Children with specific expressive language impairment

General information

Specific expressive language impairment is a specific difficulty in using expressive language, which can’t be explained in terms of other factors such as social, emotional, behavioural, educational, physical or sensory difficulties, hearing loss, global developmental delay or autism.

Features include:

• Understanding of language (receptive language skills) may be mildly affected, but are better than their talking (expressive skills) and within the normal range for age

• Expressive language levels on standardised checks are significantly below age level

• Children have good non-verbal ability, but can’t use spoken language at an age appropriate level

• Difficulties learning language incidentally, i.e. picking up new words from context and learning and generalising new grammatical constructions

Helping to access the phonics screening check

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible issues</th>
<th>Ways to help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many children with specific expressive language impairment have slow processing and planning of their responses</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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<tr>
<td>Deficits in speech perception have been identified in at least some children with language impairments. This deficit is particularly marked when listening against background noise21</td>
<td>A quiet distraction-free environment is essential</td>
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</tbody>
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21 Vance, 2011
Typically a child with specific expressive language impairment will have been delayed and slow in starting to talk and will have limited spoken language; they can’t form clear and complete sentences, struggling to work out the rules of grammar and omitting words. Consequently children may overuse certain grammatical constructions or set phrases.

The child with specific expressive language impairment will have varying degrees of difficulty with:

- A limited vocabulary
- Word finding, which is difficulty recalling words they know and have used before
- Expressing more complicated thoughts and ideas, for example trying to describe, define, or explain information or re-tell an event, activity or story

Expressive language difficulties are directly evident in literacy (using words correctly, spelling, composing sentences, etc.).

Children may become extremely frustrated because they can’t express the ideas they wish to communicate, or socially withdrawn because they can’t use language to relate to peers.

In specific expressive language impairment speech and language development will be later and very slow, and doesn’t follow the typical pattern. Later language skills may develop before earlier skills and/or sentence structures may be atypical. Difficulties with language and communication are likely to persist through life.

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22 Gardner et al, 2006, Reed, 2005
23 Nation and Snowling, 1998

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The outcome of the check

Children with specific expressive language impairment are likely to have difficulty with:

- Non-words or pseudo-words because they have poor non-word recognition and repetition. This is because children with specific expressive language impairment will have limited vocabularies
- Using word knowledge in reading, because they have a reduced vocabulary and so can’t use word knowledge in decoding words, particularly regarding irregularly spelt words
- Blending sounds to form words. Many children with specific expressive language impairment may have ongoing or residual difficulties with their speech sounds. This may be particularly true for blending longer words

Some children with specific expressive language impairment may be able to decode a word accurately, but their word finding difficulties may mean that they actually say a completely different word. This may have no phonic similarities to the target word.
Responding to the outcome of the check

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

- To support their phonic development, children with specific expressive language impairment 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 discriminate.
- They require an intensive programme of phonological awareness, including a focus on discriminating, recognizing 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 specific expressive language impairments 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’.

Most importantly, children with specific expressive language impairment will need a broader range of approaches to learning to read than just phonics. They will need support with the foundations of language, including vocabulary and sentence structure.
An evidence resource to inform next steps

Specific expressive language impairment is under identified.²⁴

Specific expressive language impairment puts children at clear risk for later difficulties at school, in particular, for reading difficulties. ‘Studies have indicated that as many as 40-75% of children with specific expressive language impairment will have problems in learning to read, because reading depends upon a wide variety of underlying language skills’.²⁵ For children who still have significant language difficulties at school entry, low levels of literacy are common,²⁶ and educational attainments are typically poor.²⁷

The literacy skills of both typically developing children²⁸ and those with language impairments²⁹ are improved by phonological awareness training (based on the components of synthetic phonics, but emphasising earlier developmental stages). However children with specific expressive language impairment will not make the desired progress with synthetic phonics alone, particularly in the longer term and for text comprehension, even if their verbal comprehension is within the normal range. The use of a synthetic phonics approach should therefore not be at the expense of vocabulary enrichment.³⁰

The following are therefore recommended:

✔ Artificial incidental language learning opportunities, which emphasise learning in meaningful contexts, mimicking real life.³¹ This can be used to learn and practice vocabulary

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

Additional resources and further support

For a child with specific expressive language impairment, the teacher and speech and language therapist should work together to plan and develop child’s phonological awareness and early reading skills simultaneously to avoid dissimilar inputs confusing the child.³²

Publications and resources:

Ministry of Health Malta resource detailing links between literacy and language impairment -
https://ehealth.gov.mt/HealthPortal/rehabilitation/speech_language_pathology/conditions_that_may_affect_sl/literacy_difficulties.aspx

Organisations and websites:

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

²⁴ Botting et al, 1998
²⁵ https://ehealth.gov.mt/
²⁶ Catts et al 2002
²⁷ Snowling et al, 2001
²⁸ Lundberg et al, 1988
²⁹ Van Kleek et al, 1998
³⁰ Ouellette, 2006
³¹ Camarata et al, 1994; Kouri, 2005; Law, 1997
³² Parkinson and Gorrie, 1995; Newman and Elks, 1988