



Supporting Children's Language Development

This practice guidance provides information about how to support and understand children's language development

Supporting members to provide the highest standards of care and learning for children

This practice guidance has been developed for all professionals including childminders, nursery workers and nannies

This guide covers:

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2. Supporting language development in the Under 3s
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1. Why is supporting language development so important?

Language is important because it forms the foundations for interacting with other people – for communicating our needs, our thoughts and our experiences. From the moment of birth, babies are ready to communicate: they listen to and look at people and things in their environment and respond to what they hear and see. Babies from birth need a stimulating environment in which those who care for them respond sensitively to the different meanings of their cries, coos and gestures. This early ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally is the basis on which language is developed. A child's ability to develop language depends on being immersed in a rich environment of words, sounds, rhythm, and verbal and non-verbal expression from birth. ECAT (DfES, 2009)

Language development is central and an essential skill to other areas of children's lives and can impact on their lifelong learning, achievements and health and well-being.

Learning, we need to be able to understand what is being said to us in the learning environment and to ask questions.

- Social development, how people relate to each other socially.
- Emotional development, how children describe and understand their own and others emotions.
- Behaviour, understanding the rules of society and the setting.

How do we communicate?

Speech, language and communication are complex skills which interact greatly with each other.

Speech, which is how children use sounds to make words. So, articulating the sounds d-o-g and joining them together makes 'dog'. It also includes speaking clearly in a way that makes speech interesting and meaningful; speaking without hesitation or without repeating sounds or words.

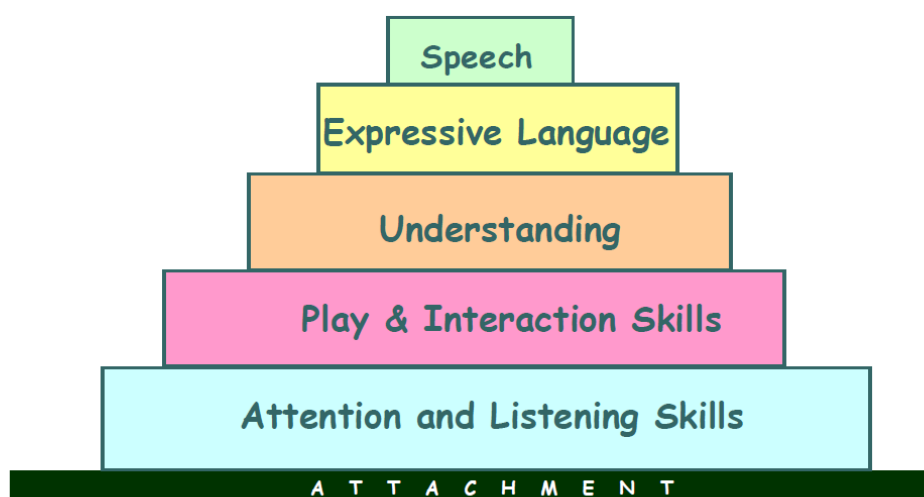
Language has structure and rules, which means that people can convey their message and be understood by others. Language includes knowing and choosing the right words to explain what you mean, joining words together into sentences, stories and conversations, using word endings (e.g., '-ed' for the past), grammar and different types of sentence (e.g., questions). It is also making sense of what people say.

Communication is how we use language with others. This can include non-verbal communication, for example body language, signing and facial expression, e.g., eye-contact, turn-taking etc. and how conversations work, for example how we use language or gestures in different ways for giving directions, asking for help etc.

As outlined by Dame Clare Tickell

“Children begin to develop language from birth, and their progress depends on warm and positive interactions in safe, stimulating environments. A flow of conversation that is responsive to a child’s interests and abilities is essential to their language and wider development. Children need opportunities to move and to explore their surroundings through all their senses, to talk with adults and to play with them. Without this a child’s development is likely to suffer, limiting their capacity to engage with new people and situations and to learn new skills” (2011).

● ● ● | Communication Pyramid



Communication Pyramid, Attention and Listening, Skills Play & Interaction Skills, Understanding Expressive Language Speech, Attachment. Every Child a Talker, Telford & Wrekin April 2009

Communication needs to be built on firm foundations. It is important to consider the above communication pyramid, noting the building blocks that are so important in supporting speech and language development, if any of these are missing or delayed ultimately speech will be affected.

There is a strong connection between children’s personal, social and emotional development and communication and language development. Research shows that in many cases that children that are identified with behavioural difficulties are also found to have communication difficulties. If you could not communicate your wishes, concerns and feelings or understand what is expected of you then you too may become disruptive!

If the children entering school with delayed vocabulary and communications skills do not get the support they need to improve this can then lead to significant difficulties with reading and writing.

2. The importance of supporting Language Development for the under 3s

- By 22 months – a child’s development can predict outcomes at age 26
- By 2 years – 75% of a child’s brain growth has occurred
- By 2 years – the experiences of the child physically affect the brain structure (I CAN, 2012)

The above points emphasise the importance of supporting language development at this important phase of children’s lives.

How can you support the language development of children under 2?

It is important that a key person is allocated to babies and toddlers, someone who can establish a bond with them, without this important connection communication will not be effective.

Sing, talk and use gestures with babies at every opportunity. This could include the child’s routine when changing their nappy, feeding them and whilst playing alongside them. Research has shown there are strong links between children’s use of gesture and the development of their language (Neaum, 2012).

You could consider introducing a baby signing programme within your setting, encouraging parents to attend classes, this will provide continuity between setting and home for the child. The use of simple language, naming objects, actions, intentions and feelings are important at this stage as is the use of rhyme and asking simple questions.

How do you talk to babies? Consider “motherese” or child directed speech. This approach is particularly effective. Motherese tends to use exaggerated intonation, includes an extended pitch range (usually higher), is slow with lengthened syllables, has longer pauses and includes object words at the beginning or end of sentences which are over emphasised.

Do you allow time for babies and toddlers to respond to interactions? It can take up to ten seconds for a baby or child to process information e.g., if you wave bye-bye, wait for a response, don’t just repeat bye-bye continually.



- Ensure that babies and toddlers are spoken to throughout the day, during both routine and play times.
- Encourage parents/carers to talk to their children about routines, tell stories, sing songs and nursery rhymes, and promote the use of role play and small world. You could encourage this through stay and play sessions, sharing of resources such as story sacks or through the use of home learning diaries promoting simple cheap ideas to try at home.

- Ensure you are trained and are aware of the importance of communication and that you provide a language rich environment where play is planned to promote communication; where children are given opportunities to be listened to and to be encouraged to listen and pay attention themselves.
- Reflect on your environment, is this an enabling environment for the children to communicate with other children and adults, is there a selection of books appropriate for the various ages and stages of the children; are books accessible; are there friendly spaces where children can go and talk to one another spending time alone or in small groups; do you provide a cosy corner and/or soft furnishings so that there is a cosy place to talk and listen to stories; are displays interesting and inspiring to promote conversation; consider noise levels, is the environment too noisy; how do you encourage children to communicate effectively with each other; do you use visual timetables to aid understanding?
- Books should be read and looked at with children throughout the day to meet their individual interests, this can be a child initiated or adult led activity and not just at planned times.
- Ensure that there is a good cycle of observation, assessment and planning in place and that it starts from the child, what can they do, what interests them and identifies how they learn best.
- Follow up any concerns that are identified through assessment, in England this could include the Early years foundation stage statutory frameworks requirement of the Progress check at two. With parental permission seek support from a Speech and Language Therapists or sign-post parents/carers to your local Speech and Language Therapist.
- Do you discuss the use of dummies/soothers with parents/carers and limit their use to sleep or quiet times. Whilst awake and content babies and toddlers need to practice using the muscles in their mouth to make speech sounds, this is not possible with a dummy in your mouth.

3. Supporting language development for over 3s

- By 4-years-old the difference in the number of words children may have heard is 19 million, some children will hear 45 million others 26 million
- A child's vocabulary at 5-years-old can predict their educational success and outcomes at age 30

(I CAN, 2012)

How can you support the language development of older children (3+) in your early years setting?

Most of the key points identified in section two will continue to be relevant here.

- A child will become a confident communicator if they have a key person who is particularly attuned to their needs and can interpret and respond to them.

- The key person system provides an adult who is particularly attuned to the individual child's needs and can interpret and respond to the child aiding them to become confident communicators.
- Ensuring that communication is a two-way process where children are actively listened to and time is given to allow them to articulate their ideas, wishes, thoughts, feeling and emotions is important.
- Build on conversations with children to engage in sustained shared thinking, using open ended questions that are appropriate for the child's understanding. Remember do not ask too many questions, use comments and questions to build conversations. Too often children are bombarded with too many questions e.g. 'What are those?', 'How many are there?', 'Where did you get them from?' and then they will switch off and not respond, a better approach would be to start off with a comment e.g. 'Those are lovely shells. Where did you get them from?'
- The use of role play, small world play and dramatic play can support language development particularly now, as at about two and a half years old, children will begin to role play familiar events or figures in their lives. At some point between 3 and 5 years children will engage in socio-dramatic play where they may act out themes, imitate people and play roles of characters. It is important to provide the props to enable children to do so. Consider your dramatic resources and props; do you change the role play areas indoors and outdoors to meet the interests and genders of the children? Boys will often engage in Super Hero play and outdoor activities, it is here that you will be able to observe their language development?
- Is there a good range of books including fantasy, factual, people, science, nature, animals and those that promote diversity and inclusion? Are books in good repair? Is your book area welcoming, well organised and away from the general hustle and bustle? Are there comfortable chairs/cushions to sit down on? Do you read to children, responding to child-initiated requests as well as adult led at set times?
- Engage with parents and include them in stay and play sessions where you promote activities that support language development and social interactions. You could have a 'Take home Bear' that visits the children's home, this adventure can be captured in photographs or comments within a story or learning journal. Research shows that the home learning environment has the most impact on children's learning and so it is important to work in partnership with parents and encourage them to provide language rich opportunities.
- You should model correct language to children, trying not to perpetually correct them and make them repeat words. Conversations with individual children are important where you can encourage children to extend their questions and answers. Puppets are a good resource to engage children in rich conversation especially about their feelings.
- Your setting could use the audits and tracking forms the from Every Child a Talker programme (DfES, 2009) to reflect on practice and on the environment to ensure continuous improvement within the setting and for each individual child.



Supporting Welsh Language development in Wales

All childcare and early years practitioners in Wales need to support children to develop Welsh language skills.

Language skills learned in one language should support the development of skills and knowledge in another. Using two languages within an activity can provide motivating and valuable experiences. Often, the children will use both languages simultaneously; for instance, in using the pattern '*dwi'n hoffi*' ('I like') the child may not know the name of the object in Welsh, but will use the English word, such as '*Dwi'n hoffi pineapple*'.

Please see PACEY's [Spotlight on Welsh language](#) development for more information in relation to Welsh language including links to training and further resources and activity ideas.

4. Causes of communication difficulty

Language delay and development can be affected by many causes, these can be broken down into three areas:

- Developmental, this could be linked to a general developmental delay or be specifically a speech and language delay.
- Physical, this could be hearing problems, structural differences such as cleft palate or tongue tie.
- Environmental, limited opportunities for communication or parents/carers lack of understanding that the child has issues with communication.

Other areas that you may like to research further are selective mutism, where children decide not to talk in certain situations, this may just occur at their childcare setting especially if they are feeling insecure, in more familiar and safe environments the child may communicate fully. There could be other reasons

for selective mutism such as a trauma in the child's life; with this in mind you would need to refer to other professionals for guidance.

If a child has English as a second language you may need to seek specialist advice to support you, this could be a speech and language therapist who may be able to sign-post you to services that will help.

Some ideas that you could consider might be

- Ensuring that you are aware of key phrases in the child's language, the child's parents or wider family may be able to help with this.
- When annotating displays and resources try to use a range of languages.
- Have a range of dual language books and posters available for all of the children.

Stammering (or stuttering)

Between the ages of two and five, one in twenty children will stammer, the stammer will come and go. This happens primarily because the child knows what he/she has to say but cannot find the words or organise them to do so quickly enough (McLachlan & Elks, 2005).

Tips to support a child who stammers

- Do not draw attention to the stammer
- Allow plenty of time for the child to respond, look at the child do not turn away so that he/she knows you are listening
- Slow down your speech
- Encourage turn taking when asking children questions, this will remove the pressure to rush with an answer before someone else replies first

6. References

DfES (2009) *Every Child A Talker*. Nottingham: DfES publications

Tickell, C. (2011) *The Early Years Foundations for Life, Health and Learning*. (DfE publications)

ICAN (2012) *The Early Language Development Programme*

Neaum, S. (2012) *Language and Literacy for the Early Years*. London. Sage

McLachlan, H. & Rowe, I (2005) *Elklan Lets talk with under fives*. Cornwall: Elklan

7. Resources - websites, reading materials and books

PACEY- [Spotlight on Welsh Language](#) Development

Every Child A Talker: Resources available from the Foundation Years web site
www.foundationyears.org.uk

ICAN www.ican.org.uk/earlytalk0-3

Talking Point www.talkingpoint.org.uk

AFASIC www.afasic.org.uk (This is a parent led organisation who support families who have children with speech and language impairments.

The British Stammering association www.stammering.org

The Communication Friendly Spaces Toolkit www.elizabethjarmantraining.co.uk Elizabeth Jarman has also published a range of books called a Place To Talk, these are available from Featherstone educational, with titles such as: - At My Childminders, At My Pack Away Pre-School, At My Children's Centre

Letters and Sounds available from the DfE web site

Dury, R. (2007) Young Bilingual learners at home and school. Staffordshire: Trentham Books

Mukherji, P. & O'Dea, T. (2000) Understanding Children's Language and Literacy. Cheltenham: StanleyThornes

Weitzman, E. & Greenberg,J. (2002) Learning Language and Loving It (2nd ed). Canada: Hanen

Nash, M., Lowe , J. & Leah, D. (2013) Supporting Early Language Development. Spirals for Babies and Toddlers. Abingdon: David Fulton

7. Frameworks and/or Legislation

England

Department for Education *Early years foundation stage statutory frameworks.*

Department for Education *Development Matters Non-statutory curriculum guidance for the early years foundation stage*

Wales

Welsh Government (2022) [Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings](#)

[Welsh Government \(2016\) National Minimum Standards for Regulated Child Care for children up to 12 years of age](#)

8. Support from PACEY

As a PACEY member you can get more help by visiting the website www.pacey.org.uk or by calling 0300 003 0005

PACEY is the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years. Formed in 1977, we are a charity dedicated to supporting everyone involved in childcare and early years to provide high quality services, information and advice to children, their families and carers. We want all children to experience high quality childcare and early education, helping them to have a bright future.

Across England and Wales we provide training, expert advice, help and peer support to practitioners and practical and impartial support and information for families and carers and those advising them. We represent the views and experiences of practitioners and champion their vital role in helping prepare children for a bright future.

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