

Let's talk, talk...



Mary Mountstephen MA (SEN), a leading Early Years Special Needs Adviser in the independent sector, explains how nursery school workers can enhance Speech, Language and Communication Skills among pre-schoolers

Communication difficulties are considered to be one of the most common neuro-developmental disorders of childhood, and the importance of early intervention is now high on the national agenda.

By raising awareness of early warning signs, later difficulties may be avoided or addressed with the support of outside agencies so that all children can be stretched and challenged.

The ability to communicate is an essential life skill for all children; it is at the core of social interaction. Without good communication skills, they will struggle to learn, to achieve in school, to make friends and to understand and communicate with the world around them.

From an early age, if a child cannot hear or understand instructions, he is likely to become frustrated and his behaviour is often misinterpreted as simply disruptive or naughty.

Early childhood professionals know that children are active learners

'Use their name in a calm tone and get eye contact at eye level'

and they understand the benefits of physical activity and play and that the more senses used in the learning process, the more a child, under normal circumstances, will thrive. They will also be aware of a child who is not thriving, but be unsure of how best to meet that child's needs.

What causes difficulties or delay in communication?

There are a number of possible social, environmental and biological and medical reasons why a child's communication seems to be delayed or there are difficulties.

- a lack of early stimulation and good quality interaction in the home. For the first crucial months of life onwards, infants may have had difficulties hearing their parents talk above household noises. Communicating one to one in quiet, calm conditions may not have been possible or deemed important.
- ear infections can have longer term impact and implications than just the period of the infection. Although children may catch up, they are more likely to have delayed auditory processing skills, for example following instructions and poor listening skills. They may pass a hearing test, carried out in quiet surroundings on a 1:1 basis, but struggle to hear and understand spoken information in the setting and at home. Background noise intensifies their problem.
- problems with pregnancy and/or birth can cause developmental

delay including difficulties with sustaining attention and concentration.

- sensory processing problems: a child with sensory processing problems can become quickly overloaded by what is going on around them and their way of coping may include switching off.
- a specific medical syndrome or disorder
- a family related condition

What you might observe

- covering ears and becoming tearful or clingy
- frustration
- solitary play
- concentration problems and distractibility
- apparently ignoring instructions
- poor vocabulary
- does not look as though they are listening when in a group: does not have appropriate body posture and eye contact.
- over reacts to loud or unexpected noises

What to do

- ask parents and carers for suggestions and advice in advance about what works at home
- be consistent in how you respond.
- always keep calm and respect the child's way of communicating.
- say it again slowly and clearly, although without over-exaggeration or raising your voice.
- use your knowledge of the child, visual prompts and observe expressed emotions
- use their name in a calm tone and get eye contact at eye level. Eye contact reinforces two way



communication and lets the child know you are interested in what they are trying to say

- use simple, whole group practiced hand signing techniques and facial expressions to reinforce what you want to communicate.
- ask a nearby child if they know what the child is trying to communicate
- ask the child to draw what they want to tell you or to select from a prepared set of photos of possible situations which have been put together.

Here are some useful strategies for practitioners and parents:

The Four S's:

Say less, use short simple sentences to avoid overload and confusion
Stress the most important words in the sentence: The pan is **HOT**
Slow speech down with a short pause between words
Show, point and add gestures.

SPARK:

When playing a game, a song, a rhyme or a routine:

Start the same way every time, using a picture as a prompt
Plan each child's turn so that they can anticipate what comes next
Adjust the routine if necessary so that a child understands when to take their turn
Repeat the same actions/ words each time as this develops a feeling of security
Keep the end the same so that children feel secure.

Specialist support

If you feel based on your observations, that a child needs referral to a specialist support service such as Speech and Language Therapy, you do need parental consent.

It is possible that the parents will not feel able to accept this recommendation, even when you provide them with targeted evidence to support your concern. Some parents find it very difficult to accept that their child has any difficulties or delay and they there may be a number of reasons for this ,which lies outside your scope of influence.

By pointing out that early identification and extra support can sometimes prevent longer term problems, you may be able to persuade them that this is an appropriate action.

Difficulties in talking, listening, literacy and other subject areas as well as making friends may become more persistent if not addressed as early as possible. ■

References

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www.earlysupport.org.uk
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Some Fun Games to Stimulate Language

Hide My Hands

Marlene Rattigan

*I hide my hands
 (Put them behind your back)
 I shake my hands
 I give a little clap
 I shake my hands
 I hide them in my lap
 I creep my hands
 (fingers walking up the body)
 I crawl my hands
 Right up to my nose
 I creep my hands
 I crawl my hands
 Way down to my toes*

Helps with fine-motor coordination, sequential memory, body awareness and directionality

Here's another well-known finger-play we like to use:

Tommy Thumb

Tommy Thumb up, (stick thumbs up)
 Tommy Thumb down (thumbs down)
 Tommy Thumb dancing
 all around the town
 (dance them all around in front of you)
 Dancing on your shoulders
 (on shoulders)
 Dancing on your head (on head)
 Dancing on your knees
 (on knees)
 Then tuck them into bed
 (tuck thumbs under your arms)

Peter Pointer up, etc
 Middle man
 Ruby Ring
 Baby Small

Fingers all up,
 Fingers all down etc

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