



## Inclusion Development Programme

Supporting children with speech, language and communication needs: Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage





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# Introduction

Meeting the individual needs of all children lies at the heart of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Every child deserves the best possible start in life, and support to fulfil their potential. A child's experience in the early years has a major impact on their future life chances. All Early Years providers must have and implement an effective policy for ensuring equality of opportunities and for supporting children with learning difficulties and disabilities. Practitioners should focus on each child's individual learning, development and care needs to ensure that the children and families with whom they work are fully included. Providing an inclusive setting that promotes equality of opportunity does not mean that all children should be treated the same, but that the unique skills and abilities of each child should be recognised and developed, and that 'inclusion is not optional: children have defined entitlements in this area and settings have legal responsibilities' (EYFS).

## What is the Inclusion Development Programme?

The Inclusion Development Programme (IDP) is part of the Government's strategy for children with special educational needs (SEN), outlined in 'Removing barriers to achievement: the Government's strategy for SEN' (DfES/0117/2004). This four-year programme (2008–2011) will provide support for leadership teams in schools and settings, and professional development materials for teachers and practitioners working with children with a range of special educational needs of all ages from early years through to secondary.

It aims to:

- build the independent capacity of schools and settings by helping teachers and practitioners to develop the skills needed for the early identification and support of children with speech, language and communication needs;
- strengthen leadership and strategic approaches to inclusion and achievement of children with speech, language and communication needs by providing guidance and support for special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), headteachers, leaders and managers.



## What is the focus of the Early Years strand?

The focus of this Early Years section of the IDP is supporting children with speech, language and communication needs.

It is relevant to all practitioners, teachers, managers and leaders working within the EYFS, with children from birth to the age of five. Whatever your role, you are encouraged to reflect on how you can apply the strategies described in these materials to the work you do in your setting.

Many schools and settings already benefit from the support of an early years advisory teacher (EYAT) and an area SENCO. In some local authorities these roles are carried out by the same person. The Government has signalled the need to align the role of the area SENCO with the work of early years advisory teachers in supporting quality improvement in early years settings (SSEYC Grant Letter 01/08/07). This reflects the importance of developing and maintaining fully inclusive practice where the unique skills and abilities of each child are recognised and developed as part of improving the quality of experience for all children. The IDP complements the work of EYATs and area SENCOs in helping settings improve quality and maintain inclusive practice. In due course the Department for Children, Schools and Families are likely to say more on how EYATs and area SENCOs can work together.

Many practitioners in all types of settings have growing concerns about children's speech, language and communication skills.

The 2006 ICAN report, 'The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication', indicated that in some areas more than 50% of children enter school with transient language or communication difficulties. 'Transient' means 'not lasting or remaining'. If these children get the right support they are likely to catch up and their needs will not





become permanent. These materials are designed to help practitioners ensure that their provision offers such children the 'right support'.

A much smaller proportion of children will have more severe needs that require ongoing support. All EYFS practitioners have a responsibility to identify children's needs and intervene with appropriate support as early as possible, to help children achieve the goals of 'Every Child Matters' and progress towards the Early Learning Goals. The importance of early language and communication skills for children's later achievements is now well documented (ICAN report 2006), and we need to provide support for children at this early stage so that they can achieve their full potential later on. Effective practice in the EYFS focuses on meeting children's individual needs and providing an inclusive setting for all children.

The EYFS sets the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. There is a requirement on all practitioners to provide for equality of opportunity.

Practitioners should focus on each child's individual learning, development and care needs by:

- removing or helping to overcome barriers for children where these already exist;
- being alert to the early signs of needs that could lead to later difficulties, and responding quickly and appropriately, involving other agencies as necessary;
- stretching and challenging all children.

*Statutory Framework for EYFS, p. 9*

Settings must implement the welfare requirements of the EYFS, which include legal requirements such as the SEN Code of Practice and the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. Further guidance on promoting disability equality is available in 'Implementing the Disability Discrimination Act in schools and early years settings' (0160-2006DOC-EN), and in 'Promoting Disability Equality in Schools' on the [teachernet.gov.uk](http://teachernet.gov.uk) website; you will find details of other legislation and guidance on the DVD.

## **Special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs)**

All early-education settings and childcare settings registered with Ofsted are required to have regard to the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2001). One requirement is that a setting should designate a person responsible for overseeing inclusive practice. This person is usually called a SENCO, but in some settings is known as an 'inclusion coordinator'. All members of the team, not just the SENCO, are responsible for ensuring that children's needs are met, but the SENCO is responsible for ensuring that the setting's SEN policy is fully implemented. The SENCO will work closely with key people, parents, leaders and managers to ensure that all children's needs are met. Local authorities provide additional support to settings with a team of area SENCOs. (These professionals are sometimes known by other names, such as 'inclusion officers')

More information on the roles of the SENCO and the area SENCO is available on the DVD.

## How to use these materials

This booklet and the interactive DVD should be used in a group with colleagues to form the basis of continuous professional development (CPD) sessions. The content of the DVD reflects the content of the booklet, giving video examples of real practice and activities that will promote further reflection and development. These materials will help you improve your provision for all children, and will particularly support you in developing more inclusive practice, especially for children with speech, language and communication needs.

It is the responsibility of leaders and managers to demonstrate their commitment to inclusive practice by ensuring that practitioners are given the necessary time to work through the materials as a group and the opportunity to carry out follow-up work in the setting. It is important that leaders and managers should also be involved in the CPD sessions. As practitioners working together through the materials, you will identify areas of your practice that are particularly successful and some that need further development. Practitioners will need the support of their leader or manager to plan and implement changes within the setting.



Childminders who work alone may consider joining, or starting, a local childminding network, or making links with other childminders or early years settings in their area. It will be very helpful to work through the materials as a group and to share your experiences with other practitioners. Children's Centres and local authority (LA) support teams may also help to facilitate CPD sessions with you.

LA consultants, EYATs and area SENCOs will find the materials useful as part of the LA training and support for inclusion. The materials will also be a valuable resource for trainers providing initial early years and childcare qualifications.

There are already many other sources of information about early speech, language and communication development. In this booklet and on the DVD, links are made to existing materials and organisations that provide relevant support. You are encouraged to use these to find out more and to deepen your understanding.

The EYFS package (booklets, posters, cards and CD, DfES 00012-2007PCK-EN) should be used alongside these materials. The principles and effective practice guidance set out in it are the basis for this document, and you should refer to them as you work through the materials: they provide a wealth of additional guidance on effective practice.

The EYFS establishes four overarching principles to inform our thinking and practice in order to meet all young children's entitlement to rich and engaging learning experiences. These materials are organised according to the four sections and principles of the EYFS:

These materials are organised according to the four sections of the EYFS:

- 'A unique child';
- 'Positive relationships';
- 'Enabling environments';
- 'Learning and development'.

At the end of each section you are asked to reflect on your practice as:

- a practitioner;
- a team;
- a SENCO;
- a leader or manager (this includes all senior management teams and management committees).

In some cases you may be fulfilling all these roles.

Throughout these materials, the term 'parent' is used to mean a parent or carer. The term 'setting' is used to describe any of the wide variety of providers delivering the EYFS, including schools, childminders, and other private, voluntary and independent providers.

## Requirements

*The booklet 'Practice Guidance for the EYFS' (page 39) sets out the requirements for communication, language and literacy:*

Children's learning and competence in communicating, speaking and listening, being read to and beginning to read and write must be supported and extended. They must be provided with opportunity and encouragement to use their skills in a range of situations and for a range of purposes, and be supported in developing the confidence and disposition to do so.

### The EYFS and speech, language and communication

The development and use of speech, language and communication are at the heart of young children's learning. Much teaching is delivered verbally; and children require good communication skills to make friends, to participate in group activities and to develop higher-level thinking skills. Children's later achievements are dependent on their ability to communicate effectively. It is vitally important to ensure that we do everything that we can to help all children to become skilful and confident communicators.

The EYFS tells us that from birth onwards children should be helped to develop:

- language for communication;
- language for thinking;
- linking of sounds and letters;
- reading;
- writing.

In order to progress to become competent readers and writers, children need to have developed good speech, language and communication skills. They need to be able to understand – to comprehend – language, as well as developing the skills to use language to express themselves. Children need to have well developed vocabularies, with a real depth of understanding of the meanings of words. Most children will do this using oral language, but some children may need to use augmentative methods of communication, such as signing.

Schools and settings should develop their own strategy for the development of speech, language and communication, in line with the EYFS guidance, and this strategy should be shared with parents. It should describe how the setting will support all children's communication development, as well as how it will identify and support children who are experiencing some difficulties with the development of their skills (referred to here as children with speech, language and communication needs), as well as describing how children with already identified needs will have those needs met. Leaders and managers should ensure that the strategy is implemented, and should lead their teams to constantly reflect on and review their practice.

Some children will have their speech, language and communication needs recognised for the first time by practitioners in the setting. Other children will start the setting with an already identified need, and may already be receiving support from other professionals. It is important that all the people involved work closely together to ensure a consistent

approach for the child and family. The Early Support Programme ([www.earlysupport.org.uk](http://www.earlysupport.org.uk)) facilitates the development of integrated support services for families and professionals. You will find Early Support materials referenced in many parts of the EYFS and more details about it in the 'Enabling environments' section of this document.

It is important to observe children closely and to listen carefully to them in different situations to ensure that you are clear about what their needs are. Some children who begin settings with an apparent delay in the development of their skills quickly progress as they experience the language rich activities of the setting. Other children may be shy or reserved and just take a while to develop their confidence. Some children, however, will need help to further develop their skills; they should be identified as early as possible and given appropriate support. You may find that with a focus on the development of their skills, they soon make progress. Don't be tempted to 'wait and see'. There is a 'window of opportunity': if a child's speech, language and communication are similar to those of their peers by the age of about five-and-a-half, their prospects are considerably better; however, children can sometimes require support at this early stage over a two-year period, so it's best to start now.

The 'A Unique Child' section of this document and the DVD will help you to observe and assess children's speech, language and communication development.

Many children with speech, language and communication needs will make good progress with the support that can be offered within an effective setting. A minority will need the support of a speech and language therapist (SLT) or other types of specialist support, such as from a service for children with a hearing impairment. These professionals will support you to provide suitable environments, experiences and activities for the children. You can find out more about their roles in the 'Enabling environments' section of this document.

## Why do some children have speech, language and communication needs?

There may be a variety of reasons why children experience difficulties or delay in their speech, language and communication development. Some possible causes are:

- ear infections – if a child has many ear infections, they may be unable to hear words, or hear distorted sounds, or find it confusing and tiring to focus on verbal communication;
- specific difficulties in using their oral muscles effectively, which may affect their speech – for example, if a child has cerebral palsy;
- difficulties that are passed down through families;
- problems during pregnancy or birth that affect children's developing brains and contribute to their speech and language difficulties as part of a wider developmental delay;
- a recognised syndrome or disorder that causes communication difficulties;
- a lack of stimulation and support to provide the rich language experiences necessary to develop their speech, language and communication skills.

For most children, there is no clear cause.



A practitioner asks:

*A child in my setting has lots of colds and intermittent hearing problems. Is that why his speech is delayed?*

Hearing loss is one factor that increases the risk of speech and language difficulties in children. Children with hearing difficulties are likely to hear less language from the world around them. They may therefore experience fewer models from which they can learn to understand and use language themselves. Listening and understanding may be difficult and tiring, and children with hearing loss may find it hard to 'tune in' and pay attention to sounds or pick out speech from background noises.

However, the effect of a child's hearing difficulty on their speech and language development is dependent upon a number of factors. These include the age of the child, the severity and frequency of the episodes of hearing loss, and whether there are other factors that compound the difficulty.

Never assume that a child's speech and language difficulties are solely due to hearing loss. Very often, a hearing difficulty is only one of a number of factors responsible for delayed communication development. It is also possible that the child is experiencing communication difficulties that are unrelated to their hearing problems. For these reasons, we cannot wait and assume that a child's speech and language problems will be resolved once their hearing has returned to normal. (For some children, this may not be until the age of seven or eight). All children with communication delay need special attention, and those with hearing difficulties are at greater risk of ongoing speech and language problems. All children with hearing loss need special attention to support communication development.

Help to make listening and learning language easier for them by following some simple guidelines:

- Position yourself face to face as you play and talk with them. This makes it easier for them to see when you are talking, and to shift their attention back and forth between their activity and your face. Being able to see your face also allows the child to use your facial expressions and lip patterns to help them understand your words.
- Make sure you have the child's attention each time you talk to them.
- Keep your language simple. Avoid long or complicated sentences when talking to the child.
- At group times, make sure the child is sitting where they can best see your face. (Make sure that the light is not behind you, otherwise your face will be in shadow and your mouth will be harder to see.)
- Use gestures alongside your speech to help the child understand important words.
- Be aware that background noise will affect the child's ability to hear what you are saying.
- Talk at a natural pace, not too fast or too slowly, and do not shout, as this can distort your lip patterns and is unpleasant for the child.
- If you are concerned about a child's hearing or speech and language development, discuss the matter with their parents as soon as possible. With their permission, it may be appropriate to seek specialist advice.

More information about hearing impairment and how to support children with hearing difficulties can be found on the websites of the Royal National Institute for Deaf People ([www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)) and of the National Deaf Children's Society ([www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk)). The latter's publication 'Deaf-friendly nurseries and pre-schools' gives much helpful advice.

## What do we mean by speech, language and communication?

Practitioners need to be familiar with the components of speech, language and communication in order to understand how children acquire language. You should be familiar with the particular meanings of the terms so that you are able to describe and record children's speech, communication and language development accurately and correctly.



*Speech* refers to the sound system of a language as well as how sounds are made in the mouth to form spoken words. All languages have different sound systems, and babies need to learn to 'tune in' to the sounds of the language that they hear around them. Some children will have well developed communication and language skills but have difficulty using the correct speech sounds.

*Language* is the structure in which words are used. The language system is made up of several components:

- grammar – how words can be combined to make sentences, and how words change to indicate things such as the past tense, for example 'I'm playing' changing to 'I played';
- vocabulary and semantics – vocabulary is the set of words that are used – children's earliest words are labels for familiar people, objects and animals, the things that are around them; as their language develops they begin to understand that words can have different and wider meanings and can be used in many different ways (semantics);
- pragmatics – the appropriate use of language in different situations, for example beginning to understand what a question is and that it requires an answer.

These skills are used in both the understanding and the production of words and sentences, and children may have difficulties in any of these areas.





*Communication* describes the different systems that we can use to pass on messages to other people. The information can be conveyed with words (spoken or written) or sounds. You can also communicate using pictures or symbols, or using non-verbal communication such as gestures (waving goodbye or nodding in agreement) or a signing system.

## What is meant by receptive and expressive language?

- 'Receptive' language is about understanding, or comprehending, the words and sentences that are used. As children develop, their ability to understand the language that they experience also develops. A young baby may be able to understand familiar and frequently-used words such as 'all gone' and the gesture of open hands that often accompanies it, but would struggle with more complex words such as 'big' and 'yesterday'. As they develop, most children become able to understand very complex language and communication. This process continues well into Key Stage 1 and beyond. Receptive language development is the foundation for all language and communication skills.
- 'Expressive' language is the use of words and sentences in agreed structures and forms. This also develops in stages: children become increasingly able to use their language and communication to convey their own thoughts, feelings and needs. When they are older, most children will be able to fully express themselves and make their needs and feelings understood.

Understanding these different terms will help you to detail children's development more accurately, particularly when you are talking with parents or other professionals. Describing a child's needs by saying 'he has a problem with these particular speech sounds' is much more helpful to everyone than saying 'we can't understand what he says'. As you work through these materials, you will find more information on assessing and describing children's levels of speech, language and communication.

## What is the impact of speech, language and communication needs?

The impact of speech, language and communication needs on children will vary according to the severity of the problems, and may affect some or all of the following areas:

- social and emotional development;
- making friends;
- learning appropriate behaviour skills;
- accessing play and learning opportunities;
- further development of language skills;
- development of skills in literacy, mathematics and other areas of the curriculum.

*Research by Rice and Wilcox (1995) outlines the reasons why language is important for young children in early years settings:*

- Failure to understand verbal instructions given by adults may be interpreted as misbehaviour. For example, a child who fails to understand the hidden clause in 'all of you who put your things away neatly and quickly can line up by the door' may immediately line up without putting things away first.
- Much teaching in school is conducted through verbal description and instruction, and failure to understand means that children are unable to store or use the information provided.
- Children with language delay or impairment have limited resources for demonstrating knowledge and explaining their reasoning. For example, children with limited vocabulary are less able to describe activities they have participated in.
- Oral language skills serve as a precursor to literacy skills.
- Language ability is central to the ability to establish friendships with other children. The development of social relations with peers is an important achievement of the early childhood years.

*Further information on language development can be found in 'Communication, Language and Literacy: Professional development resource' (DfES 00429-2007PCK-EN).*

Remember that some children need alternative or augmentative communication systems to help them develop good communication skills. Some children may use electronic aids or signing systems to communicate, as they may be unable to make themselves understood through speech.

It is important to recognise and understand the different aspects of speech, language and communication development, as this will help you to identify and assess children's progress and alert you to a child experiencing some difficulties. For example, you may work with a child who has well developed receptive language skills, appearing to understand what is being said to them, but has some difficulty finding the right words to express themselves. For these children, providing support to their expressive language by clear modelling of simple sentences would be very helpful. All these areas will be considered in more detail throughout this document and on the DVD.

In addition, The ICAN 'Talking Point' website ([www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)) provides much useful information.

# A unique child

## EYFS principle

Every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.

## Commitments

- 1.1.** Child Development: Babies and children develop in individual ways and at varying rates. Every area of development – physical, cognitive, linguistic, spiritual, social and emotional – is equally important.
- 1.2.** Inclusive Practice: The diversity of individuals and communities is valued and respected. No child or family is discriminated against.
- 1.3.** Keeping Safe: Young children are vulnerable. They develop resilience when their physical and psychological well-being is protected by adults.
- 1.4.** Health and Well-being: Children's health is an integral part of their emotional, mental, social, environmental and spiritual well-being and is supported by attention to these aspects.

## The development of speech, language and communication skills

Babies begin to communicate from birth, and are eager and ready to further their communication skills by interacting with caring, sensitive adults. From their first sounds, their first eye contact or their first attempts to copy mouth movements, babies and children are reaching out for some affirmation and encouragement from the people around them.

Practitioners need to remember that each child's journey towards being a skilful communicator will be different. Children will begin a setting with very different previous experiences; some will have well developed communication and language skills while others may already be experiencing some difficulties or delay. Some will start out with only limited language experiences. It is the responsibility of practitioners to make the best possible provision to meet the children's differing speech, language and communication needs.

Practitioners should be able to accurately describe the stage a child's speech, language and communication development has reached, track their progress, and identify issues as they arise. They need to understand the types of interaction, encouragement and learning opportunities that are appropriate for babies and children at different stages in

their development. Remember that young children are active learners, and that all areas of learning and development are interconnected and all play a part in the development of communication and language skills.

When practitioners have a good picture of each child's level of speech, language and communication skills, they can then reflect on whether the environment and the curriculum are meeting their needs. Having a thorough knowledge of speech, language and communication development, and using that alongside your knowledge of child development, your observations and the information you receive from parents, will help you to recognise, for example, the difference between a child who is shy or reserved and a child who is experiencing some difficulties or delay in their development.

A practitioner asks:

*Which children need to be referred to a speech and language therapist?*

A speech and language therapist can help you to support children with a wide range of speech, language and communication difficulties. After detailed discussions with parents, you should consider a referral where a child is delayed in any of the following areas:

- understanding language that is spoken to them;
- developing the range of speech sounds appropriate for their age;
- developing the use of words and sentences appropriate for their age.

In addition to those children who are falling behind in the course of 'typical' development, you should consider a referral for a child who is not following the usual patterns of development. For example:

- children who use language inappropriately, for example saying phrases that don't make sense in the context, or repeating learned chunks of language without any apparent meaning;
- children who find it unusually difficult to follow the rules or join in with conversation by looking, taking turns, sharing interest in a subject, and so on.

A practitioner asks:

*So what about children who stutter?*

Developmental stuttering (or normal non-fluency) is a feature of typically developing speech. It is quite normal for some children between two-and-a-half and five years of age to go through phases of hesitations and repetitions as they grapple with all of the challenges involved in developing their communication skills. They might hesitate during an utterance and say 'um' a lot, or they might repeat a sound or a word over and over as they prepare their turn in the conversation ('I – I – I – I got one of those at home'). For some children, however, this bumpiness can develop into a more persistent condition. You must discuss referral with the child's parent or carer in any of the following circumstances:

- the child is showing frustration or upset or is withdrawing from or avoiding conversation as a result of the non-fluency;
- the parent or carer is concerned or anxious about the child's speech;
- the non-fluency has continued for longer than six months (regardless of the parent or child's initial concern or lack thereof).

More information about stammering can be found on the British Stammering Association website ([www.stammering.org](http://www.stammering.org)).

When planning activities, consider what communication and language skills a child needs in order to benefit from them. Think about how you are presenting activities, and whether you take enough account of each child's unique needs. Is a large group for story time meeting the needs of the children who struggle to pay attention, listen and understand? Can they see the book and hear what is being said? Do you have their attention, or are they being distracted by other activities, or even by other members of staff clearing tables by their side? Are the children familiar with the vocabulary? Is the story too complicated? Are the children with more developed skills being challenged enough?

Practitioners should be able to recognise the different methods of communication that babies and children use as their skills develop. For example:

- Young children and babies use lots of non-verbal communication: pointing and making eye contact to show you the toy that they want, or arching and stiffening their whole body to demonstrate that they don't want to go in their pushchair.
- Some children rely heavily on visual prompts, and will need the support of a variety of methods of communication, into the reception year and sometimes beyond, to aid their understanding. For example, pictures, non-verbal communication, signing, photographs and visual timetables may help children's understanding.

Remember that providing an inclusive setting that promotes equality of opportunity does not mean that all children should be treated the same, but that the unique skills and abilities of each child should be recognised and developed, and that 'inclusion is not optional: children have defined entitlements in this area and settings have legal responsibilities' (EYFS).





The 'Development Matters' column of the 'Practice Guidance for the EYFS' identifies the developing knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes that children will need if they are to achieve the Early Learning Goals by the end of the EYFS. You should refer to the 'Communication for Language' strand to help you identify and track the progress children are making in speech, language and communication. The following advice refers to all areas of learning, including the development of speech, language and communication:

*It is important to note, however, that children will not necessarily progress sequentially through the stages. Some elements may appear to have been achieved very quickly, others will take much longer. As children move from one element to another, they take with them what they have already achieved, and continue to practise, refine and build on their previous development and learning.*

*Practice Guidance for the EYFS, p. 11*



A practitioner asks:

*At what age can a child be referred for speech and language therapy?*

There's no lower age limit for referring children for SLT. Therapists will see some children with complex needs from birth to support parents and carers in their role as facilitators of communication development and to assess and intervene when a young child is having difficulty with swallowing.

SLT services will vary, however, in the age at which they will accept referrals for delayed speech and language development. Children vary greatly in the age and rate at which they acquire spoken language. It is generally expected that children will say their first words by the time they are 16 months old, though a child's early attempts at a word might sound very different from the adult version. If a child is not attempting words at this time, it would be advisable to monitor their progress and to devote some time to finding out the best ways to support and motivate communication. It's important to note that the majority of these 'late talking' children will go on to develop age-appropriate language skills without specialist help.

As a general rule, children who are still not attempting to use spoken language after their second birthday should be considered for referral to SLT. It may still be appropriate to monitor communication development for a period before making a referral for a young child. Time should be allowed for new children to settle into the setting, so that they can develop the confidence needed to demonstrate their skills and so that you can implement strategies to support them and observe the outcome of these. If a child does not appear to be developing language within typical limits and does not progress with your help, you should discuss a referral to SLT with their parents.

If parents are very concerned about the child's communication, you should consider a referral. Parents should be aware that they may also self-refer via their GP.

You may also want to think about the child's hearing levels. Talk to parents, and if you or they have any concerns about the child's hearing you may want to suggest to them that they refer their child for a hearing check.

If in doubt, check with your local SLT team. They will be happy to advise you and should provide you with local guidelines for referral. Remember, you must get parental consent before you refer to the SLT services.

There is an increasing number of children entering EYFS settings for whom English is not the first language. Most of these children will already have well-developed communication and language skills in their home language, and need support in schools and settings to develop their skills in English. Practitioners should remember that 'bilingualism is an asset and the first language has a continuing and significant role in identity, learning and the acquisition of additional languages' (*Supporting children learning English as an additional language*, DCSF 00683-2007BKT-EN – use this booklet for much more guidance).

The DVD provides a range of activities to help practitioners gain a good insight into how speech, language and communication develops, and explains some of the terms that are used to describe children's difficulties. To find out more, you should look out for local training based on 'Communicating Matters' (DfES 02026-2006PCL-EN), which explores the development of speech, language and communication in detail.

Some very useful tips that apply to all children, and especially to those who struggle to communicate, are available on [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk) or through the ICAN DVDs 'Learning to Talk' or 'Chatter Matters'.

A practitioner asks:

*Is it true that sucking dummies and bottles can harm a child's speech and language development?*

Yes. Dummies and bottles can contribute to delayed communication development.

Babies and young children spend lots of time making sounds and exploring their own mouths and voices before they begin to use words. In doing so they are not only practising and developing the skills needed for speech, but they are also encouraging other people in the world to notice them and communicate with them. Children who suck dummies through the day make fewer sounds, gain less experience of using their voices, and hear less language from adults around them.

If toddlers are allowed to continue to suck a dummy and talk with it in their mouths, there is also a risk that the child will learn distorted patterns of speech because the teat prevents normal movements at the front of their mouth. These patterns may be difficult to change later on.

Although a dummy or bottle can be a source of comfort when a child is upset, and may form part of a child's sleep routine, parents should be encouraged to use it only at these times, and to phase out dummies and bottles as soon as possible. Policy in settings should reflect this.





## Reflecting on practice

Refer to the 'Reflecting on Practice' notes on the 'Principles into Practice' cards for 'A Unique Child' and the Effective Practice Guidance on the EYFS DVD, and consider these in relation to developing speech, language and communication skills.

Do you as a practitioner ...

- ... have a thorough knowledge of child development and the development of speech, language and communication?
- ... understand how children progress at different rates in communication and language?
- ... get a good picture of children's communication and language outside the setting?
- ... make time in your staff team to discuss children's levels of development?
- ... take account of the fact that some children will understand considerably more language than they use?
- ... recognise that some children who have a lot to say don't always understand everything that is said to them?
- ... know the difference between children who are shy or reserved and those who have speech, language and communication needs?
- ... recognise and support the different methods of communication that children use?
- ... think about the language skills that are involved in the activities you are providing and ensure that all children can access them?

Do you as a SENCO ...

- ... support other members of the team in understanding the development of speech, language and communication?
- ... understand the particular speech, language and communication needs of some children and how they can best be helped?

Do you as a leader or manager ...

- ... make the development of children's speech, language and communication skills a priority?
- ... have a thorough knowledge of this area yourself?
- ... ensure that the training and development plans for the setting include a requirement that all practitioners access training and development on speech, language and communication at a level appropriate to their professional needs and the needs of the setting?
- ... plan regular opportunities for practitioners to discuss children's levels of development and to plan support for children?
- ... review children's progress, including an analysis of the EYFS Profile results, reflect on that progress, and support practitioners in implementing necessary changes in the setting and in their own practice?
- ... have a policy on the use of dummies that is implemented sensitively, taking into account children's emotional needs?



# Positive relationships

## EYFS principle

Children learn to be strong and independent from a base of loving and secure relationships with parents and/or a key person.

## Commitments

- 2.1. Respecting Each Other:** Every interaction is based on caring professional relationships and respectful acknowledgement of the feelings of children and their families.
- 2.2. Parents as Partners:** Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning.
- 2.3. Supporting Learning:** Warm, trusting relationships with knowledgeable adults support children's learning more effectively than any amount of material resources.
- 2.4. Key Person:** A key person has special responsibilities for working with a small number of children, giving them the reassurance to feel safe and cared for and building relationships with their parents.

When working in an early years setting you are communicating for a variety of purposes and in many different ways. You will perhaps chat informally with colleagues as you set up for the day's activities, relating personal stories; and you will greet parents and children using verbal communication and a range of non-verbal signs such as smiles to welcome them into the setting. Throughout the session, you will be speaking and listening to the children, and perhaps using augmentative methods of communication, such as visual cues or a signing system. By communicating in a variety of ways, you will be building up those professional relationships with parents, colleagues and children that are so important to effective practice.

## Parents as partners

The setting, and the ways in which practitioners interact with children, will play a significant part in the development of speech, language and communication. Parents have an even bigger role to play. Parents experience and support their children's communication within the home, with their family and in the wider world, in situations very different from those provided by a setting.



Research evidence (e.g. Biemiller, 2003) tells us that, particularly before the age of seven, children's vocabulary growth is largely determined by parental practices. Children mainly use words that parents and other adults use with them in their conversations. Children acquire larger vocabularies when their parents use more words.

You may be able to think of some examples of how this affects children's development. You may have come across a young child who is fascinated by dinosaurs. This interest has been fostered by parents who have shared books about dinosaurs and talked about the features of different dinosaurs and repeated and reinforced the names. Consequently the child may know more dinosaur names than you do. They are also able to spot and explain the differences between them in a picture book, again using the language and vocabulary they have heard.

In 'Learning and development' there is more information about how practitioners can help develop children's vocabulary and how important this is to their later academic success.

Practitioners need to make positive, professional relationships with parents. There should be a two-way flow of knowledge and information between parents and practitioners about children's speech, language and communication development. For example, a setting needs to know the words or gestures that a child uses at home, and parents will appreciate being told about the rhymes and songs that their child enjoys in the setting so that they can repeat them at home. You should be celebrating each child's successes with parents, being enthusiastic and sharing the high aspirations you have for children's progress. Parents should be confidently contributing to their child's learning and development record and being kept well informed about their child's progress.



Practitioners need to demonstrate to parents that their contributions are valued. For example, think carefully about how you would respond, both verbally and non-verbally, to a parent who tells you that their child knows all the words to 'The Wheels on the Bus' when you know that in the setting the child doesn't join in at all. Do you think 'I'm not sure that's true' while saying to the parent 'oh yes' in a noncommittal way, or do you ask them what other rhymes the child likes to sing, make a note of them and then reflect on what may be inhibiting the child from singing in the setting?

An effective setting should be sharing its good practice with parents, and also indicating to them where they can receive extra support or advice about children's speech, language and communication development. Most children's centres provide support groups or training for parents.

Websites such as [www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk](http://www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk) and [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk) provide useful information for parents of under-threes.

A good, open, professional relationship with parents will make it easier for you to discuss any concerns you may have about their child's progress and make it easier for them to share things with you.

A practitioner asks:

*I have concerns about a child's communication development, but the child's parents insist there isn't a problem. What can I do now?*

If you develop good relationships with parents, and share observations and assessments with them, they should be used to discussing their child's progress with you and concerns can easily be shared in a sensitive way. When discussing concerns with parents, always remember to relate exactly what you have observed. For example, you may have noticed that Laura is swapping some sounds around and uses one sound for another, saying 'tat' instead of 'cat'; ask if they have noticed her doing that with any other sounds. This is much clearer to parents than saying 'I think Laura has speech difficulties'.

It might help to reassure parents that speech, language and communication difficulties are common among children, and that many children, if given some extra support, make very good progress. Point out, also, that early identification and extra support can sometimes prevent children from having difficulties later on with things such as talking, listening, literacy and making friends.

You may have reached the stage, after careful consideration, where you feel that a referral to SLT should be considered. Sometimes, for a range of reasons, parents may not be happy about a referral being made. If a parent refuses to consent to referral despite your efforts and you continue to have concerns, you should note this. Carry on monitoring the child's development, recording their response to any support strategies you have put in place, and present the parents with regular opportunities to discuss progress and reconsider their decision in the light of new information. Remember that families may be dealing with any number of domestic issues at the time you first raise your concern. Circumstances that prevented them from acting then may be resolved at your next meeting, making the parents more likely to engage with you this time around.

It is important, when working with children who have speech, language and communication needs, that the family and the setting work together, planning the support that each can offer and providing consistency for the child. Imagine how confusing it would be for a child to be using one gesture, sign or sound for something at home and then being expected to use a different one in the setting.

The setting-based SENCO should be working with practitioners, particularly key workers, and parents to coordinate this consistent approach, as specified in the *SEN Code of Practice* (DfES 2001).

### **Are you a skilful communicator?**

Research has shown consistently that if practitioners could become more aware of how their own language influences children's communication, then this change would have a greater impact on children's language than anything else. It can be hard to look from a distance at how we use language, especially in a busy setting where so much language is spontaneous and disappears almost instantly. That is why it is so important to continuously reflect on how we listen and respond to children in settings.





As a practitioner, you will be constantly speaking and listening to the children, and perhaps using augmentative methods of communication such as a signing system. You will communicate in writing, making notes on observations or in parents' daily diaries, and you will be reading and sharing books with children.

All practitioners need to have a good knowledge of how children's speech, language and communication skills develop, and must be able to support that development, but they also need to consider the skills they need to develop in order to do so. Are you a skilful communicator?

'Warm, trusting relationships with knowledgeable adults support children's learning more effectively than any amount of resources' (EYFS). This statement is particularly true in the successful development of speech, language and communication.

A knowledgeable adult is one who has reflected on and developed their own skills as a communicator and has an understanding of the ways in which children acquire speech, language and communication. The adult should also be aware of the best strategies to use to support this development. They also understand the significance of the strong link between children's social and emotional skills and communication skills.

A skilful communicator will think about the following strategies and approaches to their work with children. Adopting these approaches supports all children. Those with speech, language and communication needs will particularly benefit. You should reflect on these suggestions and consider how well you put them into practice with the children you work with, in relation to their developmental stages.

## Do you model and promote good listening skills?

Think about how adults listen. What do adults do when they try to pick up sounds or words – for example, when trying to work out the exact words in a song we want to learn, or to write down a telephone number someone has left on an answerphone? We concentrate carefully, block out background noise, slow the recording down if possible, take a moment or two to listen very carefully, and sometimes get physically closer to the source of the sound. If we want to reproduce unfamiliar sounds, as when we are learning another language, we listen to and repeat the sounds many times until we become confident with them.

Adults take these listening and communication skills for granted, having developed them over many years. However, practitioners need to think about the strategies and activities they can provide to help children develop their skills.

When working with children, it is important to model good listening skills for them, and to help them to develop good listening behaviours. Look at the children who are talking to you, actively listen to what they have to say, and help them to become good listeners. This is easier in a quiet environment, and it can help to use visual cues, such as pictures or photographs. Use specific words, signs or symbols to indicate to children that you want them to 'listen'. It may be enough to get into a habit of emphasising the word 'listen'; sometimes adults cup their hand around their ear or point to their ears. Often we say 'sh' with our finger on our lips as a signal that children should be quiet.



When young children are engrossed in activities, it is sometimes difficult for them to listen to instructions at the same time. It is helpful to say their name first, to gain their attention: 'Karim, it's time for a story now' rather than 'It's time for a story now, Karim'. You could also gain their attention by gently touching them on the arm so that they turn to look at you.

Children using augmentative support for communication development, such as a signing system, also need to be reminded to look carefully and pay attention to the signs being used. Position yourself carefully so that the child can see you clearly. Remember not to have the light behind you, as the child will then only see the shadow that you cast, rather than being able to see your face and hands clearly.

Remember that you need to acknowledge and accept non-verbal communication from all children, to show them that you are 'listening' to their communication.

Children are listening, repeating and imitating words and sounds all the time during their everyday life and play. We need to provide them with opportunities to listen carefully to all sounds, and in particular those that make up speech and language. This will help them to discriminate between speech sounds, and eventually to recognise that certain letter shapes are associated with certain sounds (grapheme–phoneme correspondence). Phase One of 'Letters and Sounds' (DfES 00281-2007FLR-EN) gives much more detailed guidance on developing children's phonological awareness.

As you are developing the children's listening skills and observing them carefully, you will be able to identify children who are having difficulty hearing, producing or discriminating between sounds, and to take appropriate action. By observing (see 'Look, Listen and Note' in 'Practice Guidance for the EYFS'), you will also be able to plan for all children's next steps in learning.



## Do you give children time and space?

Practitioners need to give children time to respond to questions, or to have their turn in a conversation, and should recognise that 'waiting time' is constructive. It allows children to think about what has been said, to gather their thoughts and to frame their reply. Some children with speech, language and communication needs may need more 'thinking time' to process information and to put together a response. Practitioners have to become comfortable with the children's silences while they think about what has been said and what they should say in reply. Pauses and hesitations are a natural part of everyone's speech. Once children learn that they have freedom to comment in their own time, most will take advantage of the opportunity.

## Do you provide the correct forms of words sensitively rather than correcting children directly?

For example, a child may say 'I rided my bike in the park', and the adult would respond 'oh, you rode your bike in the park'. This is an example of modelling the correct form rather than just correcting the word, so that the child can understand the whole context. Do not correct children and ask them to repeat the word again: this is not helpful to the child, as the word is out of context and constant 'failure' to say words correctly may make them reluctant to try out their language with you and could undermine their self-confidence.

## Do you 'recast' when talking with children?

This means repeating (with corrections) what children have said, and then extending it by adding one or two words. For example, the child might say 'I rided my bike', and the adult replies immediately 'yes, you rode your bike down the track'.

By doing this you are providing a model of the correct form of the language and then extending it and introducing vocabulary, but without changing the meaning. You are also providing an acknowledgment to the child that you are listening and are interested in what they are saying. We do this frequently with babies, where it also works well. They might say 'mmmmum' and we reply 'yes, it's mummy'.

## Do you adapt your language to the children's needs?

When giving instructions, are you thinking about the children who may have difficulty understanding a lot of pieces of information being given at once? For example, a practitioner might say: 'when we have finished snack and tidied up, we will put our raincoats and wellies on, because its raining and we don't want to get wet when we go outside'. This is a complex set of instructions made up of several pieces of information. Think about whether all the children are picking up and remembering all that information, particularly if there are no visual clues for them. It is often better to speak in shorter sentences, breaking down complex instructions into manageable chunks and allowing children time to internalise and process the information.

A practitioner asks:

*A child in my care seems to be having difficulty following spoken instructions. What can I do to help?*

The child might need you to break your language down into smaller chunks that are easier to understand. Try using short phrases and giving just one piece of information at a time.

Slowing down and stressing the most important words in your speech will help them to process language more easily. Try to use gestures and objects or pictures alongside important words, to support their understanding. You may also have a signing system in your setting that could be helpful in supporting children's understanding of language.

Be aware when giving whole-group instructions. The child might benefit from sitting at the front of the group and facing you, so that they can take information from your gestures and facial expressions, or you might need to give them the instruction individually.

Make sure you have the child's attention each time you talk to them. Say their name and touch them on the arm to ensure they are listening and looking at you before you speak.

Support story and group times with props, photographs or pictures.



## Do you ask open questions?

Many types of questions that are commonly asked of children, such as 'how many?' or 'what colour?' questions, only require one-word answers. If used too often, these 'closed' questions can turn conversations into interrogations. Try to ask open questions that require children to think more about their response. (Remember to give them time to answer.) For example: 'what do you think ...?', 'what if ...?', or 'tell me how ...'. However, practitioners should be aware that children with delayed language often find it very difficult to respond to any sort of questions. To begin with, they are likely to find the structure of closed questions supportive, so that they can practise giving an appropriate response. As they develop their vocabulary and length of utterance (the number of words they can put together), more open questions can be asked of them. The best questions are always those for which the answer is not already known – by either the practitioner or the child.

## Do you value non-verbal communication?

When we are working with babies, we value their non-verbal skills: for example, we become quite excited the first time they wave goodbye independently after our verbal prompts. As children get older, they still rely heavily on non-verbal communication, and it is important that adults value and acknowledge this. Remember that children will be reading your non-verbal communication too. They will pick up on whether or not you are really listening to them, and whether you are interested in what they are saying or communicating.





A practitioner asks:

*I have noticed that one of the children in my setting is very quiet and says very little. His parents tell me that he talks a lot at home. How can I encourage him to do so here?*

Although some children are reluctant to talk when they first come into a setting, it's highly unlikely that they are not making any attempts to communicate. A good relationship with the parents will enable you to find out what the child is talking about at home and what kind and level of language they are using.

In the setting, listen and observe closely to see what the child does to show what they want and what they are interested in; then respond positively, using the kind of language the child would be likely to use, rather than questions. For example:

- If they bring you things to look at: 'Wow, you found a shell.'
- If they come to you or look at you when they are stuck: 'You need help with your buttons?'
- If they point to things that interest them: 'It's a worm. You can see a worm.'
- If they use body movements and facial expressions to say how they feel: 'Yuk, you don't like that soup.'

Avoid putting pressure on the child to speak, especially in group times. In groups times, instead of asking open questions, you might begin to encourage participation by asking for a yes-or-no response, or by giving the child a choice of answers ('did you use paint or crayon?'). Respond positively to any communication the child offers, even if it is just a nod or a shake of the head.

You might ask the parent to bring in an object of interest or photographs from home so that the child has something familiar to talk about. Ask the parent for some background information about the object so that you can support the child if they get really stuck.

It's important for all children to have a genuine reason to want to communicate, but for a child who needs extra encouragement we must take care not to try and second-guess their needs. By offering help or making choices for children, we are denying them the opportunity to have a go at requesting for themselves. When you see a child struggling with a task, position yourself close by and wait for them to signal to you that they need help. Where choices are available, let the child make them, even when you know what their preference will be (for example, 'would you like apple or pear?' or 'shall we play indoors or outside?').

## Do you know how to communicate with a child using an augmentative method of communication?

Some children with speech, language and communication needs will use an augmentative method of communication, such as signing or using symbols, either to support their emerging speech and language skills or as their principal method of communication.

There are a variety of signing or symbol systems, and a decision will be made by the family and by speech and language therapists and other professionals as to which system best meets the needs of the individual child.

If a child is using signs and symbols to support their communication, it is important that everyone in contact with them has some knowledge of the system. The practitioners most in contact with them should be as proficient as possible, and other members of staff, for example midday supervisors, should know at least some key signs to enable them to communicate with the child.

It is also important that all the children in the setting know some signs as well, so that they can use them to communicate with the child in their play.

## Do you consider the needs of children learning English as an additional language?

Children learning English need plenty of opportunities to listen to spoken language in context, so that they become familiar with how English sounds are made. The strategies that you should be providing for all children – visual clues, time to respond, non-verbal communication, and so on – will also support children with English as an additional language (EAL).

It is important that such children should continue to develop skills in their home language by continuing to use it with their family.

A practitioner asks:

*A child with a non-English speaking family has started in my setting and is not yet using any spoken language. When should I expect him to attempt words?*

It is not unusual for any child to be silent for a period after entering a setting and being surrounded by an unfamiliar language and people who don't share their own vocabulary. The child learning English will need time to tune in and begin to develop an understanding of English words, and more time still to consolidate this understanding and build the confidence needed to use English words. From first being exposed to English, it is estimated that it may take up to two years for a child learning English to develop age-appropriate conversational fluency.

Children learning English as an additional language should not be confused with those having special educational needs, and most of them learn English without the need for any specialist help. However, bilingual children are no less likely than monolingual children to have speech, language and communication needs, in their first and any subsequent languages. Check with parents and carers that they are happy with the child's development of the first language. If not, a referral to SLT should be considered, but it will be important to make use of the interpreter services available in your LA.

Comprehensive guidance on working with children learning EAL can be found in 'Supporting children learning English as an additional language: Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage' (DCSF 00683-2007BKT-EN).

## Do you ask colleagues to observe you and then discuss your communication skills in order to improve your practice?

Although peer observation may seem daunting at first, it is a very useful way of reflecting on your skills. In some settings, a video or tape recording is made of a practitioner working with the children, and the practitioner can observe their own skills and then discuss them with a colleague. It is a very good way of making sure that you are, for example, asking open questions or giving children time to respond before you answer for them. Practitioners are often surprised at what they find out about themselves. Make sure that you have a chance to give and receive positive feedback about your interactions with children. Picking three things that are good and one area that needs development will help to boost everyone's confidence as well as highlighting an aspect to change.



## Reflecting on practice

Refer to the 'Reflecting on Practice' notes on the 'Principles into Practice' cards for 'Positive relationships' and the Effective Practice Guidance on the EYFS DVD, and consider these in relation to developing speech, language and communication skills.

Do you as a practitioner ...

- ... reflect on the communication methods that you use with parents and ensure that they are appropriate?
- ... discuss children's speech, language and communication skills with parents?
- ... value and use the information that parents contribute to their child's learning record?
- ... know which children in your group are attending other settings or receiving support to develop their speech, language and communication skills from other professionals?
- ... know which language children speak at home, and how to provide support to children learning EAL?
- ... demonstrate good listening skills, and support children to develop their own listening skills?
- ... use specific words, signs or symbols to indicate to children that you want them to listen?
- ... provide opportunities for children to listen carefully to the sounds around them so that they can discriminate between them?
- ... listen carefully to children to identify those who are having difficulty hearing, producing or discriminating between speech sounds, and take appropriate action?
- ... give children time to respond to questions or have their turn in a conversation?
- ... provide the correct form of words sensitively rather than directly correcting children?
- ... recast (repeat) what children have said and extend the language?
- ... adapt your language to meet the children's needs?
- ... ask open questions?
- ... value and acknowledge children's non-verbal communications and reflect on your own non-verbal communication skills?
- ... know how to communicate with a child using an augmentative method of communication?
- ... reflect on your own communication and language behaviours with the help of colleagues?

Do you as a SENCO ...

- ... work with practitioners and parents to coordinate a consistent approach to a child's learning at home and in the setting, and when necessary between settings?

Do you as a leader or manager ...

- ... reflect on and review the setting's relationship with parents, and take into account parents' feedback?
- ... ensure that there is an effective two-way communication system between practitioners (often a 'key person') and parents?
- ... know where parents can go in their local area to attend support groups or courses on speech, language and communication development, and share this information with parents?
- ... make links with other settings, and share information about children who attend more than one setting?
- ... ensure that systems are in place to enable practitioners to reflect on and develop their own communication skills – for example, training plans, peer observations, and timetables and routines that support effective practice?
- ... provide time and support for the SENCO to carry out their role?



# Enabling environments

## EYFS principle

The environment plays a key role in supporting and extending children's development and learning.

## Commitments

- 3.1.** Observation, Assessment and Planning: Babies and children are individuals first, each with a unique profile of abilities. Schedules and routines should flow with the child's needs. All planning starts with observing children in order to understand and consider their current interests, development and learning.
- 3.2.** Supporting Every Child: The environment supports every child's learning through planned experiences and activities that are challenging but achievable.
- 3.3.** The Learning Environment: A rich and varied environment supports children's learning and development. It gives them confidence to explore and learn in secure and safe, yet challenging, indoor and outdoor spaces.
- 3.4.** The Wider Context: Working in partnership with other settings, other professionals and with individuals and groups in the community supports children's development and progress towards the outcomes of 'Every Child Matters': being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being.

## Observation and assessment

In effective settings, practitioners observe, assess and analyse children's progress regularly. They then use these observations and assessments to recognise children's interests, identify next steps in learning, and plan exciting and motivating experiences for each child. As part of this process, practitioners should be systematically observing and assessing children's speech, language and communication, and planning to meet their individual needs. Settings need to think of effective ways of observing and assessing children's development, for example, sensitively tape-recording children's speech and language. The recordings can then be analysed, and if, for example, a child is having difficulty with some speech sounds, practitioners will be able to identify which sounds the child is having difficulty with.

Use the knowledge and information that you gained from the 'A Unique Child' section of this guidance and the DVD to help inform your assessment of each child.

'Creating the Picture' (DCSF 00283-2007DWO-EN-01) gives more detailed information on observation, assessment and record-keeping. This is only now available at [www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/foundation\\_stage/creating\\_picture](http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/foundation_stage/creating_picture).

You can also refer to the EYFS.

'Communicating Matters' (DfES 02026-2006PCL-EN), a training course that supports practitioners' understanding of children's early language and communication, includes tasks that help to develop observation and assessment skills. Practitioners should contact their LA to find out about local training.

## The learning environment

Practitioners need to reflect on the environment that they are providing and consider how it impacts on children's learning.

When thinking about the environment, consider:

- the physical environment, both indoors and outdoors;
- the conditions for learning, or the emotional environment;
- the wider environment – the contribution of other professionals to children's learning.

## Indoors and outdoors

Practitioners need to try to picture their setting from a child's point of view, or, better still, find out what children think of their environment. As a team, you should discuss what you want children to get from the space you have and then reflect on whether or not you are providing it. Think about whether your environment is helping or hindering the development of the children's speech, language and communication. The following points will help you. They can be applied across all age ranges. Consider how you can adapt them to be appropriate for the children in your setting.

- Noise level. If the environment is too noisy, some children may have difficulty concentrating on their tasks or listening. If you play music all the time, ask why? Are the children listening to it, or is it just a background noise? Children need cosy, welcoming areas, indoors and outdoors, where they can go if they want to have quiet conversations or share a book.
- Rhyme and story sessions should be taking place every day somewhere where there are not too many other distractions for children, where they can listen and see clearly. Consider what else is going to happen around them at that time. Are the tables being set for lunch and the trolley being wheeled through? Think how distracting that will be.
- It is important for children to link their developing speech, language and communication skills with their physical skills. Is there enough space to do action songs and rhymes successfully? Why not do them outdoors sometimes, even in the rain?

- Label drawers, boxes of equipment, and so on, with symbols, pictures, written signs and photographs, so that children can find the resources that they need. These visual clues will help children to be more independent. You should also label activity areas with similar signs and pictures, since this will help children to understand what each area is used for. Make sure that you keep to the routine, though, otherwise children will become confused.

'The Communication Friendly Spaces Toolkit: Improving Speaking and Listening Skills in the Early Years Foundation Stage' (ISBN 1 85990 428 9), a collection of research summaries, case studies, a DVD and an audit workbook that can help you to plan and improve your environment, is available from the Basic Skills Agency ([www.basic-skills.co.uk](http://www.basic-skills.co.uk)).

The outdoor environment should be equally well planned to support children's learning. Practitioners should be aware of the opportunities that outdoor provision offers to support children's speech, language and communication development. Consider the new vocabulary that can be introduced by first-hand experiences of large climbing equipment, or touching plants or minibests? Are there opportunities outside for children to play together as well as on their own? Make sure that boxes of resources that children can access outside are labelled too.

Practitioners should ensure that the environment helps parents to see the importance that the setting places on speech, language and communication. Display information about your approach to the development of speech, communication and language, and details of what is available to support children's development in the local community, such as libraries, Bookstart, and events at children's centres. Display pictures and information about how babies and children communicate. (The website [www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk](http://www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk) is a useful source for posters and information.)



## Conditions for learning: the emotional environment

The emotional environment that you create for children is as important as the physical environment. It is vital that all children – especially those with speech, language and communication needs – feel comfortable, confident, secure and welcome in your setting and that they have a sense of belonging and well-being. They need the support of adults who are sensitive to their needs and understand how important children's well-being is to their learning.

It is important to provide an environment that supports the building of relationships. Children spending time in small groups, with one key person, or in pairs, can gain from support to build their confidence. Planning activities that involve a small group of children will provide opportunities to develop speech, language and communication skills through repetition and good modelling of words and sentences by the adult.

Children who have difficulty in making themselves understood may regularly snatch toys from other children or disrupt activities because they are frustrated and cannot communicate their needs in any other way. Their emotional development needs to be supported, and practitioners need to help them to develop more appropriate communication methods.

Labelling resources and quiet areas (as suggested above) also helps to improve the emotional environment. Children will be confident about where things are, and feel more secure. They will have somewhere to sit quietly if the hustle and bustle of the setting becomes too much at times. In the 'Positive Relationships' section, the importance of listening and responding to children with sensitivity was discussed. Such a positive approach to children's needs contributes to a supportive and effective emotional environment.

Some other features that will contribute to this supportive environment are listed below.

- If all the practitioners, other staff and students are aware of individual children's needs, and sensitive to them, they will all know how to support their communication.
- If a child is communicating using an augmentative system, such as signing, make sure that the other children understand this and know some signs too.
- If practitioners use shared and consistent names for times in the day, such as 'story time' and 'tidy-up time', this helps children to learn the vocabulary and the expectations. For example, when they hear 'cafe open' they realise that they can go and help themselves to drinks and snacks.
- Practitioners should check that children have understood instructions – especially those children who may have some difficulties with their understanding.
- A visual timetable will help children to understand the sequence of the day. A series of pictures or photographs show the different activities that are going to happen during a session. This can be completed in a number of ways – for example, put the pictures in a row from left to right, and talk through with the children what is going to happen. When an activity is completed, you (or a child) can put that picture in a 'finished' box. Children who don't have a concept of time can be reassured, as they can see, for example, how many activities are to happen before home time.

- Continuity of approaches to communication between home and setting, or between settings, will support a child.

A practitioner asks:

*A child in my setting is very talkative, but I find her speech difficult to understand. I don't want to damage her confidence, so what should I do if I can't understand what she is trying to tell me?*

If you have gently asked a child to repeat an utterance and they produce it in the same way, there is no point in asking for further repetitions. If you think the child is communicating about something in the room, try saying 'show me', and offer your hand, encouraging them to lead you.

If you can understand part of the utterance, or use the context for clues to its meaning, repeat back what you think the child is trying to say and check with them that you have interpreted correctly.

If, despite your efforts, you cannot understand the message, share responsibility for the breakdown in communication. For example: 'I'm sorry, I didn't understand that time'.

Don't pretend that you have understood. If the child sees through your strategy, you risk breaking their trust, or, worse, making them feel that you do not value their attempt and do not consider it worth the effort to figure the message out.

You can download a set of training materials for early years practitioners, called 'Personal, social and emotional development' (PSED), from [www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk).

'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning, (SEAL) is another curriculum resource for primary schools. This can be downloaded from the DCSF standards site: [www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/seal](http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/seal).

## The wider context: working with other professionals

All practitioners working with young children work in a 'team'. If you are a childminder, the team may consist of just you and the parents; other practitioners working in settings will have much larger teams. All teams need to work closely together. They need to develop good professional relationships, respecting each other, implementing the setting's policies, sharing information about children, planning learning opportunities, and reflecting on their practice.

Remember that all settings will have a SENCO; although the SENCO will have a responsibility to coordinate a setting's approach to children with identified needs, all practitioners are responsible for ensuring that children's needs are met.

'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' (DfES 2004) reminds us of how important it is for every setting to work with professionals from outside the setting. Collaborative working is an essential if we are to meet the needs of all children. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is the mandatory universal tool for coordinating children's services for children with additional needs. 'Early Support' is the Government's recommended way of delivering services to young disabled children and their families.

(There are also many other useful documents related to helping children with disabilities and additional needs, details of which can be found on the DVD.)

## The Common Assessment Framework

The green paper 'Every Child Matters' proposed the introduction of a 'Common Assessment Framework' (CAF). The CAF provides a more effective way of identifying children's additional needs earlier, and will improve partnership between agencies. All LAs will be implementing the CAF by 2008. Visit [www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk) for more information. A link to the practitioners' guide is also included in the EYFS DVD ('A Unique Child' 1.2).

## Early Support

'Early Support' is the central-government mechanism for achieving better coordinated family-focused services for very young disabled children and their families. It improves multi-agency service delivery to families with young disabled children or emerging special educational need. It is relevant to anyone who works with young children and their families. It is particularly useful when families are in contact with many different professionals supporting their child.

It provides a range of materials to help professionals working with families to coordinate their activity better and to work in partnership with parents. There are also information booklets for parents. The materials are supported by a training programme. All materials are available free of charge. To find out more, or to order materials, visit [www.earlysupport.org.uk](http://www.earlysupport.org.uk).

You may sometimes need the additional support provided by professionals such as EYATs or area SENCOs. These professionals will offer support to practitioners to enable them to meet the child's needs within the setting.

Practitioners need to be clear about the roles of other professionals with whom they come into contact, in order to plan how they can work together effectively. Services need to work together to provide effective information and support to children and families.

Practitioners also need to be able to recognise when it is necessary to make a referral to an outside agency. The vast majority of children will have their needs met by the effective practice in the setting. LAs will offer training and support to practitioners to help them to do this.

In a few cases it will be necessary to refer children, with parents' agreement, to a more specialist support service. Children with speech, language and communication needs are commonly referred to SLT. The SENCO will support you in this process.

On the DVD, you will find more information about the various roles and responsibilities of professionals that might be involved with children with speech, language and communication needs in 'Who does what: Roles and responsibilities in relation to speech, language and communication needs'.



A practitioner asks:

*The speech and language therapist has arranged to visit a child in my setting. I haven't worked with a speech and language therapist before. What should I expect?*

The SLT is likely to have decided to visit the child in the setting for one or more of the following reasons:

- They wish to see the child in an environment outside the clinic to assess the child's communication skills in a more natural context. They will observe how the child's difficulties affect their day-to-day experience and the strengths and strategies the child uses to counteract the difficulties.
- They wish to speak to you about your knowledge of the child and their strengths and difficulties, and to ask you about what you already know helps to support this child.
- They intend to formulate a support plan that involves you and the setting. Collaboration between the SLT and the early years practitioner is known to provide the best outcomes for a child with communication support needs. The environment you provide has potential to support the communication development of all children, including those who experience difficulties. Your setting provides the kind of stimulation and social experiences that motivate children to communicate. Because you have regular contact with the child in this environment and because of your professional skills, you are ideally placed to encourage the next steps in the child's developmental pathway.

The SLT may or may not work directly with the child during their visit. In some instances they will hope to observe the interaction without the child being aware that they are being watched. For this reason it is best not to introduce them to the child at the start of the visit or to try to prepare the child for the therapist coming to see them.

If the therapist does intend to spend time with the child in a one-to-one situation it would be helpful if you could provide a quiet area with a minimum of visual distraction (away from windows, doors and busy wall displays) and where other children could be diverted away. The therapist may bring their own special equipment, but any assessment for pre-school children is typically play-based, enjoyable and informal, and done in short bursts of activity.

The SLT will want to hear from you about the child – their strengths, their difficulties, and what motivates them to join in. They will also be aware that as you have regular contact and a familiar relationship with the child, you are likely to be a key component in any intervention programme. They will therefore be keen to share your observations and ideas. It would be helpful if you could prepare for the visit by having the child's developmental records to hand, along with any records you have made about the child's speech and language attempts. Make a note of any questions and queries you might have about the child's communication skills, and their management, prior to the visit, and don't be afraid to ask the therapist to clarify anything you are unclear about during the discussion.

## Transitions and new environments

A practitioner asks:

*In my pre-school, we pass our children's records on to parents, but we are not sure that the new setting receives them. What can we do?*

Of course it is important that parents have a record of their child's achievements, but it is equally important that the child's new setting should have a good picture of what each child is able to do – otherwise, the new setting will have to start from scratch and waste time that could be spent building on those achievements and further supporting children's learning.

If you have already been supporting a child with their speech, language and communication needs, and perhaps putting in place a range of communication strategies, it's very important that the next setting know about it so that their staff are aware of how best to support the child, especially in that unsettling transition period.

- When parents first come to your setting, emphasise how important it is for you and them to share information about their child so that you can plan for their child's individual needs.
- Make sure that there is a written process or policy for information sharing. This process should include the arrangements that you make for sharing information about the child with other settings and, should the need arise, with other professionals. You must consider confidentiality and data protection issues. You should not share information without parents' written consent.
- Include information about this process in your information booklet for parents or brochure about the setting, including the reasons why it is so important to share information.
- Involve parents in planning for and helping with transitions. Consult them about their own and their child's views, and value what they say.
- Put together a summative record of the child's achievements in your setting. Share this with the parents, give them a copy and get their signed permission to share it with the child's next setting. You can then make arrangements with the next setting to share that information.
- Encourage parents to share their child's full learning record with the next setting too. This should be easier if you have developed good relationships with parents and they understand why it is so important.

The transitions from home to setting, and later between settings, are key moments in children's and families' lives. The EYFS DVD gives practitioners a great deal of guidance on how these transitions can be made as easy as possible, with minimal disruption to children's learning journeys. (See 'Enabling environments' 3.4).



If a child with known speech, language or communication needs is transferring either from home, from another setting, or from a Foundation Stage class to a Year 1 class, – you should remember the following points:

- The child and family may already be in contact with a range of support agencies, or have received additional support from practitioners in a previous setting. They will all have a lot of information to share. It is important to invite people who have been working with the child to discuss the new placement, the child's needs, and how best to support the transition. This discussion should take place well in advance of the transition, so that appropriate preparations can take place. For example, practitioners might need to attend specific training to develop their skills, or visit the previous setting, or the child's home, to see the child relaxed and at play and discuss their needs. The SENCO should be coordinating the transition. Remember that Early Support ([www.earlysupport.org.uk](http://www.earlysupport.org.uk)) can provide guidance on coordinating services.
- Ensure that a key person is identified, to welcome the child and family and to maintain contact with them in the transition period and preferably beyond.
- Consider whether a staff exchange could be arranged temporarily, so that the child gets to know the new key person in familiar surroundings first.
- Share learning records between settings, and make use of the information that they provide. This process will include a discussion of EYFS profile results in the move from Reception to Year 1.

The EYFS suggests the following useful questions to ask:

- What is already known about how this child learns and participates?
- What particular support needs does this child have?
- What policies and procedures do we already have in place that can help?
- What would we need to change in order to include this child and support their development?
- Who else is in contact with the family? If other services are involved that have more specialist knowledge than we do, how can we all work together?

Remember that focusing on the strengths and support needs of the individual child is the most straightforward way to avoid assumptions and unhelpful stereotypes.

The following two valuable resources about transitions are available.

'Seamless Transitions – supporting continuity in young children's learning' (DfES 0267-2006PCK-EN), aimed at all practitioners, is available from [dfes@prolog.uk.com](mailto:dfes@prolog.uk.com) and can also be downloaded from [http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/0267\\_2006\\_DCL\\_EN\\_web\\_book\\_edition.pdf](http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/0267_2006_DCL_EN_web_book_edition.pdf).

'Continuing the Learning Journey' for practitioners in schools, can be downloaded from [www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_6014.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_6014.aspx).





## Reflecting on practice

Refer to the 'Reflecting on practice' notes on the 'Principles into practice' cards for 'Enabling environments' and the Effective practice guidance on the EYFS DVD, and consider these in relation to developing speech, language and communication skills.

Do you as a practitioner ...

- ... know how to carry out, record and analyse observations of children's speech, language and communication development?
- ... invite parents to provide information, and include it in children's learning records?
- ... discuss children's progress with parents?
- ... take account of the environment when planning activities, to ensure that it suits the needs of children with speech, language and communication needs?
- ... ensure that you are aware of and sensitive to individual children's needs, and know how to support their communication?
- ... use shared and consistent names for times in the day (such as 'story time' and 'tidy-up time'), to help children to learn the vocabulary and understand the expectations?
- ... check that children have understood instructions – especially those children who may have some difficulties with their understanding?
- ... use a visual timetable to help children to understand the sequence of activities?
- ... know who the SENCO is and what their role is?
- ... know about Early Support and the CAF?
- ... know the importance for children of a smooth transition between home and setting or between settings, and plan to meet children's individual speech, language and communication needs during the process?

Do you as a SENCO ...

- ... know how Early Support and the CAF can support your role?
- ... understand the role of EYATs and area SENCOs, and share this with all practitioners? Do you know how to contact them?
- ... understand the roles of the other professionals that may support children in your setting, and build relationships with them?
- ... maintain an up to date list of all the relevant support services in your area and have ways of keeping in contact with them regularly?
- ... have a clear policy for referring children to specialist services?
- ... know about the training and development for SENCOs and practitioners that is available in your LA?
- ... identify staff training needs relating to speech, language and communication development?
- ... coordinate the transition process for children with identified needs?



- ... ensure that transition meetings, including parents and professionals supporting the child, take place and that information about the child's needs is shared?
- ... discuss children's development with key workers, and plan the next steps in their learning?

Do you as a leader or manager ...

- ... ensure that the SENCO has a clearly defined role and a job description?
- ... attend training so that you can support the SENCO in their role?
- ... make sure that you are up to date with legislation and the responsibility you have for inclusion?
- ... support the SENCO's requests for training and development opportunities for the team?
- ... ensure that there is a clear policy for transition and that it is implemented?
- ... support the SENCO and practitioners to build links with other settings and appropriate specialists?
- ... reflect on the indoor and outdoor environment and review it with your team, and plan and implement changes to it to ensure that it is meeting children's needs?

# Learning and development

## EYFS principle

Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates and all areas of learning and development are equally important and interconnected.

## Commitments

- 4.1.** Play and exploration: children's play reflects their wide ranging and varied interests and preoccupations. In their play children learn at their highest level. Play with peers is important for children's development.
- 4.2.** Active learning: children learn best through physical and mental challenges. Active learning involves other people, objects, ideas and events that engage and involve children for sustained periods.
- 4.3.** Creativity and critical thinking: when children have opportunities to play with ideas in different situations and with a variety of resources, they discover connections and come to new and better understandings and ways of doing things. Adult support in this process enhances their ability to think critically and ask questions.
- 4.4.** Areas of learning and development: the EYFS is made up of six areas of learning and development. All areas of Learning and Development are connected to one another and are equally important. All areas of learning and development are underpinned by the principles of the EYFS .

## Planning for the development of speech, language and communication

The EYFS gives us a framework to provide children with a communication and language rich environment, and helps to ensure that those children most at risk have an excellent chance of achieving well. This guidance will be invaluable as you develop your strategy for speech, language and communication in your setting.

When we think about a language focused curriculum for children with speech, language and communication needs, what should we focus on? What should practitioners do to provide a broad and rich language curriculum, and how can they ensure that all children get maximum benefit from it? The special emphasis that should be given to language development for those children with speech, language and communication needs will be beneficial to all children. It will not be at the expense of other areas of the curriculum, since skilful practitioners will weave the activities into all aspects of daily activities.

Research and other evidence tells us that some children, particularly those from low income homes, do not experience the rich, well-planned communication and language provision in their settings that is necessary to support their development. Research has shown that these children have fewer opportunities to talk with their parents than children from well-educated, middle-class homes, and are already behind their more affluent peers in their acquisition of vocabulary by the age of three (Hart and Risley, 1995). Children who have limited language experience may also choose to spend relatively little time at pre-school engaging in conversation. Dickinson and Tabors (2001) audiotaped four-year-olds, and found that of their free-play activity time:

- 17% was spent in meaningful conversation with the teacher;
- 18% was spent in meaningful conversation with peers;
- 59% was spent not talking at all.

Practitioners, leaders and managers need to ensure that they have a plan for the development of all children's speech, language and communication skills: children with limited vocabularies need to be targeted early, as catching up later is very difficult. This strategy should include details of how children who do not have well developed skills, or have speech, language and communication needs, are being identified and included.

*It is important to remember that we need to specifically plan for the development of communication, speaking and listening skills, utilising the multi-sensory activities that we know children enjoy participating in.*

*'Letters and Sounds: Principles and Practice of High quality Phonics'*  
(DfES 00281-2007FLR-EN)

Practitioners need to identify those children who have a limited language experience and who struggle to communicate their needs and ideas or to make themselves understood. They need to ensure that these children are being included in regular structured language activities that particularly focus on developing vocabulary. This must not be left to chance: the early years of a child's life will lay the foundations for their understanding of language and their later success in literacy. Remember that children are active learners, and it is easier for them to understand words like 'over' and 'under' in real life situations such as when you give them opportunities to walk 'over' a bridge made from large wooden construction equipment and to crawl back 'under', while saying and emphasising the words.

Remember that children learn an object's name most easily when they and an adult are jointly focusing on the same object. Even babies as young as one year old will tune in to the adult's focus of attention; they follow the adult's gaze and assume that the adult is labelling what the adult is looking at. Nouns (object names) are best learned when the adult speaks while pointing, whereas verbs (labelling an event) are better learned when the adult speaks before or after demonstrating the event – for example, 'we're going to bake the buns in the oven' or 'look, now the buns have been baked we can eat them!'



It is important for you as the practitioner to be clear about the words that you want to introduce or practise with the children, talk to them in ways that help them to develop their vocabulary, and give them opportunities to talk so that they can develop their understanding of how to use these new words in different situations.

Talking and giving a running commentary about the play children are involved in will support their learning too. By receiving an ongoing description of the activity, the child will hear the language that is associated with their play, but they won't be distracted from it by having to answer lots of questions; they will be able to develop it as they wish, and will perhaps volunteer to join in a conversation with you about it.

You will often hear young children speaking aloud to themselves when they are involved in play, vocalising their thoughts: for example, 'it's going through here, round there' as they push a train along. You can also model this type of behaviour if you play alongside children and talk through what you are doing aloud. Although these strategies can be helpful for short periods, they should not be extended to the point where they become intrusive or begin to inhibit children.

If practitioners are to support the development of children's language comprehension, it is important to develop not only children's vocabulary but also their language for thinking. Books, stories, rhymes and songs all have an important part to play. Supporting these with actions or objects aids children's understanding. 'Heads and Shoulders, Knees and Toes' is an easy example to think about: children are touching the appropriate parts of their body as they say the words. Consider how you could use objects and actions relating to other rhymes and songs: for example, a mouse finger-

puppet for 'Hickory, Dickory, Dock'. These objects can also be left out so that children can share the rhymes and songs with each other in their play. Equipment such as karaoke machines and microphones give children opportunities to sing and perform to an audience independently.

EYFS Guidance, and 'Letters and Sounds: Principles and Practice of High quality Phonics' (DfES 00281-2007FLR-EN), provide much more information on rhymes and stories.

Reading and sharing books every day is a vital part of children's early learning experiences. Research has shown that dialogic book reading is a powerful way of using books to support children's language development (Wasik, Bond and Hindman, 2006). Dialogic book reading involves reading picture books and talking about what's happening, with the adult asking questions, providing additional information, and encouraging children to describe scenes and events.

In dialogic book reading, new vocabulary objects are shown before reading the book. Children are asked:

- 'What's this?'
- 'What do we call this?'
- 'What can I do with the ...?'
- 'Tell me what you know about this.'

The practitioner provides information if children can't respond, and, as the book is read, asks open-ended questions. For example:

- 'What else can you tell me about what's happening on this page?'
- 'What do you think will happen next?'

It is important to provide descriptions of unfamiliar vocabulary and to relate the book and the vocabulary to the children's own experiences. For example, if you have told the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, you might talk about the vocabulary, saying 'a bowl is another word for dish, and we often use it when we are talking about our pets ... my dog has a big plastic bowl'.

Remember to use real objects to illustrate nouns and use actions to illustrate verbs and prepositions (such as over, under).

Re-reading favourite stories, or setting up play activities related to a story, helps to repeat and reinforce new ideas and information, and is helpful to all children, but can be especially helpful to children experiencing difficulties. Setting up play activities, with appropriate equipment linked to a story, gives children the opportunity to reinforce their learning in their play. For example, when reading the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, set up the role-play area as the bears' house and take up the role of one of the characters. Practitioners should join the children in their role play. This gives the children the opportunity to re-enact the story, with the adult modelling the language and vocabulary. Handling and using the objects (such as the three bowls), and linking words to them (such as 'big', 'bigger', 'small' and 'smallest') helps to reinforce their understanding too.



All areas of learning are interconnected, and a strategy for the development of speech, language and communication needs to recognise how these connections can happen in practice. Practitioners should not be planning to develop these skills in isolation from all the other areas of learning. You should be considering the individual and the collective needs and interests of the children within your setting, and thinking about the experiences, both adult-led and child-initiated, that you can be providing to further their speech, language and communication skills across the whole range of learning areas.

Take the three bears role play area as an example. This play opportunity aims to support children in re-enacting the story, but it also supports learning in other areas. As they develop the play, children may be involved in:

- Personal Social and Emotional Development – children will be learning through an activity that is interesting, exciting and motivating, and they will be making relationships with other children as they negotiate roles or share equipment;
- Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy – the relationships between numbers and amounts, putting out three bowls, shapes, and quantities ('too much', 'too little', 'just right');
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World – some children might be learning how to solve problems, and how to carry three bowls at once without dropping one, while others could be making porridge to eat in their role play, noticing and discussing how it changes as it is cooked;
- Physical Development – washing and drying the dishes after using them in their role play can lead to thoughts about hygiene, and will also help to develop physical skills, as they balance a bowl in one hand and a tea-towel in the other;
- Creative Development – expressing and communicating thoughts and feelings, developing imagination, and imaginative play.

Practitioners should be alert to the opportunities that are available to develop children's speech, language and communication skills within all six areas of learning.

As a setting working with children with speech, language and communication needs, you should also be thinking about what opportunities there are for promoting 'sustained shared thinking'. The EYFS gives the following explanation of what this is:

- Adults are aware of the child's interests and understandings, and the adult and child work together to develop an idea or skill.
- In the most effective settings, practitioners support and challenge children's thinking by getting involved in the thinking process with them.
- There are positive, trusting relationships between adults and children.
- The adults show genuine interest, offer encouragement, clarify ideas, and ask open questions, supporting and extending children's thinking and helping them to make connections in learning.

Sustained shared thinking has been identified as a key feature of learning and teaching in the early years ('Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years', DfES, ISBN 84185 758 0). A great deal of learning in the early years comes from the social interactions and shared activities that children take part in with both adults and children. Adults can ensure that these interactions become valuable learning opportunities by becoming

really involved in children's ideas and working with them to develop an idea or a skill.

Practitioners should:

- give children time to explore and develop their ideas, and encourage them to discuss what they are doing and what they want to achieve;
- listen to these ideas, and then pose questions that extend their thinking (such as 'what do you think ...?' or 'How are you going to ...?');
- build on the ideas or suggestions that children offer, taking the lead from the children and extending their ideas with them rather than imposing their own ideas (practitioners can make suggestions such as 'what do you think would happen if we ...?', as this is a two-way interaction, but not say 'do it this way').

For example:

- If you are going outside with the children, instead of saying 'it's raining, we need our coats and wellies on', say to the children 'it's raining now, I have left my umbrella at home, what do you think we should do?'
- If a child comes to you with a bike with a puncture, instead of saying 'oh dear, put it away and choose another one instead', ask 'how do you think that we can fix it?'
- If a child is making a construction with boxes, empty yoghurt pots and other materials and is struggling to make things stick together, don't take over and do it for them, but work out a solution together. For example, say 'I am not sure how we can stick plastic to plastic; do you think sticky tape will work?'

If this approach is to be successful, practitioners need to know each child well enough to know how to challenge and support their thinking at the appropriate level, age and stage. Babies can't be asked to respond to questions like these, but you can support this development at an early stage by knowing the baby's interests, providing equipment that they enjoy using, and following their lead in the play.

Practitioners need to develop their skills to promote sustained shared thinking, and children also need to feel confident in this process. They need to know that the practitioner genuinely respects their thoughts and ideas and values them (see 'Positive relationships'). It may take a while to establish the practice of sustained shared thinking in a setting because it means that adults need to reflect on and change their practice. Children need to feel that they have 'permission' to have this two-way interaction. Much of the communication in settings is directed and led by adults; often children are not asked for their opinions and ideas, but they need to feel confident and trust the adults to respect their views.

Practitioners need to remember that it may be more difficult to read the expressions and responses of a child who has speech, language and communication needs. It is the responsibility of the practitioner to make the interaction work. The team should discuss the child's needs and plan how that child can be supported to become involved in sustained shared thinking. The strategy should detail how you will plan to meet every child's needs, bearing in mind the EYFS Effective practice, enabling environments guidance: 'maintain a clear view of the learning journey for all children, but provide different opportunities for individual children or groups who may need varied routes to reach a similar place'.

The aim of the strategy should be that all children in the setting be supported to become confident, skilful communicators. It is important to spend time as a team discussing your approach to the development of speech, language and communication skills. Plan the steps, and the progress each child should be making, and when children develop more slowly, or have specific needs, support their learning by breaking down those steps into smaller, achievable ones. The 'Early Support' material in the EYFS will help you to do this.

A strategy should include how you are going to record and analyse children's progress and achievements in speech, language and communication. Settings need to be sure that children are making progress. This means that there must be good systems in place to record achievements. Analysing those achievements is vital. If individual children, or the whole group, are not making the progress that you would expect, the staff team, with leaders and managers, will need to reflect on why this is happening, identify the barriers to progress, and plan to overcome them.

## Reflecting on practice

Refer to the 'Reflecting on Practice' notes on the 'Principles into Practice' cards for 'Learning and development' and the Effective Practice Guidance on the EYFS DVD, and consider these in relation to developing speech, language and communication skills.

Do you as a practitioner ...

- ... understand and implement the setting's policy for the development of speech, language and communication skills?
- ... use the EYFS as a framework to provide children with a communication and language rich environment?
- ... help children to build up a varied collection of words that they can use and understand?
- ... identify those children who have a limited level of vocabulary, and ensure that they are being supported to increase the stock of words that they know and understand?
- ... sometimes give a running commentary of the play children are involved in, giving an ongoing description of what is happening?
- ... create opportunities for children to experience communicating for a wide variety of purposes and in creative ways?
- ... identify the children who may be experiencing difficulties with their speech sounds, and support them?
- ... use a wide range of stories, rhymes and songs with children, and support these with objects, actions and puppets?
- ... give children time to tell their own stories, share their experiences, or just talk to each other?
- ... set up play activities, with appropriate equipment linked to a story, giving children the opportunity to reinforce their learning in their play?
- ... recognise that all areas of learning are interconnected, and remember that opportunities to develop speech, language and communication skills are available across all six areas of learning?
- ... recognise that children communicate and express themselves in different ways, such as dance, movement, art and music?
- ... support and challenge children's thinking by getting involved in the thinking process with them?
- ... build on the ideas or suggestions that children offer, taking the lead from the children and extending their ideas with them rather than imposing your own ideas?
- ... show genuine interest, offer encouragement, clarify ideas, and ask open questions that support and extend children's thinking and help them to make connections in their learning?
- ... give children time to explore and develop their ideas, and encourage them to discuss what they are doing and what they want to achieve?

- ... reflect on how you can make sustained shared thinking work with children with speech, language and communication needs?
- ... plan the steps and the progress each child should be making, and when children develop more slowly, or have specific needs, support their learning by breaking down those steps into smaller, achievable ones?
- ... record and analyse children's progress and achievements in speech, language and communication?

Do you as a SENCO ...

- ... ensure that the strategy for the development of speech, language and communication skills supports the development of children with speech, language and communication needs?
- ... support practitioners in identifying and planning appropriate support for children with a low level of vocabulary?
- ... ensure that children are helped to communicate for a wide variety of purposes and in creative ways?
- ... support practitioners in identifying children who are having difficulty with their speech sounds?
- ... work with practitioners to ensure that children with speech, language and communication needs can participate in sustained shared thinking?
- ... support practitioners in breaking down learning steps into smaller, achievable ones?
- ... support practitioners in recording and analysing the progress and achievement of children with speech, language and communication needs?

Do you as a leader or manager ...

- ... ensure that the setting has a strategy for the development of speech, language and communication that includes details of how children who do not have well-developed skills, or have speech, language and communication needs, are being identified and supported?
- ... ensure that this strategy is understood by all practitioners, and is implemented, reviewed and continually improved?
- ... ensure that the development of children's vocabulary is included in the strategy, and that all practitioners understand their role in this?
- ... give time and support for practitioners to develop the skills needed for sustained shared thinking?
- ... regularly analyse the children's progress and achievements in speech, language and communication, share this analysis with all practitioners, implement reviews of practice, and support improvements?



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