Every Child a Talker

Helping children with speech and language delay: case studies and ideas to help

Social development and the development of communication are totally linked. To develop as successful communicators, children need *something to talk about, someone to talk with, and someone to listen to them*. Speech and language difficulties can arise because children do not have enough stimulation, or adults are not able to give children enough attention and interest. Children may have language difficulties for health reasons; e.g. 'glue ear', but often there are no clear reasons why children have unclear speech, or find it difficult to combine words to express their needs, feelings and ideas.

What we do know is that children with communication difficulties often have problems with social development too. They may need help to play and respond to other children appropriately, and adults may sometimes find their behaviour very challenging. That is not surprising, as it is incredibly frustrating not being able to make yourself understood.

But communication is not just about talking. Understanding language is vital too. Some children appear to talk very well: they have very clear speech and seem to talk about quite complicated subjects. But when we get to know the children, we find that in fact they do not understand very much of what we are saying, and that what they talk about is very repetitive. Children who have particular difficulties with understanding language often have problems with understanding *what language is for.* This can be due to a very specific problem with understanding the use of language. Many children who are later diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), may have this type of language difficulty, which can feature repeating back (echoing) what people say, without really understanding. (This is very different from *imitation*, which is a part of normal language development in young children.)

There are many children who have well-developed speech and language, but they have great difficulty with social development, or *challenging behaviour*. You could say that some children with challenging behaviour have a problem with communication. They have difficulty with expressing their needs and emotions, and this can show itself in aggression, difficulties with sharing, or being unable to take part in groups.

One aspect of communication that is often overlooked is how children behave *with adults.* An area that is not well understood is *attention-seeking behaviour*. This can be as challenging as when children are aggressive or disruptive. Attention seeking can be caused by not receiving enough attention from adults, or adults habitually responding to challenging behaviour. Children who are attention seeking can sometimes have very unclear boundaries at home and in the setting.

Finally we need to make sure that children who are *very quiet* are not overlooked. Extremely quiet children often talk well at home, but lacking in confidence in settings, and particularly when talking in groups.

Examples of children with communication needs

(Links in red are to areas of the Talk4Meaning website that explain ideas in more detail. When reading this document online, click on the link and you will be automatically directed to the relevant area.)

Jason is two years 11 months old, and has very unclear speech.

Jason has been in his pre school for three months. His mum and dad and big sister are the only people who really understand what he is saying. If Jason wants to play with a car, he says, “Me dat tar”. Whenever he says a word, he always pronounces it the same way. If you don’t understand what he says first time, then he might try again. If you don’t get it on his second try, he will sigh and walk away. Jason often cries when another child takes something from him, and he is always being reminded ‘not to snatch’ from other children. He prefers to be outside on the bikes, or playing with small cars on his own. Jason understands a lot more than he can say.

Jason has classic ‘delayed speech and language’. He is quite frustrated that he can’t make himself understood. He knows that he can’t communicate well with other children, so he takes things rather than ask for them. What can we do to help?

Jason needs to practice talking, and have lots of success at making himself understood. This will develop his confidence, and encourage him to talk more. As Jason’s mum and dad and big sister can understand what he says, the links with home will be very important. Every morning, ask his parents what he has been doing at home, and see if Jason can tell you about it in front of his parents. That way we will be able to talk with knowledge about something that has happened, and understand what Jason will say. This is hugely rewarding for children. It also helps you to ‘tune in’ to Jason’s way of talking.

Find out what Jason is interested in, and find books on this subject. Share the books with him. I find it is best to do this with other children, so that Jason is getting positive responses from children of the same age, with well-developed speech and language. (See ‘Sharing books’ and ‘supporting children with speech and language delay by sharing books’). There are many more things to do, but most importantly we need to make strong links with home.

One very important thing to find out is whether Jason hears properly. Otitis Media (also known as ‘Glue Ear’ is a common cause of speech and language delay, and many young children are prone to this condition. (See ‘Glue Ear 1’; ‘Glue Ear 2’; ‘Glue Ear 3’)

It will be a good idea to suggest a referral for Speech and Language Therapy. As part of this process, Jason may be given a hearing test. Also a Speech and Language Therapist can give advice on the type of activities that can help Jason at home and in his setting.

Luke is three and a half. He repeats a lot of what is said to him. He likes to talk to adults, and seems to ignore the other children, or tell adults when children are doing something wrong.

Luke is a real puzzle to the adults. Sometimes he seems to understand exactly what is being said to him, (e.g. "show me the green car"), but at other times he seems completely baffled and repeats back exactly what is said to him, (e.g. an adult asked him, "What did you do yesterday?" and Luke replied, "What did you do yesterday?") Luke also has quite a few particular interests and skills. He likes dinosaurs, and enjoys telling everyone what they are called. He has some particular fears as well, and in the setting he screams when the phone rings. He becomes very anxious whenever there is a new adult in the setting, or the routine changes.

It may very well be that Luke will be diagnosed with some degree of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It is not our job to make this diagnosis. However there are lots of things we can do to support Luke, and particularly with his understanding of language.

Not knowing what is going to happen next is one of the biggest causes of anxiety for children who need support with understanding. They may be very happy playing with their favourite activity, and are then asked to do something else; e.g. "wash your hands and get ready for lunch." Not understanding why they have to stop, and what will happen next, can lead to anxiety, which can then lead to distress, and possibly 'challenging behaviour' such as tantrums. All children need to know about their routine, but Luke in particular needs to have it explained in a way that doesn't involve too much language, and that he can *see*.

Taking photos of children in their daily routine, printing them off large, and displaying them in order as a 'visual timetable', is very helpful for all children. Talking about the display with all the children can be very reassuring, and will particularly help Luke develop a sense of security, so that he can begin to relax and learn. (See 'Supporting wellbeing and developing language: helping childen understand their day')

Links with home are very important. All children are experts about their own family, so find out as much as you can about who lives at home and Luke's favourite activities and toys. If possible, ask his parents to give you some photos about home and holidays, and make a book to share with Luke and other children. Some settings do this with all children, and display the books in the book area, where they often become the most read books in the space! Some settings make 'All About Me' boxes. They give each child a shoebox to take home, and parents and child decorate the box and fill it with toys and objects that the child can bring to the setting to talk about. (See 'Supporting wellbeing, language and settling in: 'Things I Like' boxes. Also see 'Making chatterboxes part 1' and 'Making chatterboxes part 2')

Children with communication difficulties related to understanding (and possibly ASD) will often need a lot of support, and particularly to help them relax and enjoy themselves when away from their parents. Parents will need support too. It is important to make sure that the setting has access to experienced support professionals, who can work with the parents and practitioners in the setting, so everyone is 'singing from the same hymn sheet'. Referral to Speech and Language Therapy is often the first course of action.

Evie is four years old. She seems to enjoy doing exactly the opposite of what she has been asked to do. She disrupts most activities by hitting children, knocking things over or even breaking toys. This is especially true when adults are involved in group activities. No one, and particularly her parents, is able to get her to do as she is told.

Evie has well developed speech and language, and understands what she is being asked to do. However she has developed quite severe *attention seeking behaviour*. It is easy to assume that children with this type of difficulty have been starved of adult attention, and as a result crave attention and get it by behaving badly. This may be true in some cases, but the majority of children have plenty of attention at home: it's just that they have somehow learned that by behaving in a negative way they can get a lot more attention.

Evie's parents may also have gradually slipped into a habit of responding very quickly and strongly to Evie's negative behaviour, and have got out of the habit of giving praise. Evie has learned that the more badly she behaves (and doing so in a public place can have maximum effect) the more attention she gets. Practitioners in settings can also find themselves responding in the same way, and this just confirms to Evie that the best way to get adult attention is to be disruptive.

This can often be one of the most difficult problems in social development to deal with. Dr Nigel Mellor, a national specialist in supporting children with attention seeking, is very clear that everyone involved with Evie will need to agree on a strategy. Professionals from outside the setting can also provide valuable advice and support.

Adult *consistency* needs to be at the centre of our approach to children who have attention seeking behaviour. This means that we all need to agree how we are going to talk and respond to Evie, and what we are going to accept as behaviour, what we are going to ignore, what we are going to not accept, and what we are going to praise (don't forget this last bit!) We will also need to work closely with Evie's parents. This is likely to be the part where outside support will be essential.
For an introduction to the nature of attention seeking, and what to do to support children like Evie, see 'Look at me!'

Zak is four. He has well developed speech and language, but he needs support to talk and share with other children. When an adult is talking with another child, he will make a beeline for the adult and immediately talk to her, almost pushing the other child out of the way in the process. In small groups he talks loudly and is almost literally 'in the adult's face' throughout the activity. He will not allow other children to talk.

Zak is a good talker, but he is not a good *communicator*. He has learned that if he forces his way into a conversation or activity, then he can get all the adult attention, at the expense of other children. In fact Zak is not interested in the needs of other children, as he is so intent on getting what he wants. Zak is behaving in a very *dominant* way. Unless Zak gets support, he will be likely to continue to behave in this way, and runs the risk of being very unpopular with other children, and with adults.

As with children who are attention seeking, the best way to support Zak is through everyone being *consistent*. This means that we all need to agree how we are going to talk and respond to him, and what we are going to accept as behaviour, what we are going to ignore, what we are going to not accept, and what we are going to praise (don't forget this last bit!)

I find it is helpful to be very clear in the way that we talk with all children, and especially those who dominate with their behaviour and language. If Zak pushes a child out of the way and tries to butt in when I am talking, I will say," I am talking to Zoë now. When I have finished, then I will talk to you." In order for this to work, I need to immediately talk to Zak once I have finished, even if he has walked away. I will be clear with Zak by saying, "OK Zak, I have finished talking to Zoë. Now it's your turn. What did you want to say?" It will be important to praise him too: perhaps by saying, "That's great the way you took turns there. It's not easy to wait your turn, and especially when you have got something interesting to say."

In the cut and thrust of a busy setting, it is not easy to remember to be consistent, but it can become a habit!

Hasreen is three and a half. She very rarely speaks in her pre school.

Many settings have at least one child who is very quiet: possibly only speaking in a quiet voice to adults, or sometimes not speaking at all. What is very perplexing for the adults is that most of these children speak very well at home. Sometimes this can be a question of *confidence*. Hasreen, for example, is quite reserved by nature: she doesn't like to try out new things unless she is absolutely sure she will get them right. Also she can be overwhelmed by big groups or being in a building with lots of noise.

Hasreen talks well at home, because she is surrounded by familiar people and things. She also has confidence as a speaker at home because she knows she will be listened to and given time to explain what she means. She speaks Punjabi at home, and is learning English in her pre school. Many children like Hasreen go through a 'silent phase' when they are learning a new language in pre-school or school. During this time they are listening carefully to the many words and new sounds, and working out what they all mean, and how they can be used.

Pre-school settings are busy places, and it can be a real challenge for adults to give quiet children the time that they need to share their ideas. This is particularly true when more confident or dominant children are competing for adults' attention.
Staff may also be concerned that Hasreen is showing signs of 'selective mutism'. This is a condition where children are able to talk at home, but totally unable to talk outside the home. This is often wrongly interpreted as the child *choosing* not to speak; when what is happening is that the child is developing a type of phobia or extreme fear of speaking in public.

Hasreen, and children like her, does not have selective mutism, but needs support to build her confidence as a speaker. Given time and continued success, she will develop this confidence.
(For a detailed account of selective mutism and positive ways to support, see 'Selective mutism'). For an in-depth article about quiet children, see 'Time to Chat'. For more information about quiet children see 'Supporting children who are quiet or lacking in confidence' and 'Supporting children who are quiet or lacking in confidence 2: making links with home'

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