

# Children with language delay

## General information

Language delay may affect what the child can say (expressive language), and/or what the child can understand (receptive language) and may be accompanied by other speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), for example unclear speech (phonological delay). Language is following the typical developmental pattern but at a slower rate.

Language delay may form part of a more general developmental delay or may be an isolated delay where other areas of development follow the norm.

There may be a variety of possible causes or linked factors for language delay including environmental factors, genetic factors and physical factors (for example early fluctuating hearing loss).

Research shows that language delay is a significant factor impacting on the development of literacy skills.

## Helping to access the phonics screening check

Possible issues	Ways to help
Children may not have the attention and turn taking skills needed to easily manage the structure of the check	Administer the check in a room without distractions and possibly in short sections to help them concentrate
Many children with language delay process language slowly	Give as long as necessary to respond - they may require longer than 10 seconds
Children may not know or understand words like 'before', 'imaginary creatures' and 'practice' and they may confuse them and may not understand the instructions	When giving instructions for the check use short sentences and keep language simple. Instructions should be accompanied by gesture and/or signing, demonstration, pointing and non-verbal reassurance and encouragement
Children with expressive language delay may lack the confidence to respond	The check should be administered by an adult they know well who will give lots of encouragement

Where there's a known or suspected language delay it's suggested to check out the following, so you can enable the child to access the test and then accurately interpret the outcomes of the test:

- ✓ Check vocabulary – do they know and understand the words needed?
- ✓ Check the child's understanding of concepts such as first/last, real/pretend, whole/part etc
- ✓ Check the child's speech and language with a school-based screen such as 'Speech Link' and 'Language Link', or tool such as *Universally Speaking 5-11*<sup>8</sup>
- ✓ Obtain the advice of a speech and language therapist with regard to the child's level of language development and any associated delays in speech sounds

## The outcome of the test

Some children with language delay may respond inaccurately as they haven't understood the instructions. They may not 'know' the words or understand the concepts behind the instructions. Children with a poor vocabulary may not have an awareness of which words are non-words (pseudo-words) and which are real, so drawing conclusions from their performance on real and not real words may not be possible.

A child with delay in expressive language may lack the ability or confidence to respond accurately and may not have the ability to communicate this to the tester. *They may remain silent or give unrelated responses.*

Some children from disadvantaged backgrounds, or homes where there is less verbal interaction, are likely to have a limited vocabulary.

Test results that indicate a need for intense emphasis on development of phonics may mask the need to enrich the child's language as a priority. The risk of emphasising phonics too much too soon will impact on the development of literacy.

Poor vocabulary can impact on access to both phonics and wider literacy.

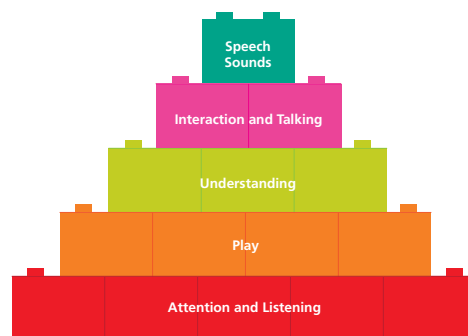
<sup>8</sup> You can access Universally Speaking 5-11 here – [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/resources](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/resources)

## Responding to the outcome of the check

Children with language delay in the early years have a significantly increased risk of experiencing problems with reading in school but may not be ready for literacy. They need to develop the building blocks for language and literacy, such as attention and listening, understanding what's said, and an ability to use words in sentences as shown below.

They may also need to develop phonological awareness skills, such as:

- Knowledge of rhyme
- Recognising syllables in words
- Knowing about phoneme/grapheme correspondence
- Ability to pick out initial phonemes in words etc
- Be able to interact with books and stories for pleasure



Adapted from a model used in many speech and language therapy services across the UK

Children with language delay may have difficulties in any or all the previous building blocks. They may need a targeted intervention to support these skills<sup>9</sup> and will certainly need an enriched language environment and opportunities to practice the building blocks of language and literacy, such as:

- Turn taking, attention and listening games
- Games and opportunities to develop the child's ability to remember what's been said and what they want to say
- Developing the vocabulary the child understands and can use
- Expanding the sentences the child understands and uses through play, games and 'talk time' opportunities
- Expanding opportunities to develop oral narrative-storytelling and story acting at the child's own level
- Building confidence to use language in conversation and interactions with others
- Enabling small group opportunities to develop any of the areas listed

Many children with language delay will have a preference for visual or multisensory learning. They may need increased visual and experiential support for learning such as signs, play activities, toys and real objects, to develop their understanding of vocabulary and concepts.

## An evidence resource to inform next steps

- Children with speech and language delay in the early years are far more likely to have difficulty with learning to read<sup>10</sup>
- The level of a child's oral language development will limit their ability to become competent in literacy<sup>11</sup>
- Children need oral comprehension before they can develop an understanding of written words<sup>12</sup>
- 'For children with impoverished language, creating a communication support environment in the early years at home and in schools is critical'<sup>13</sup>

## Additional resources and further support

### Publications and resources:

Language for Learning – [www.languageforlearning.co.uk](http://www.languageforlearning.co.uk)

Speechlink - [www.speechlink.co.uk](http://www.speechlink.co.uk)

Black Sheep Press - [www.blacksheepress.co.uk](http://www.blacksheepress.co.uk)

### Organisations and websites:

The Communication Trust – [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk)

I CAN – [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

Afasic – [www.afasic.org.uk](http://www.afasic.org.uk)

Elklan – [www.elklan.co.uk](http://www.elklan.co.uk)

<sup>9</sup> Talk Boost is an evidenced programme that can boost a child's communication by an average of 18 months after 10 weeks of the intervention. Find out more here – [www.ican.org.uk/talkboost](http://www.ican.org.uk/talkboost)

<sup>10</sup> Bishop, D.V.M. and Adams, 1990

<sup>11</sup> Ofsted, 2005, Lundberg I, 2006

<sup>12</sup> Hirsch Jnr. E.D., 2003, Torgesen 2005

<sup>13</sup> ICAN Report 2006

## Case Study

Rufus in year 1 had speech and language delays. This included:

- Easily distracted
- Difficulties waiting for his turn
- Auditory memory
- Severely restricted vocabulary
- Immature sentence structure, for example, "Me goed shops on yesterday"
- Delayed speech sounds resulting in unclear speech

### What helps Rufus

Following advice from a speech and language therapist, he was included in a group to develop his attention and listening skills. Activities for vocabulary building and expressive language were also practised in small group sessions and shared with his parents for 'talking games' at home.

Six months later he had made considerable progress and could:

- Follow longer instructions
- Re-tell some key events from a short story
- Predict 'what might happen next'
- Use specific vocabulary rather than words like "thingy"
- Use language to reason by answering 'why' questions with words like 'because' etc.
- Talk in more complex and well formed sentences
- Speak more clearly
- Show phonological awareness skills; for example, picking out initial phonemes, sound blending

By developing his foundation skills, Rufus was then more ready and able to access phonic teaching and to develop wider literacy skills.