

# Supporting children with language difficulties

by Angela Owens

Language, including receptive and expressive language skills, is a key component of communication. 'Receptive language' refers to the process of receiving and understanding language, whereas 'expressive language' relates to the ability to communicate to others through speech or writing. Children can experience difficulties with expressive and/or receptive language, and these problems can have a profound effect on other areas of their learning and development.

Educators who work with young children who have language difficulties play an important role in supporting them to be included in everyday experiences, learning activities and interactions with others. Educators can also play a key role in implementing the strategies devised by other professionals to support and improve children's communication abilities in the child care setting.

## Why are communication skills important?

Being able to communicate effectively enables people to share thoughts and ideas, to build relationships and to develop their comprehension of their world. Language delays or difficulties can negatively affect all areas of a child's learning, and this in turn can lead to poor outcomes for children in the future. Children who experience difficulties in understanding or being understood may also experience anxiety and frustration and have low self-esteem. When left unsupported, these children may also display challenging behaviors as a result of their language difficulties.



### This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1-1.3, 3.1 and 3.6

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 4.2 and 5.1

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 4.1 and 4.3

As language plays such a fundamental role in children's social, emotional and academic wellbeing, it is crucial that any potential language development concerns be addressed quickly and effectively. Educators who identify possible problems with a child's language should provide feedback and sensitive guidance to assist families to seek further information from a relevant professional if they wish to do so.

## What can cause communication problems for young children?

Communication difficulties fall into two categories: speech disorders or impairments which affect a child's ability to speak; and language disorders or impairments, which affect a child's ability to understand and use language (Child and Youth Health, 2004).

Children can experience communication difficulties as the result of a range of issues including:

- Having a disability or syndrome such as a hearing or visual impairment, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or intellectual delay
- Having a physical condition or disability that affects nerve and muscle control such as cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy, or an acquired brain injury
- Experiencing neglect or lack of stimulation/ social interaction with others during early development.

## What is 'normal' language development?

*'Learning to understand and talk occurs gradually. Most children have learned basic talking and understanding skills by the ages of 3 to 3½ years. By the time they start school (around age 5 years), their speech will also have more formal structure, including full sentences and descriptive language. Opportunities to*

*practise talking and listening with adults and other children help children to develop their communication skills'* (Child and Youth Health, 2004).

As educators know, each child will develop and achieve milestones differently. However, there are general age ranges by which children can be expected to have developed, or begun developing certain skills, and educators have a responsibility to consult with families if they have concerns. While some families may disagree with the concerns raised or not be prepared to consider these, many families will appreciate educators' support and guidance to seek further information from a speech and language specialist. Some parents may also already have some concerns about their child's language development, but may be hesitant to raise their concerns for fear of being perceived as having unrealistic expectations of their child's development.

Ultimately, where there are concerns regarding a child's communication skills and their family is prepared to investigate this further, it is preferable to err on the side of caution. This will help ensure that any genuine issues are identified early and that intervention strategies are implemented to support the child and minimise the potential impact on other areas of their development and wellbeing.

### Strategies for working with children with language difficulties

The level and type of support that a child requires in child care will depend upon the nature of their language problem and the types of intervention strategies that have been planned by other professionals working with the child.

Different strategies may be used in conjunction with each other, and may be changed or adapted over time to meet the individual child's needs. Some common strategies used for supporting children with communication difficulties are outlined below.

#### Communication or Object Boards

A communication or object board assists someone who has difficulty expressing themselves verbally to use visual cues. These visuals can include symbols/drawings, photographs, words and/or phrases, real objects or a combination of all four. Visual symbols can be used to augment both expressive and receptive language for children. For example, to assist with receptive

language difficulties, an educator may use a simple sequence of pictures or symbols to explain daily routines such as toileting, meal times or hygiene. Clearly sequenced communication boards can also be used to assist children to participate in simple tasks such as art/craft or construction activities by breaking these activities down into visual, step-by-step processes.

Communication boards can also be used by children with language difficulties to help them to express their needs and take an active role in decision making. Educators may use a 'choice board' that depicts several activities to help children to choose what they would like to do by pointing to the corresponding picture or symbol. Choice boards may also consist of a simple 'yes' and 'no', allowing children to be proactive in advising educators of their preference. These may be used in situations such as at meal times when children are being asked to decide what and how much they would like to eat.

#### Signing

Signing, which is the use of hand signs to communicate, can assist with both expressive and receptive communication, either used on its own or to supplement verbal and/or visual communication. In Australia the most frequently used form of sign language is Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN), although Makaton, which is a form of keyword signing (rather than signing in full sentences), is also commonly used.

#### Using specific verbal language strategies when speaking with children

One of the key ways that educators can support children with language difficulties to engage in everyday routines and experiences is by using concise verbal language to communicate instructions and requests and for general conversations. Some considerations for effective verbal interactions include:

- Use 'first-then' statements to define the order of what is to happen. For example, "first eat lunch, then have a story", rather than "you can have a story after lunch", as the child may hear the key word sequence as meaning that the story will come first
- Avoid excessive, verbose explanations and the use of 'extra' words. For example, simply say to a child "don't climb on the chair because it's dangerous" rather than going into a complex explanation of what might happen as a result of climbing on the chair

- Break tasks down into simple one, two or three step instructions (depending on the child's skill level)
- Avoid interrupting children when they are having difficulty expressing themselves and avoid finishing sentences or thoughts for them – patience is essential
- When initiating a conversation with a child, for example “how are you today?”, give them plenty of time to answer, and avoid the temptation to answer for them, or to ask more questions to elicit a response
- Clearly demonstrate when you have understood what a child has said, and ensure that you respond to any requests promptly (even if your response is “no”)
- Even though using non-complex language is important, avoid speaking in overly simple ways which can be patronising, disrespectful and poor role modelling for the child.



in the support of the child. This will help to ensure that the child's progress and achievements are shared and that any problems are quickly identified. This in turn will assist everyone to implement support strategies consistently to meet the child's individual needs.

### Involving children in play and experiences that are interest-based

As for supporting all areas of children's development, a key strategy is to get to know the child and their specific strengths and areas of interests well, and to use these as a springboard to promote the development of their communication skills. All children learn and develop best when they can explore, discover and experiment in situations where they feel comfortable, happy and intrinsically motivated.

### Conclusion

Regardless of the strategies used, educators need to work collaboratively with families and, where relevant and possible, other professionals involved

The successful acquisition of both receptive and expressive communication skills underpins the overall development and current wellbeing of children as well as in their future lives. Educators can play a significant role not only in identifying potential issues with children's language development, but also in supporting children to develop their communication skills in the child care setting ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

### References and further reading

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