I've heard about personal, social and emotional development but how's it linked to communication and language?

Children use communication and language skills to:
- Make friends
- Join in with games and activities
- Talk about their feelings
- Understand how others are feeling
- Resolve conflicts with others

What's the link between emotional development and reading and literacy?

Understanding and telling stories depend on having a wide range of words to describe characters and their feelings. To do this, children need to first learn to use emotion words to describe their own feelings.

Children also need to understand feelings and emotion words in order to be able to relate to characters in a story and understand how they might be feeling.

How do young children learn to talk about emotions?

Young children often express feelings physically (e.g. cry; throw themselves on the floor when upset; run around screaming and laughing when excited). They also express themselves through their mark making, play and movement.

It is a complex skill for children to talk about emotions. It involves noticing feelings and what they mean.
When do children start talking about emotions?

Children usually start using emotional vocabulary at around two years old. They talk about being ‘happy’ and ‘sad’ and can point to pictures that show these emotions.

As children begin to put sentences together they are able to communicate more complex ideas; this helps them get on with other children and adults, as well as express what they think and want.

What about children who struggle with speaking and understanding language?

Children who struggle with speaking and understanding language can get upset and frustrated when they can’t get their message across. They struggle with the words to express their feelings.

Research has found that a child’s early language skills, such as the number of words they can say at age 2 and their understanding of language at age 4, can predict their emotional and behavioural skills at age 6¹.

Studies have also shown that children with language difficulties are at a higher risk of behavioural, social and emotional difficulties in childhood and through adolescence².

How can I help children develop their skills?

We know that talking about emotions, naming them and talking about what they look like helps children to learn about them.

In your setting:

- Talk about a wide range of emotions (excited, surprised, upset, frightened) to extend children’s emotional vocabulary. As children’s spoken language skills and their ability to interact with other children develop they are able to learn more complex words to describe feelings.
- Reflect back how children are feeling and why (E.g. ‘You look like you’re upset because Leia has the new pushchair’) to help children to make sense of social situations and also learn new words to describe feelings.
- Help children to understand how their peers feel by explaining and pointing it out to them (e.g. “I think Kelly’s sad because she wants a turn”).
- Do you have cosy and comfortable areas so that children can relax and feel comfortable talking about feelings? A great opportunity for this might be through sharing books or playing in the home corner.
- How do you react to emotions? Being neutral about emotions and not judging whether emotions were ‘good’ or ‘bad’ also supports children to use a wider range of emotional vocabulary.

I CAN Help enquiry service

Book a free phone call with one of our speech and language therapists on https://ican.org.uk/i-can-s-enquiry-service/
Alternatively, you can phone 020 7843 2544 or email enquiries@ican.org.uk

Talking Point https://ican.org.uk/i-cans-talking-point/
Visit this website for information about children’s speech, language and communication.
• Do you talk about your own emotions? Saying something like ‘Oh no, I dropped the bananas. I’m really cross as we haven’t got any for snack’ lets children see there is a reason for emotions and what they look like. This can help children to recognise and label emotions.
• Do you talk about how characters feel and respond to situations in books? Often even simple books have a narrative in which a character has a challenge they need to overcome or a puzzle they need to solve. For example, in Dear Zoo the central character is looking for a pet. How does he feel when this range of unsuitable pets is sent to him?
• During role play, take on the perspectives of different characters and talk about how they are feeling (e.g. “The dinosaur is upset because no one is listening to him!”).
• Share your favourite ideas for developing children’s emotional vocabulary with parents and carers so they can try them at home as well.

You can also e-mail your questions to help@ican.org.uk

* In this factsheet, for ease we use ‘spoken language’ throughout. We take a broad and inclusive definition. We are talking about supporting children through oracy. We are also talking about supporting children and young people with speech, language and communication needs. This includes those who speak using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and sign languages, such as British Sign Language.

References


(2) Lindsay, G., & Dockrell, J. E. (2012). Longitudinal patterns of behavioral, emotional and social difficulties and self-concepts in adolescents with a history of specific language impairment. Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 43, 445-460