

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service

Supporting a Child to Understand Language

Good understanding of language is vital for learning and thinking. To understand spoken language we have to -

- Understand word meanings including concepts.
- Understand sentence structure and grammar within and across sentences.
- Understand the context and apply world knowledge.
- Reason verbally e.g. inferences, jokes/puns, use of idioms etc.
- Understand non-verbal aspects of language e.g. sarcasm.

This means there are many areas in which children may be having difficulties. These aspects are developmental and children may be in KS2 before they can do the last two.

Strategies to support a child to understand language used in the classroom -

- Make sure child is attending and listening before speaking to them.
- Speak slowly to allow the child time to take in new information.
- Support what you say with something the child can see. Use gesture, pictures, objects, key words to support understanding - not just written information.
- Teach through practical experience and 'doing'.
- Use shorter sentences e.g. "Put the seeds in" "the water" "then it grows" instead of "I'm going to show you how to do some planting, you need to sprinkle the seeds around into the soil after you've made a hole"
- Pause between sentences allowing extra time for the child to process what was said and to respond. This could be as long as 5-10 seconds for some children.
- Recognise the effort the child uses in order to listen and understand. They will find it harder to do things which other children find easy.
- Use simple grammar e.g. "Have you finished your picture?" rather than "Has anyone not yet finished their picture?"
- Chunk information by giving one instruction at a time. Try not to overload the child with information and allow them to process what you have said.
- Ask the child to repeat in their own words what you have said/asked him to do.
- Repeat information, especially key words - don't presume children know even basic vocabulary.

- Use practical demonstration - show what you want the child to do, many children with language difficulties struggle to remember what is said.
- Link new information to what is known already e.g. saying “Yesterday we did shapes; we found circles like this shape. Today we are doing another shape...”
- Prepare the child for new information – pre-teach topic vocabulary/send topic webs home (see handout called “Teaching New Words”)
- Answering questions in class raises self- esteem, so prepare the child before the lesson: tell them that you will ask them a particular question in class. Practise the question and answer with the child in advance.
- At the start of a lesson give a clear over view of what is going to be covered. Focus attention on the important parts: “there are 3 things you really should remember”.
- Be clear about what the topic is and changes to the topic. “We were talking about Egypt. Now we are talking about Britain”.

Strategies to support a child to understand instructions -

- Use simple sentences that follow the order in which activities are to be carried out - Firstthen..... “
- Let the child carry out the instructions without having to wait.
- Give explicit instructions and avoid ambiguous language e.g. ‘write your sentence’ rather than ‘give this one a go ‘.

When the child is ready to move on with their comprehension skills -

- Gradually increase length of instructions.
- Gradually reduce the amount of visual support given.
- Teach the child to visualise i.e. picturing in their head what they have to do.
- Agree ways in which the child can signal when they need help.
- Teach self-help skills (see below).

Self-help strategies for older children -

- Look at the person speaking and think about the words. Draw, make notes, take pictures to help your memory. Try to make pictures in your head about what is being said.
- Put your hand up/signal if you do not understand or can’t remember.
- Ask your teacher to say it again or to speak more slowly.
- If you do not know a word ask “what does.....mean?”
- Have another go. It’s okay if you make a mistake.