say about many different subjects. He struggles to have proper conversations with people; he can't wait for them to finish what they're saying and often interrupts. Kaleem really finds it hard to stay on the same topic as everyone else and goes off on a tangent a lot.

Kaleem is excellent at reading; he can read anything that's put in front of him. The staff noticed, though, that although he was able to pass all the items on the phonics screening check, he never seemed to understand what was going on in his reading books.

What helps Kaleem

His teacher has started to ask him comprehension questions after every page to encourage him to think about what he has read. The staff are now working with Kaleem on understanding information that needs to be inferred, because unless it's really obvious, he just doesn't understand it. They have also introduced some comprehension monitoring work with him; this has helped him to start to be aware about when he hasn't understood what he has read.