Language and communication needs: supportive strategies and interventions

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PEP toolkit: language and communication needs

Introduction

Research suggests that looked-after children perform as well as their peers on cognitive tests. However, educational outcomes are significantly poorer (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2011). One possible reason for this is specific difficulties with their **verbal knowledge impacting expressive and receptive language.** Evidence suggests that children and young people with complex emotional and behavioural dysregulation and low **windows of frustration tolerance can have a specific language difficulty that is often not identified and may account for some of the child or young person's difficulties** (Ripley, 2007).

The following may indicate potential language-related needs:

- speech articulation and word discrimination difficulties. This can include intelligibility of speech sounds (not age-appropriate)
- difficulties following instructions (related to understanding the words rather than difficulites remembering the words)
- difficulties with receptive language (understanding), including the use of figurative/abstract language
- difficulties with reading comprehension, but often having fluent decoding skills
- difficulties with age-appropriate expressive grammar and speaking in the correct tenses
- difficulties with narrative organisation skills – stories are out of sequence and temporally disorganised
- difficulties understanding maths concepts and maths problem-solving. This is confusing as they seem to be able to complete calculations
- difficulties retelling stories using appropriate vocabulary, often using the same word to describe something
- appearing to misunderstand or get 'the wrong end of the stick'
- shouting out random unrelated answers in class
- appearing to have age-appropriate thinking and practical skills that do not involve language, such as building skills, non-verbal problem solving (the ability to complete puzzles)

If you suspect a specific language difficulty/impairment, please liaise with appropriate professionals regarding further identification of need in this area. However, the following are useful strategies and have been collated in consultation with Hampshire Educational Psychology (HEP) and shared with their kind permission:

Semantic interventions

Pupils with difficulties understanding words could do
the following to help access the word by appropriate meaning:

- what category does it belong to?
- what other categories could it go in?
- what is it made of?
- what do you do with it?
- what does it go with (cup and saucer)?
- where would you see it?
- who would use it/make it?
- what does it smell like?
- what does it feel like?

Semantic (word meaning) spider webs are useful to use as well.

Grammatical interventions

Pupils who have difficulties accessing **grammatical information** (for example, is it a
noun, verb etc, or use of pronouns) could benefit from the following.

- What group of words does it fit into (noun, verb etc)
- Where does it fit within a sentence?

Phonological memory interventions

When pupils have learnt to recognise the word and associated visual representation
of the word but still have difficulty accessing their **phonological memory** and
actually retrieving the word, the following can be done:

- What sound does it start with?
- What sound does it end with?
- What does it rhyme with/sound like?

Use tip-of-the-tongue cues:

- think of the first sound of the word (you may need to help them)
- picture what the word looks like in your head
- point to it/gesture/sign it
- think of another word with a similar meaning
- say what it is used for.

Expressive language

All language should have a visual cue, such as word banks with pictures.

Tell the children stories in class and ask them to retell them in their own words using visual cue cards.

Ask the children to describe everyday activities in sequence, such as going out on a cold/wet day, getting dressed, making a drink and making a sandwich.

Ask them to plan for an activity. For example, baking a cake. Discuss what you might need, such as ingredients and utensils, and ask them to explain how the activity will be carried out. Provide visual cue cards.

Tell a story. Ask the children to narrate the ending of a story with visual cue cards.

Ask children to narrate a television programme. Turn down the sound on a television programme and ask them what is happening in the programme.

Reverse roles. Ask children to teach you how to do something using their words and actions.

Describe jobs. Ask children to describe and define what people do for jobs from pictures.

Actions in activity: children think about a specific activity/outing and the different actions involved, such as swimming/splashing/floating, drying, getting dressed, packing up wet things and going home and narrate these.

Make up as many categories as possible for children using visual cues and get them to rehearse and practise saying the words in the categories in sentences.

Receptive language

Work on topic and subject-specific vocabulary in advance and ask children to place them in word banks at the beginning of the lesson.

Do not assume an understanding of basic concepts, such as before/after. Ask the children to repeat the task requirements. This helps concentration, too.

Simplify your vocabulary, sentence structure and length and apply the concept of 'information carrying words'. All subject-specific words need a visual cue and a worked example.

Use visual prompts to back up your language, such as gestures, objects and pictures.

Give children plenty of time to work out what you have said to them. Use pauses and be aware of the speed of speech.

Repeat key sentences and ask the children to repeat what they have to do.
Staff should use simplified language and common words, omitting non-essential details and double negatives. Staff will need to speak in very short sentences (no more than three to four words). Staff may need to repeat instructions.

Children may need help to focus on what is important, pointers to emphasise what they should listen to, and keywords highlighted to aid their understanding.

Provide children with opportunities for lots of reinforcement and repetition of keywords. For example, revisit the vocabulary even when the topic is finished and reinforce the vocabulary concepts in as many different contexts (different subjects) as possible.

The following may also be helpful:

- Ask children to tell you to which **category** things belong to. This can also be subject-specific:

➢ What other categories could it go in?
➢ What is it made of?
➢ What do you do with it?
➢ Where would you see it?
➢ Who would use it/make it?
➢ What does it smell like?
➢ What does it feel like?
➢ The use of semantic spider webs would be a useful tool

The following scaffolding questions are useful for children with language difficulties. Always provide a visual aid:

➢ **Setting asks questions**: who? when? where?
➢ **Beginning:** what happened?
➢ **Reaction:** how did they feel?
➢ **Goal:** how did they plan to do it?
➢ **Attempt:** what did they do?
➢ **Outcome:** what happened?
➢ **Ending:** how did it end?

Ask children to listen to stories or subject-specific narratives and retell them using frameworks and structures to support understanding (such as who? Where? What?). This needs to be broken down into steps and displayed visually.

General classroom strategies

Ensure all verbal instructions are combined with visual cues, such as objects, pictures and gestures.

As some pupils may process information slowly, staff should ensure that they pause after verbal instructions to give them time to process the information.
Pre-teaching and developing vocabulary/category lists for each topic area using visual assignment plans and semantic webs.

Encourage pupils to provide alternative information if they cannot access the appropriate vocabulary.

Gain the child's attention before speaking.

Simplify your vocabulary, sentence structure and sentence length to match the pupil's level of understanding.

Give pupils enough time to work out what you have said to them.

Repeat key sentences and ask the pupil to repeat what you have said.

Use directions with actions so that large chunks of language do not need to be remembered at once, such as:

- organise the instructions in the order that they are mentioned.
- give the pupil time to reply.
- do not allow other pupils to answer for them.
- do not ask closed questions.

The following link is for the NHS 'school therapy pack' which provides advice on SALT needs, and the second link provides information on how to support narrative skills:

Occupational Therapy (solent.nhs.uk)

Narrative Approach to Learning Language - Black Sheep Press

Box 1 – Transition from Primary to Secondary for SLCN Children

Throughout education, pupils experience multiple transition periods, the most significant of which is the move from primary school to secondary school. This mind map shows some of the many changes that all pupils will experience, every one of which is likely to be much more challenging for children with SLCN.

It is important to think about how reasonable adjustments are made in the following areas for children with SLCN needs:

How does your setting support language development in these areas?

social groups

vocabulary

routines

new

organisation

subjects

teaching styles

curriculum

teachers