Speech and Language Difficulties

What are Speech and Language Difficulties

Across the UK a large proportion of young people permanently excluded from mainstream schools have a speech and language difficulty. It is thought around 10% of the school population nationally have an additional speech and language need.

Speech and Language difficulties can be broken down into two main areas. Receptive and Expressive language difficulties.

Receptive language difficulties are where young people struggle to understand the meaning behind the words spoken and messages given to them.

Expressive language difficulties pertain to young people who struggle to communicate their own thoughts and feelings with others.

There are many types of speech and language difficulty, but the most common that apply to young people who are at risk of permanent exclusion are as follows.

- Difficulty with vocabulary (understanding and use of)

- Difficulty with understanding instructions and processing of messages

- Difficulty with expressive narrative skills

- Difficulty with verbal reasoning

- Difficulty with social inference and understanding emotions

- Difficulty with managing conversations and conversation breakdown

What are the causes of speech and language disorders?

There could be many reasons for a young person having a speech and language disorder. Often young people exhibit with several of the causal factors which are not limited to the following.

- A brain disorder such as autism

- A brain injury or a brain tumor

- Birth defects such as Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome, or cerebral palsy

- Problems in pregnancy or birth, such as poor nutrition, fetal alcohol syndrome, early (premature) birth, or low birth weight

Sometimes language disorders have a family history. In many cases, the cause is not known.

It's important to know that learning more than one language does not cause language disorders in children. But a child with language disorder will have the same problems in all languages.

Early identification of a Speech and Language difficulty

It is vitally important that speech and language difficulties are detected early. Some difficulties are more easily identifiable than others. Schools should consider viewing behavioural difficulties in school through the lens of speech and language difficulties.

It is important to understand the young person ability to understand the information they are being given. Sometimes a young person misinterpreting the information given to them can be accidentally viewed as misbehaviour by the supporting adults. Some young people with speech and language difficulties will intentionally misbehave as they have found following instructions very difficult to process and understand.

ICAN offer a detailed selection of progression monitoring tools that can be used for early identification of Speech and Language difficulty. The primary model can be found here https://ican.org.uk/shop/progression-tools-primary-years-set/ and the associated poster https://ican.org.uk/media/3186/primary_milestone_poster_-_final.pdf and the secondary model here https://ican.org.uk/shop/progression-tools-secondary-years-set/ and the associated poster https://ican.org.uk/media/3180/secondary_milestone_poster_-_final.pdf

ICAN are a great source of information pertain to supporting young people with speech and language difficulties and offer excellent initial training for teaching staff in understanding and supporting speech and language difficulties through this half day training course. Pastoral leaders who have completed this training have stated they have found it useful for understanding the link between behaviour and speech and language. ICAN also offer screening tools that some schools chose to use as a precursor to a referral to the BANES speech and language team.

Wellcomm provided by GL assessments is also a good tool for both assessing speech and language need and setting up relevant interventions. This particular program is aimed at early years and primary age children but may also be relevant for some children of secondary age. The assessment tool comes with a "big book of ideas" that allows practitioners to start the intervention with relevant strategies and resources as soon as the assessment has been completed.

The BANES Speech and Language team also deliver training on the link between behaviour and speech and language difficulties. Schools that are interested in the offer should contact Stuart Cook. Stuart.Cook@hcrgcaregroup.com.

When might a young person be referred to a speech and language therapist?

- language delay
- language disorder
- specific language impairment
- specific difficulties in speech and producing sounds
- hearing impairment
- cleft palate
- stammering/dysfluency
- autism/social interaction difficulties

Supporting young people with Speech and Language difficulties in the classroom

- Repeat and chunk information. It's much easier to follow shorter instructions one at a time than listen to, remember, and recall a long instruction.

- Instructions should be given in the order they need to be completed, "first do X then do Y" is much easier to understand than "before you do Y, do X"

- Check a pupil knows what to do by asking them *what* they understand, not *if* they understand. This will give you an idea of where their gaps in understanding are.

- New topic vocab should be explicitly taught using pictures, games, links to other more familiar words. This will need to be revisited a number of times for best impact.

- Scaffold their contributions to class and group work by: giving choices, asking simple prompting questions such as "can you tell me some more?"

- Give pupils adequate thinking time to process your request and then formulate their answer

- Classroom environment - an organised classroom learning environment should have equipment well organised and labelled.

- Visual timetable - this should be a combination of words and pictures. Key subject/activity should be displayed with the capacity to move individual items.

- Visual support systems - Symbols, drawing, prompt cards and photos can be used to support teaching e.g. learning outcomes, specific vocabulary, to sequence the steps within an activity.

- Wall displays - Key vocabulary should be highlighted as part of each display and supported with pictures/symbols which can be developed as topics progress

- Multi-sensory teaching - Teaching should use visual, auditory, and tactile approaches including play, resources, practical activities, pictures and videos

- Recording frameworks - different frameworks could be given for children and/or young persons to organise, sequence and record their learning. These include mind maps, word maps, charts and different sorting diagrams

- Some schools report success is focusing on developing active learning strategies with young people.

- Classroom routines and consistency are particularly important for young people with speech and language difficulties. Having the same routine at the start of each lesson reduces the cognitive load allowing the young person for focus on the important instructions given by the supporting adult.

- Some pupils may benefit from rewards and praise given for good listening and speaking skills.

- Limit the use of ambiguous or figurative language or phrases that have multiple meanings. If this phrases are used it will be helpful for the supporting adults to explain them fully.

- Take time to explain idioms – it is important not to assume that young people have understood.

- Model correct language. Repeat the language to be used so young people have multiple opportunities to decode and understand the information being given to them. School report using sentence starters for both written and verbal answers as a useful scaffolding tool. Give pupils the opportunity to plan verbal answers before responding.

- Pre teaching of key vocabulary can reduce the cognitive load on young people.