



Section two

Why communication is important

Communication is key

Communication is fundamental to children's development; children need to be able to understand and be understood. Communication is the foundation of relationships and is essential for learning, play and social interaction.

Communicating with babies is the foundation of attachment.

If a parent or carer is responsive to a baby's signals and 'takes turns' in communicating with them from birth onwards, babies develop a secure attachment to the carer. This attachment underpins learning and development – it helps children thrive.

Language is how we get to know each other and build relationships.

As parents we talk and listen to our child, which helps them develop and learn as well as forging close connections.

Language is the vehicle for learning.

It is the means by which teachers teach and children learn. Imagine trying to learn and understand new information without the ability to listen, understand and talk...

Children with speech and language needs are at high risk of difficulties with reading, writing and spelling.

If children can't say words, they will be more likely to have difficulties in 'sounding out' words for reading and spelling, or writing them down. If children can't understand the words they hear, they will struggle to understand what they have read.

Children with communication difficulties are more likely to have behaviour difficulties.

Many children with identified behaviour needs have previously unidentified speech, language and communication needs. Imagine the frustration of not getting your message across.

Friendships are incredibly important for children.

Making and keeping friends is difficult if you have poor communication skills. Children often choose friends who are good at communicating, so children with difficulties are doubly disadvantaged

Self esteem and confidence is affected.

Children with communication needs often see themselves as less able and less popular than their friends. Young people identify good communication skills as important for feeling confident.





Communication impacts on all areas of life

On education

1. **Poor language predicts poor literacy skills** and, without the right help, between 50% and 90% of children with persistent communication needs go on to have reading difficulties. Vocabulary at age 5 is a very strong predictor of the qualifications achieved at school leaving age and beyond.
2. The reading skills of 5 year olds with good and poor oral language skills were followed up; at age 6 there was a gap of a few months in reading age. By the time these young people were 14, this gap had widened to a **difference of 5 years** in reading age.
3. Only a fifth of children with speech, language and communication needs reach the **expected levels for their age** in both English and Maths at age 11. Only 10% get 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths.

On employment

1. Employers now **rate communication skills as their highest priority**, above qualifications, with 47% of employers in England reporting difficulty in finding employees with an appropriate level of oral communication skills.
2. **More than 8 out of 10 long-term unemployed young men** have been found to have speech, language and communication needs.
3. The **cost to our economy of youth unemployment** is substantial. A 2007 study by the Prince's Trust put the economic cost of youth unemployment through lost productivity and benefits payments at £4.69bn a year.

On health

1. Poor communication is a **risk factor for mental health**.
2. 40% of 7 to 14 year olds referred to **child psychiatric services** had a language impairment that had never been suspected.
3. Without effective help a **third of children** with speech, language and communication needs require **treatment for mental health problems** in adult life.

Children who find communication hard find life hard

Despite the vital importance of communication, few people know about the number of children who struggle to develop these skills and the barriers they face.

Over 1 million children in the UK have long term and persistent speech, language and communication needs. These children do not learn language in the same way as other children. They often need specific teaching and specialist support to develop their communication skills.

In areas of poverty, more than half of children start school with delayed language. They may struggle to understand or to make themselves understood, have smaller vocabulary, poor listening and social skills.

One of the major challenges for these children and their families is that often their difficulties are **invisible** to other people, as there is a lack of understanding of speech, language and communication needs.

Often people see clearly the impact of speech, language and communication needs – poor behaviour, poor reading and writing, isolated children, children with low confidence – but they don't see the underlying cause, poor-understanding and poor use of language and communication.



The 5 communication barriers

Learning to talk is a complicated skill and can break down in lots of different ways:

I can't get words out

Some children know what they want to say, but words come out muddled or unclear.

For some, the words come out, but speech is very unclear and difficult for other people to understand.

Some children may have a stammer.

Others can't find the words they need – like when you know someone's name and just can't remember...

Or they can't organise their words and sentences, so talk is confused and difficult to follow.

These children have a speech and language impairment. They can be as able as other children their age in other ways, but talking is very difficult for them.

I don't understand words

Some children struggle to understand words and sentences.

Like when you go to a foreign country and you don't understand the language – eventually you would just pick it up. These children can't pick it up. They need specialist speech and language support to learn language.

These children have a speech and language impairment. They can be as able as other children their age in other ways, but understanding language is very difficult for them.

I don't know how to have a conversation

Some children can talk clearly and in sentences, they just don't know how to use these skills to have a conversation.

They might not look at you or listen well or might interrupt too much or talk about only their own interests. Often these children want to talk and make friends, they just don't know how.

They can be as able as other children their age in other ways, but communicating with others is very difficult for them.

I don't have enough words

Some children are young for their age when it comes to talking.

They don't understand or use as many words as other children their age; sentences are short, they may have poor listening skills or unclear speech for their age.

Many of these children have the potential to catch up with their peers with the right support.

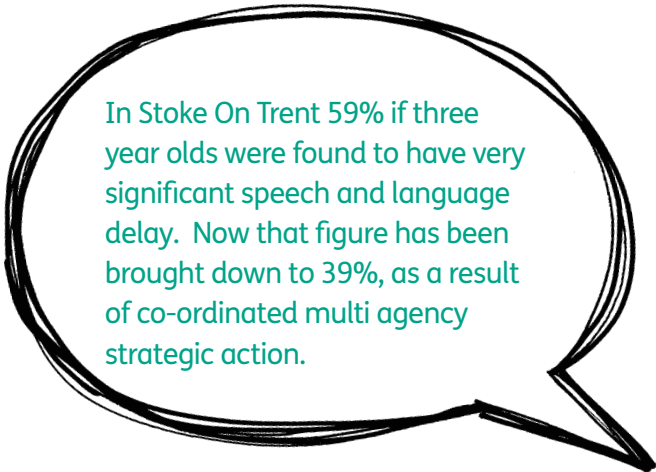
I have multiple barriers

Some children will struggle with different aspects of communication, so they may struggle to understand what people are saying. Their sentences may be short and speech unclear.

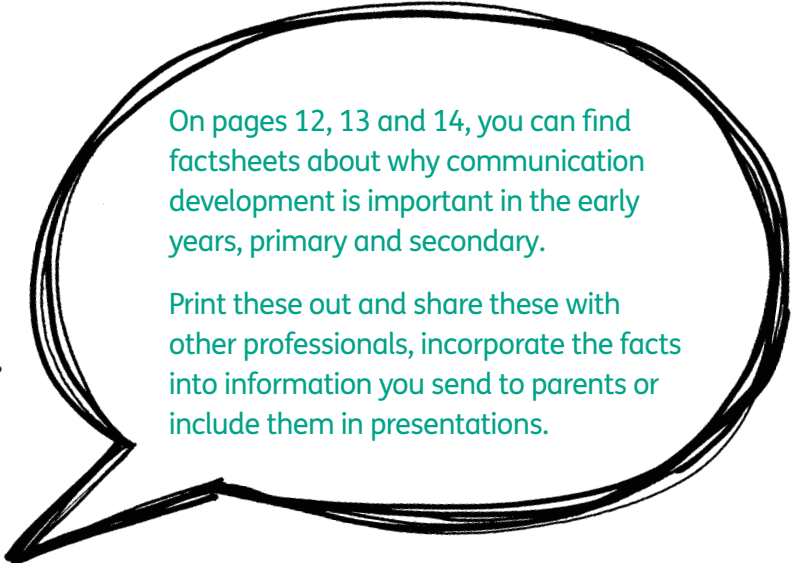
They may have additional learning difficulties, physical difficulties, hearing difficulties. These children often communicate in their own ways and can have lots to say.

Some things that work in supporting children's communication development

1. Workforce development is essential; practitioners need to be confident in supporting speech, language and communication skills and identifying those children who are struggling.
2. Communication supportive environments can make a real difference. See page 27 for a checklist of what this includes.
3. Regardless of where a child is educated, collaboration between practitioners and parents is seen as being fundamental for effective management of children with communication difficulties.
4. Reading intervention programmes have shown better results when there is an element included to improve oral language.
5. There is good evidence that co-ordinated, strategic action by local authorities and health services can improve language skills across the community, with a particular impact on disadvantaged children.



In Stoke On Trent 59% of three year olds were found to have very significant speech and language delay. Now that figure has been brought down to 39%, as a result of co-ordinated multi agency strategic action.



On pages 12, 13 and 14, you can find factsheets about why communication development is important in the early years, primary and secondary.

Print these out and share these with other professionals, incorporate the facts into information you send to parents or include them in presentations.



Children's communication in the early years

Communication begins before birth

1. Secure attachment between parent and child develops through parents' responsiveness to their child's communication, meaning babies and children are more ready to learn.
2. Despite the importance of communication, few of us understand the science behind how language develops; it is one of the most complicated things our brain does. However, we know that the amount and type of talk children hear and interact with can have a marked effect on children's communication development.
3. Poor language affects behaviour – even in very young children. Two in three language delayed three year olds have behaviour problems.
4. Children's vocabulary in low income families is around one year behind children in middle income homes at age 5. These children are at a disadvantage in learning and making friends even before they start formal education.
5. The communication environment in the early years has been identified as being crucial in promoting children's early development and in reducing the risk of low attainment.

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Children's communication in primary aged children

Language is essential for learning

1. Children need to have good language skills in order to use their language to learn. Talking is key in supporting and extending children's thinking and advancing their learning and understanding. The ways in which teachers talk to children can influence learning, memory, understanding and the motivation to learn.
2. Speech, language and communication needs are the most common type of special educational need in younger aged children. They are also special needs that attract high levels of parental dissatisfaction with services and where high levels of inequity exist between what is provided in one local area and another.
3. Most adults working in primary schools will come into direct contact with children who have communication difficulties every day.
4. Speech, language and communication needs in primary school can seriously affect children's learning. For example, poor language predicts poor literacy skills and without the right help, between 50% and 90% of children with persistent communication needs go on to have reading difficulties. Vocabulary at age 5 is a very strong predictor of the qualifications achieved at school leaving age and beyond.
5. Many children with communication difficulties are withdrawn, which means they are less likely to start conversations, they play alone more and are less liked by others in their class. Others show significant behaviour difficulties, which can equally alienate their peers. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest children with speech, language and communication needs are more likely to be bullied.

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Young people's communication

Language and communication development carry on through the secondary years

1. Evidence suggests that young people want to develop good communication skills for life and readiness for the workplace. They need the ability to get their message across, work in teams and resolve conflict. Communication skills also help young people manage and regulate their emotions.
2. Children with speech, language and communication needs are significantly at risk of literacy difficulties. As children become literate, literacy and language development support each other, so young people with speech and language difficulties are doubly impaired. The reading skills of 5 year olds with good and poor oral language skills were followed up; at age 6 there was a gap of a few months in reading age. By the time these young people were 14, this gap had widened to a difference of 5 years in reading age.
3. A survey of two hundred young people in an inner city secondary school found that 75% of them had speech, language and communication problems that hampered relationships, behaviour and learning.
4. Only 6% of young people with speech, language and communication needs get five good GCSEs including English and Maths.
5. 60% of young offenders have speech, language and communication difficulties, but in only 5% of cases were they identified before the offending began. Many young people with behaviour difficulties have hidden communication difficulties. And there is evidence that undetected communication needs may put young people at greater risk of exclusion from school.

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