

## Speech and Language Therapy Advice

### THE CHILD WITH COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES

Some kinds of speech and language problems - like those of children who don't talk clearly or in full sentences - are easy to spot in the classroom. In this leaflet we look at another type of problem, just as important but often harder for the teacher to pin down: the child who doesn't seem to understand, or remember what is said to him.

#### **WHY DO SOME CHILDREN FIND IT DIFFICULT TO LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND?**

Many children follow a normal course of language development but at a slightly slower rate than their peers - perhaps because of the quality of the language they have experienced in the past, or perhaps because of a family pattern of language delay. These children will tend to have problems in both understanding language and in expressing themselves.

Others may have fallen behind in their language because they have had a period of hearing loss; even minor, fluctuating losses caused by repeated ear infections or intermittent catarrh can affect the child's developing vocabulary and listening skills. Others again - a very small group - may have a very specific language disorder which means that they are more than just a bit late in understanding complicated language; they are actually developing differently and can have some quite big problems in making sense of what they hear.

#### **HOW WILL I KNOW IF A CHILD HAS DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING?**

- He may seem much worse at sitting still and concentrating in specifically listening situations - like parties, or assembly - than other children.
- He often seems to be one step behind the others when following your instructions - for example, in P E he has to watch the others before he knows what to do.
- He forgets messages and can't remember what you've asked him to do.
- He can't follow complicated sentences; try him on "Before you give me the key, give me the spoon." with a collection of four or five objects.
- He may not understand concepts of place and time; sentences like "Before we go out to play we'll have a story." or words like behind, between, above and below.
- He may not be able to answer "wh" questions - where, when, why, who?

## **DOES HE NEED OUTSIDE HELP?**

Any child who seems to be having problems like these should have his hearing checked - more than once if he has 'on -off' catarrh or ear trouble. The rare child, who is really struggling to understand speech (try him on instructions with 2, 3 or 4 important parts - "Bring me your book.", "Bring me your book and pencil.", "Bring me your book and your red pencil." should always see a Speech and Language Therapist - particularly if you have noticed that he sometimes says things at inappropriate times, or that are slightly off the point. Others, with less severe problems, are usually best helped by their teachers and families.

## **HOW CAN I HELP HIM COPE IN CLASS?**

Your first job with a child who has problems in understanding is simple; to make sure your messages are getting across. Try these tips:

- **GET HIS ATTENTION** - Before you speak to him, call him by name. Make sure he is standing still and looking, or give a signal like "Listen carefully."
- **GO UP CLOSE** - Go up to him to speak, rather than talk across the busy classroom.
- **SAY IT AGAIN** - Give him time to respond, and if necessary, repeat what you said in the same words - rephrasing may only confuse him. Use pictures, pointing and gesture to help get across the point.
- **BREAK IT DOWN** - Break down long and complicated questions or instructions into shorter units, for example, "When you've coloured the stars, cut them out and stick them on the black paper." could be simplified to "Colour the stars. Cut them out. Stick the stars on the black paper." Whilst "Show me the long red pencil." Could be changed to "Show me the pencils. Show me the long pencil. Now show me the long, red pencil."
- **PUT THE MAIN MESSAGE LAST** - Make sure the important parts of any message are at the end. Say "After the television programme, you're going straight to the hall so fetch your P E bag now." **NOT** "Fetch your P E bags; you'll need to take them with you to the hall straight after our television programme."
- **DON'T ASSUME HE'S UNDERSTOOD** - Make sure he can repeat any instructions you've given him, and watch him start any new task.
- **WATCH YOUR WORDS** - Always ask yourself if the child actually understands words you use; for example, in number work does he know what 'each side of', 'altogether', 'larger number', 'the number before....' mean?
- **LET HIS FRIENDS HELP** - When you are busy, appoint one of his friends to repeat instructions and if necessary demonstrate what he has to do.
- **BE PREPARED FOR BAD BEHAVIOUR** - if he has to spend a long time listening to language he can't understand. When you can, give him another

task during long assemblies or stories. When you can't, warn him he'll need to sit still and be ready with a small reward - like a gold star if he succeeds.

### **HOW CAN I HELP WITH HIS LANGUAGE BEHAVIOUR?**

- **Involve his parents, or volunteer helpers in school, or older children in reading aloud to him on a daily basis.** Choose materials from both fact and fiction, which increase slowly in complexity and decrease in the amount of information given by pictures.
- **Use published language and listening materials for cassette player and headphones, for the child to work on independently in class.** Some of the best materials around have been developed by a group of local teachers and are available for just a few pounds from the Bath and District Teachers' Centre, under the name 'Listening Games'.
- **Make your own tape recordings relating either to duplicated pictures, things to draw, or constructional materials** - always with a model you have previously drawn or made, so the child can check his success in following the tape.

Examples: "On your picture you will see some houses. Colour the first door red. Put a big number on it. Now find the largest window..... give it some frilly curtains...."

"Make a wall two bricks high out of green Lego bricks. At one end add a square tower of red bricks....."

"Draw first a blue circle, then a red square. Put two dots inside the square...."

- **Play listening games as a class or in small groups.** Give each child a different coloured cube, which they must hold up when they hear that colour mentioned in the story.

Get them to clap or tap when they hear a special word (or a word in a category like 'things to eat') in a story. Try the eligibility game: "Clap your hands if you've got red shoes on.", "Stand up if you're wearing grey socks."

Play pop songs, Can they work out the words as a group?

Have them listen to and tell you about all the sounds in a 30 second period, outside or in class.

Have the children spot wrong words in nursery rhymes and familiar stories.

- **Give the child extra time to learn new and important vocabulary.** He will need extra time to learn new words and be able to use them effectively. Setting up a Topic Box in which he collects pictures of words that he is trying to learn can be a way to help and monitor vocabulary development. Encourage him to look at his words at least twice a day and revisit old words to check that they have not been forgotten.
- **Work on understanding complex language.**

Play 'I Spy', riddles and treasure hunt. "I spy something small and sharp. We use it for sewing.", "I'm thinking of something we eat. It's red and round.", "Find me something that's small and shiny."

Put out sets of pictures, or a group of objects. Describe one without actually referring to it by name, and have the children guess which one you are talking about.

Work on concepts of time and place; ask the group, for example, what they did before coming to school, or hide a penny and give clues like "It's underneath something we read.", or "It's above your heads."

Work on the 'wh' questions; ask the group "Where do we ....., why do we....., who does....., what would you do if ....., when do we.....?"

Work on understanding negatives. "Show me the one that's not red.", "Which button is not done up?"

- **Play games to help the child remember.**

The 'Bring me' game ..... "Bring me something red and something tiny, bring me a book with a picture of an animal on the cover..." Use very simple instructions for the child with language problems, longer and more complicated ones for others in the group.

Put a collection of clothing on the table, say something like "I'll wear gloves, a hat and a red scarf.", and have a child repeat the sentence putting on appropriate clothing.

Put out a suitcase and a collection of things that could go in it, say "In my suitcase I put ....." with a list of objects. Ask a child to repeat the list and pack the case.

Older children can play similar games but without the props, as in "On my way to school I saw ....." or "At the toy shop I bought ....." with each child in turn repeating the list and adding one item.

Play the 'touch' game - point to a child who will touch something in the room then sit down. Point to another child who must touch what the previous child touched plus one more thing ..... and so on until someone forgets the sequence.

Play the 'gossip' game - each child whispers a message to the next and the last child says it out loud.