Children with specific receptive language impairment

Also known as SRLI and Receptive language disorder

General information

Specific receptive language impairment (SRLI) is a specific difficulty in understanding and learning language which can’t be explained in terms of another factor such as social, emotional, behavioural, educational, physical or sensory difficulties, hearing loss, global developmental delay or autism. SRLI is a ‘persistent’ or long-term difficulty in understanding spoken language.

Features include:

- Language levels on standardised checks are significantly below age level
- The child may have good non-verbal ability, but can’t understand or use spoken language at an age appropriate level
- Difficulties learning language incidentally, meaning they need specific teaching to understand and use words, grammatical sentences and narratives

Helping to access the phonics screening check

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<th>Possible issues</th>
<th>Ways to help</th>
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<td>Many children with SRLI have very slow processing</td>
<td>They should be given as long as necessary to respond to a word and may require longer than 10 seconds</td>
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<td>Understanding instructions may be difficult. Words like ‘before’, ‘imaginary creatures’ and ‘practice’ may not be understood and may confuse</td>
<td>When giving instructions for the check use short sentences and reduce the use of complex language as much as possible</td>
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<td>Instructions should be accompanied by gesture and/or signing, demonstration, pointing and non-verbal reassurance and encouragement</td>
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The child with SRLI will have varying degrees of difficulty with:

- Processing language; this may be very slow
- Memory (‘holding’ spoken language for long enough to be able to work out meaning)
- Knowledge of word meanings (concepts and vocabulary)
- Remembering words they know when they need to use them (termed ‘word finding difficulty’)
- Knowledge of word structure (for example, word endings such as possessives or verb tenses)
- Sentence structure; their sentences are shorter and less complex
- Ability to make sense of language

A child with SRLI may also have difficulty with maintaining listening and attention and distinguishing between speech sounds. They may become extremely frustrated or become socially withdrawn because they don’t understand or use language well.

The outcome of the check

Children with SRLI are likely to have difficulty with:

- Following the instructions for the check - this may be because of difficulties in processing information or in understanding the words which are used in the instructions
- Blending sounds, particularly in longer words - auditory difficulties mean that children with SRLI may have difficulty in holding sounds long enough to be able to effectively blend them into words
- Nonsense words - identifying pseudo words is particularly difficult for children who have poor vocabulary or word knowledge
- Maintaining listening and attention throughout the check
Responding to the outcome of the check

Approaches to support the literacy development of children with specific receptive language impairments:

- Children will need repeated, supported practice in ‘hearing’ the sequence of sounds in order and in blending sounds
- They may find it easier to work on long vowels than the short vowels that are harder to hear the difference between
- They require an intensive programme of phonological awareness, focusing on discriminating sounds, recognising initial sounds and rhymes, segmenting and blending
- Multisensory learning is helpful (for example, tracing over letters with shaving foam, finger painting letters, whilst saying the sound).
- They may also need ‘overlearning’
- Many children with SRLI will need practice aimed at speeding up their letter recognition and blending. It’s helpful for them to blend sounds without gaps between them (cumulative blending) because it sounds more like the target word, than the disjointed evenly spaced sounding out
- Children with poor short-term memory struggle to ‘hold’ a sequence of sounds in their mind in order to blend them. Identifying and using chunks that they already know is useful, for example, blending phonemes with ‘in’ to make ‘pin’, ‘fin’, ‘bin’, ‘win’
- They may need one to one teaching in quiet, non-distracting environments, and help to develop listening and attention skills
An evidence resource to inform next steps

SRLI is under identified; children with SRLI often have persistent and long-term literacy difficulties.

Children with SRLI have difficulties in using word knowledge in reading because they have a reduced vocabulary, and in using grammatical knowledge for suggesting probable words for sentence context due to poor grammatical skills.

The literacy skills of both typically developing children and those with language impairments are improved by phonological awareness training (based on the components of synthetic phonics, but emphasising earlier developmental stages). However children with SRLI will not make the desired progress with synthetic phonics alone, particularly in the longer term and for text comprehension.

The following are therefore recommended:

✔ Artificial incidental language learning opportunities, which emphasise learning in meaningful contexts. This can be used to learn and practice vocabulary

✔ Well-planned word teaching for simple words with a consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) structure, reading vocabulary and story comprehension

Additional resources and further support

For a child with SRLI the teacher and speech and language therapist should work together to plan and develop the child’s phonological awareness and early reading skills simultaneously.

Publications and resources:

Duffy, G.G. (2009), Explaining Reading: A resource for teaching concepts, skills and strategies, 2nd edition, London, The Guildford Press. Section on supporting comprehension strategies in individuals with reading difficulties who have speech, language and communication needs

I CAN Talk 7: Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

I CAN: The SLI Handbook

Organisations and websites:

I CAN – www.ican.org.uk
Afasic – www.afasic.org.uk
NAPLIC – www.naplic.org.uk
nasen – www.nasen.org.uk

14 Botting et al, 1998
15 Simkin and Conti-Ramsden, 2006
16 Nation and Snowling, 1998
17 Lundberg et al, 1988
18 Van Kleek et al, 1998
19 Camarata et al, 1994; Kouri, 2005; Law, 1997
20 Parkinson and Gorrie, 1995; Newman and Elks, 1988
**Case Study**

James has struggled with literacy since entering school. In story sessions his attention frequently wandered and he found it hard to take turns in the group. Sometimes he appeared to ignore instructions and at other times he would do the wrong thing, frequently acting on only the last part of an instruction – for example heading straight out to the playground without putting his coat on first.

James sometimes found the busy classroom environment overwhelming and easily showed his frustration when he found it was difficult to fully understand what was required of him.

**What helps James**

Working on aspects of James's communication needs helped to underpin his acquisition of literacy skills. James has benefited from small group activities in a quiet area, where distractions are reduced. These have included working on the skills of listening and attention, memory, turn-taking, phonological awareness and rhyming.

The use of Story-Sacks including objects and puppets, where there was an opportunity for James to ‘act out’ stories with lots of repetition have encouraged James’s interest in the written word. James continues to benefit from a multisensory approach to reading. He needs lots of demonstration with shorter sentences and simpler instructions and lots of praise, which tells him what he has done well.