

Talking can be tough

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Have a laugh, chat with your friends, listen to and understand information, influence others – these are all essential skills in life which many of us take for granted. Talking must be easy because I can do it! Easy for some but tough for others!

Imagine being in the classroom and not being able to understand all the words that are being said, words that others find easy to understand but you struggle with. You find it impossible to learn the more complex technical words associated with different subject areas. Sentences are hard to follow and understand, they are too complicated and so you switch off. It's very difficult to put words into sentences and people don't understand you when you speak so what's the point in bothering. Your self esteem diminishes, you lose motivation, you start to exhibit challenging behaviour or you silently withdraw. Your peers isolate you and you find it harder every day to make and maintain relationships. Research has demonstrated that if you have persistent speech and language difficulties beyond the age of 5 ½ years then you are at risk for developing additional literacy problems.¹ You start to struggle in all areas of the curriculum because talking, understanding, reading and writing are fundamental to everything and you can't do it. School is an unhappy place and learning is too difficult.

Sadly for the 2.7 million children in the UK with communication difficulties this can be the unhappy scenario.

In the report 'The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication'² it is suggested that upwards of 50% of children are starting school with poor language skills. That means over 15 students in every classroom. The incidence of children with a long term, persistent speech, language and communication need is 10% of the school population. This means one in ten children has severe speech and language difficulties and needs long term support.³

The speaking and listening strand of the national curricula across the UK has raised awareness of the need to work on these core skills. However sometimes the impact of communication difficulties on the whole of the curriculum and the total educative experience of the child can be overlooked and not completely appreciated by those of us who can communicate well.

With such large numbers of children starting school with SLCN this issue must obviously be addressed. Is this really happening? Education staff are sometimes asked to carry out a series of written activities which haven't been clearly explained to them because of lack of time and busy schedules. They are keen to implement speech and language therapy programmes because they know the importance of the work and value the professional contribution of others but a number of factors means that this doesn't always happen. The school day is already full, the work that has been left can be seen as an additional pressure and the value of completing it is not always clear. Life is busy and the weeks go by, the work is left in the drawer until the next visit of the speech and language therapist (SLT), a flurry of activity may happen prior to this but because it's too little too late progress is slow and can be dispiriting. Does this sound familiar? How liberating would it be to work on speech and language issues at the same time as supporting other curriculum areas! Insight

into the nature and extent of the children's difficulties and strategies which can be used to develop their understanding in PE as well as Maths, Science and the Arts are available and can be implemented. However to ensure that this happens effective training has to be given to teach staff **what to do** and to tell them **why** they are doing it. This can transform the situation.

Recent reports inform us that this is an issue that really needs to be dealt with. Children with SLCN are not having their needs effectively met in schools because staff feel ill-equipped. Over a third of teachers' state they had no preparation during their initial teacher training for special educational needs,⁴ over 60% of primary teachers lack confidence in their ability to meet children's language needs⁵ and many report that the emotional difficulties often associated with SLCN are difficult to manage.⁶ In a recent report into successful outcomes for children with special educational needs in mainstream schools,⁷ Ofsted identified the need for high quality, specialist teaching. With the majority of children with language and communication difficulties educated in mainstream schools⁸ it is essential that staff are equipped with the professional development programmes to enhance their skills and knowledge in this crucial area.

Developments in delivery of Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) services further underline the need for effective training. Sometimes individual or group therapy is provided but increasingly therapists are working through a consultative model where they visit an educational establishment and leave a programme of work for the staff to carry out with the child in the school or pre-school. This can be a valuable way of working for some children as it helps them to practise and learn essential core skills within a meaningful environment, however if this is to work effectively rigorous training of those implementing the work is essential.

This approach links with the Government's initiatives outlined in the report 'Overcoming Barriers to Learning'. In this there is a recognition that the challenges facing children with communication difficulties are complex and broad and that professional groups must work together to meet not only individuals needs but to support the communication skills of all children.

To implement a consultative model of service delivery quality training of education staff, teachers and teaching assistants (TA's) is essential so that the information supplied by the SLT service can be understood and embedded effectively. This view is supported by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT).⁹

As a speech and language therapist and trainer for Elklan for 13 years I believe passionately that SLT's have vital and essential information to share with our professional colleagues. We also have much to learn from our friends in education and so partnership and collaboration are essential if the aspirations of us all in relation to children with SLCN are to be met. We have a responsibility to equip and skill the wider workforce and parents to help them understand the difficulties children with SLCN face and to give them effective, well thought through, practical strategies.

Some excellent training delivered by speech and language therapists and specialist teachers is available through Elklan. We have a national network of tutors who can be commissioned to provide practical Open College Network (OCN) accredited training courses in schools and other educational establishments. Courses to meet the needs of all ages of children with a wide variety of disabilities are available. Other national organisations such as ICAN and local SLT services such as that

exemplified in Stoke on Trent and in Hackney also offer evidenced based training packages.

Talking can be tough? Yes, but developing an understanding of the needs of the children for whom this is an issue and being equipped with effective strategies and information can take the toughness out of talking for us all.

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- ¹ Bird, Bishop and Freeman (1995)
(1998) Language Impaired Pre-Schoolers: a follow up into adolescence JSLHR 41
- ² I CAN Talk The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication Issue 2, *Author: Mary Hartshorne Contributors: Kate Freeman and John Parrott*, © I CAN 2006: Reprinted 2009
- ³ Law et al (2000) Provision for children's speech and language needs in England and Wales: facilitating communication between education and health services DfES research report 239
- ⁴ Times Educational Supplement Survey 2005.
- ⁵ Sadler, J. (2005) Knowledge, Attitudes and Beliefs of the Mainstream Teachers of Children with a Pre-school Diagnosis of Speech / Language Impairment *Child Language Teaching and Therapy* Vol 21, 2.
- ⁶ MacBeath, J., Galton, M., Steward, S., MacBeath, A. and Page, C. (2006) The Costs of Inclusion Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge commissioned by NUT.
- ⁷ Ofsted (2006) Inclusion: Does it matter where pupils are taught?
- ⁸ Lindsay et al (2005) Local Authorities Approaches to Provision for Children with Specific Speech and Language Difficulties (SSLD) in England and Wales. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*.
- ⁹ Resource Manual for Commissioning and Planning Services for SLCN, Published by RCSLT 2009, authors: Professor Pam Enderby , Dr Caroline Pickstone , Dr Alex John , Kate Fryer , Anna Cantrell , Diana Papaioannou