What are Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN)?

SLCN is defined in the Special Educational Needs & Disability Code of Practice: 0–25 years as the key need within Communication and Interaction, one of the four identified broad areas of need it says:

‘Children and young people with SLCN have difficulty in communicating with others. This may be because they have difficulty saying what they want to, understanding what is being said to them or they do not understand or use social rules of communication. The profile for every child with SLCN is different and their needs may change over time. They may have difficulty with one, some or all of the different aspects of speech, language or social communication at different times of their lives.’

The Code of Practice also says that children and young people with autism are likely to have particular difficulties with social interaction. They may also experience difficulties with language, communication and imagination, which can impact on how they relate to others.

It is important to recognise that SLCN is an umbrella term and that there may be different views and opinions about how it is defined. However, here we use the Code of Practice definition.

In the acronym SLCN, the ‘needs’ refers both to the needs of the individual and to what society needs to do to support their inclusion. It implicitly looks both at the individual and the environments in which children and young people play, learn, communicate and live. From the perspective of inclusion, it is important remember that everyone has different areas of strengths, and it can be helpful to think about the differences between pupils rather than to think of some as lacking in some way. Whether a particular need becomes a barrier to a pupil achieving their potential depends as much on the way in which the school organises the curriculum and addresses the particular needs of all children.

For children with SLCN, the school and teachers need to think about the individual pupil’s needs in terms of their learning, their communication, and their socialisation; within the environment of the classroom, the corridors, the playground and the transition to and from home.

Including children with SLCN in the classroom

Difficulties with speech might include:
- speech which is difficult for you to understand, and the pupil might also have difficulty in making different sounds
- problems hearing the difference between speech sounds, so some words may sound the same to the pupil or not sound like a real word, making it difficult for them to understand what is said e.g. they may find it difficult to hear the difference between the words ‘three and free’
- stammering or stuttering where sounds, words or parts of words are repeated or may be difficult to produce without effort
- voice quality which is unusual, e.g. persistently harsh, breathy, creaky
- not being able to use intonation appropriately to add to the meaning of what is being said.

Difficulties with language might include:
- using sentence structures or grammar you would usually expect to hear from someone younger, e.g. a 7 year old telling you ‘I went nanny’s or ‘I falled over in the garden’
- having problems linking sentences effectively with words such as ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘so’, or ‘then’
- problems sequencing ideas and sentences, so explanations and stories are confused, don’t really make sense or are long-winded
- problems learning and remembering new words or topic/subject specific vocabulary
- not being able to find the right words to use at the right time. This is also known as ‘word finding’ difficulties
- a limited range of vocabulary for emotions, thoughts or feelings, e.g. only sad, happy and angry; making it difficult to use words to explain what they really feel or to resolve conflict by talking and negotiating
- problems understanding some sentences or types of question so pupils can’t follow what is being said, follow instructions, or know how to answer a question
- misunderstanding idioms such as ‘don’t hit the roof’ or ‘pull your socks up.’
Difficulties with communication might include:

- limited eye contact
- poor turn-taking skills in conversations and activities
- problems ‘repairing’ a conversation or getting a conversation back on track, e.g. asking to hear something again if there has been a misunderstanding
- not being able to use language to compromise, or to negotiate in discussions or disagreements and difficulty ‘reading’, understanding or reacting to verbal or non-verbal responses, e.g. not noticing when someone is bored or doesn’t understand something
- not understanding about, or being able to apply, a different style of language or communication depending on who they are talking to and the context, e.g. using the same style of talk and words with their friends as with their teacher.

What causes SLCN?

There is no definitive evidence about what causes SLCN and it is likely that the needs or difficulties of each individual child can result from a range of factors. Some research has shown that there can be a link to socioeconomic status – ‘Approximately 50% of children in some socio-economically disadvantaged populations have speech and language skills that are significantly lower than those of other children of the same age’ (Lindsay et al. 2008). However, it is important to note that children and young people from all areas and backgrounds can have delayed speech, language or communication.

Other risk factors for pupils having delayed speech, language and communication skills can include being a boy, being summer born and consequently being the youngest in a year group, or having a family history of delayed speech and language development.

SLCN is an umbrella term and covers a wide range of needs. For many children and young people to whom this term is applied, they develop their speech, language and communication skills in much the same way as their age matched peers, following the expected patterns of development, but at a slower rate. They may behave or sound like a younger child, know and use fewer words, talk in shorter or simpler sentences, miss what is being said to them, or display immature social skills. Sometimes they are referred to as having delayed speech, language and communication development. With the right support at the right time, the gap between those pupils with delayed speech, language or communication and their peers has been shown to narrow, and often close, so they are within the typical range of development for their age. This type of SLCN can be seen as being less severe than the difficulties of some other children who may have more persistent speech, language and communication difficulties and are unlikely to follow the trajectory of typical development even with appropriate support.

Sometimes the distinction between pupils with delayed speech, language and communication and those with more persistent SLCN can be unclear. Careful planning of support and intervention with focussed monitoring of progress will help identification. A delay which persists into adolescence can often become more complex.

‘If children with language delay do not receive timely support, their difficulties will continue and can adversely affect their academic achievement and social relationships’ (Sage, 2005).

How many children have SLCN?*

- approximately 10% or 1.2 million children in the UK have long term, persistent SLCN (based on Law et al. 2000)
- SLCN is much more common in boys than in girls with between two and three times as many boys having these difficulties as girls (Dockrell et al. 2012)
- SLCN is associated with other difficulties that the child may be experiencing such as autism, cerebral palsy, hearing loss or more general learning difficulties (Lindsay et al. 2008)
- for these children SLCN may be a secondary difficulty, e.g. communication needs are always part of a diagnosis of autism
- 1% of all children have the most severe and complex SLCN and will require long-term specialist support (Lindsay et al. 2008)

*This data is based on 2016/17 Department for Education data on Speech, Language and Communication Needs, correct at the time of publication.
Are schools identifying all the children with SLCN given the expected prevalence from the research?

No, there is a significant under-identification of SLCN in schools. The data on the previous page also highlights how even fewer pupils with SLCN are identified at secondary level than primary. If you work in Early Years or in Key Stage 1 you are also likely to have a significant proportion of your class with delays in their speech, language and communication. Additionally, if you are working in an area of social disadvantage, it is likely that many pupils of all ages will have delayed language and communication development.

What is the impact of SLCN on attainment?*

Early Years
In Early Years, only **28%** of children identified as having SLCN achieve a good level of development across the 3 prime areas of learning, which includes communication and language, by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Key Stage 2
At the end of Key Stage 2, just **15%** of pupils with SLCN reach the expected level in reading, writing and maths compared with **70%** of all pupils – a gap of **55%**.

Key Stage 4
The 2016/17 Department for Education data on Speech, Language and Communication Needs shows that at the end of Key Stage 4, only **15.4%** of pupils with SLCN gain 5 GCSEs A*- C including Maths and English, compared with **63.9%** of all pupils – a gap of almost **50%**.

*This data is based on 2016/17 Department for Education data on Speech, Language and Communication Needs, correct at the time of publication.

Identification of children with SLCN

If you have concerns about the speech, language and communication development of a child in your class, you should follow the policies set out in your school for the identification of children with special educational needs. You may wish to talk to your SENCO or Inclusion Manager about your concerns. If you are on school placement during your ITE programme, you may also want to seek the advice of your class teacher, mentor or university tutor. It may be appropriate to undertake further screening tests or to involve the Local Authority. You might find it useful to refer to the Communication Difficulties Indicators Checklist (free to download; featured in The Communication Trust’s ‘Don’t Get Me Wrong’ www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/dontgetmewrong).

To inform your thinking about a pupil for whom you have concerns you should use all the information available to you including their oral responses to questions, use of language in class, interactions with peers, written work or mark making in early years; and discussions with parents. Whether or not they receive a formal label of SLCN, it is important to continue to reflect on their individual needs along with the needs of all the children you are working with and to think about what you can do in your day to day teaching to promote their speech, language and communication development.