

Supporting children in the early years

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) play an important role in supporting and promoting children's language development in the early years (age 0-5). SLTs assess, diagnose and develop programmes of care, including training of the wider workforce and parents and carers to improve outcomes for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). They provide advice and deliver a range of support to parents, children and practitioners throughout the early years in a variety of settings.



How do speech and language therapists help?

Speech and language therapists:

- Provide a range of high quality information to support local authorities, health services and the public with key messages regarding attachment and the importance of talking to your baby, which are crucial in supporting early language development.

- Train those working with and supporting children in their early years to recognise and respond appropriately to speech, language and communication needs. This can include delivering public health messages as part of early parenting support.
- Work with other agencies, for example, health visitors and settings to support screening of the general population.
- Provide speech and language therapy support in children's centres and other early education settings. SLTs who work in children's centres:
 - assess and support babies and children up to the age of five who need help with their speech and language skills
 - work with families to put communication skills in place early to try and prevent problems from developing as the child grows older
- Work directly with children to support them in their speech, language and communication development. This can include working with them and their family in their homes.
- May work indirectly by advising or supporting a setting to meet a child's individual needs, providing training and giving advice on how to provide a language rich environment to support language development.





Why communication matters

- **The importance of early intervention:** Communication provides the foundation for children's development. The ability to communicate shapes children and young people's educational outcomes and health and wellbeing. Early language development is crucial to the development of children's literacy skills, and is a key indicator of their educational success. Poor communication skills in childhood affect children and young people's life chances, are linked with social disadvantage, mental health, and long-term unemployment in adulthood.
- **Speech, language and communication as a public health issue:** early language development is a public health issue and is critical to school readiness, ensuring that children have the skills needed to access the curriculum when they start school.

Case study: speech, language and communication support and its impact

Stoke Speaks Out: Making communication 'everybody's business'

Stoke Speaks Out is a multi-agency initiative developed to tackle a high incidence of language delay identified in children in Stoke-on-Trent. Since the programme was set up in 2004, measures of children's language on entry to nursery in the City have been collected every three years, and over 4,500 practitioners have been trained on early attachment, child development and speech and language development.

Outcome

As a result of the project, between 2004 and 2010 the city saw a dramatic improvement in children's language development – the percentage of 3-4 year-olds starting nursery with language delay reduced from 64% in 2004 to 39% in 2010.

A return on investment analysis of Stoke Speaks Out, conducted by the New Economics Foundation, has demonstrated the contribution that the programme makes to improved school readiness for children at age 5, and improved educational attainment and prevention of offending amongst young people in the long-term. The study found that Stoke Speaks Out's work on school readiness provides a positive return on investment, and for every £1 invested in the programme £1.19 is created.²

► For more information, contact: info@rcslt.org

Who do speech and language therapists help?

Speech and language therapists support:

- **Children who have, or at risk of, early language delay** (not achieving expected levels of progress in the development of their communication skills). Poor communication skills are closely linked with social disadvantage, and in areas of high social deprivation in the UK up to 56% of children start school with language delay.¹
- **Children with speech, language and communication needs.** These may include difficulties with understanding verbal language, attention and listening skills, expressive language, vocabulary and word finding, speech sounds, fluency, and voice. These can be associated with other medical conditions (such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, cerebral palsy, learning disability, hearing impairment, and Down's syndrome). Speech, language and communication needs can also exist without being associated with other medical conditions (developmental language disorder).
- **Infants and children with feeding and swallowing difficulties** (dysphagia). Infants and children with neurodisability and those born prematurely are most likely to be at risk of dysphagia, but feeding difficulties can also occur in typically developing children. Speech and language therapists support safe eating and drinking, including through direct intervention with those with more complex needs, and supporting parents and carers to help infants and children to manage their mealtimes as safely as possible.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

¹ Law J, McBean K, Rush R (2011). Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage, *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 46(6), pp. 657-64. See also All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Speech and Language Difficulties (2013). The links between speech, language and communication needs and social disadvantage. www.rcslt.org/governments/docs/appg_report_feb_2013.

² NEF Consulting (2016). Stoke Speaks Out: Pilot Return on Investment (ROI).