Information on different ways to identify pupils who are struggling with communication

An introduction to speech, language and communication needs

The term 'speech, language and communication needs' (SLCN) is used to describe a wide range of issues that make it difficult for children and young people to communicate with others. This can be due to difficulties with speech, talking, or understanding what is said to them or with interacting with other people. How well adults understand and support SLCN can have a really important effect on the impact SLCN have on children and young people's lives.

HOW DOES THIS LINK TO THE CODE?

Under the 2014 Code of Practice, all schools **must** publish information on their website about how they implement their policy for SEN (known as the SEN Information Report). This **must** include information on '*policies for identifying children and young people with SEN and assessing their needs*' (section 6.79 of the Code). As such, it is very important that schools have a clear policy on how to identify and support students with SLCN. The Commitment provides a range of resources to support schools in early identification throughout all phases.

More detailed information around particular types of SLCN is provided from the Trust and its Consortium through the 'What support is available' links in Step 2.

How to identify pupils who are struggling with communication

When developing language, children go through the same stages; some will be quicker, others a little slower, but all should have reached certain stages by certain times.

If you have concerns about a pupil who is struggling with communication, there are many tools and resources to help you understand their needs better (see below).

Because of the links between language and attainment, literacy, behaviour, and social and emotional development, we'd really recommend that if you have concerns about a pupil in any of these areas, you also take a little time to think about their speech, language and communication skills. Sometimes hidden SLCN can be the root cause of other difficulties.

Below you can find out where you can get information on typical communication development, indicators of SLCN and structured tools to help you identify pupils who are struggling.

If you have concerns about a child's communication development, you will need to talk with their parents or carers and, if appropriate, get in touch with your local speech and language therapy department, which will be able to give help and advice about the next steps you might want to take.

Using typical development 'ages and stages' resources

One way to start looking at a pupil's difficulty with communication is to look at typical speech, language and communication development for their age group.

Speech, language and communication skills all follow expected patterns of development, so if you look at what a child typically should be able to do at their age, this will help to give a really clear picture across different areas and clarify whether they are on track or not.

The *Universally Speaking* booklets, which are free to download, provide 'ages and stages' information to find out whether your pupils are on the right track for their age group, what helps them learn to talk and listen, and what to do if you have concerns about any of the children you work with.

Universally Speaking has separate booklets available for ages 0-5, 5-11 and 11-18 years that contain information on typical development for each of the following aspects of speech, language and communication:

- Attention, listening and understanding
- Vocabulary
- Speech sounds
- Sentence building and grammar
- Storytelling and narrative
- Conversations and social interaction

Universally Speaking can be useful in a number of ways. For example:

- Use the 'Children should be able to…' sections to learn about typical development
- Use the 'How to check it out' sections to think about the pupils you know
- Use the 'Top 4 things to do' to support speaking and listening in school

The booklet for ages 5-11 has a pullout 'checklist' for pupils you're particularly concerned about, or see some of the other links below.

Please go to www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/universallyspeaking to download your copy.

Indicators of SLCN

If you are concerned about a pupil, another useful resource is an 'indicators checklist'. This is a little different from ages and stages resources as they set out things that you might see when pupils are struggling with their speech, language and communication. It will help you to clarify things and look more closely at your pupils' communication.

There are lots of different checklists available: to start with you might want to look at *Don't Get Me Wrong*, available at www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/dontgetmewrong and *Universally Speaking.*

Don't Get Me Wrong includes an indicators list for identifying SLCN, which is published by I CAN and adapted from work by Melanie Cross and Angela Sloan.[1]

An indicators list will guide you through some of the difficulties that a pupil may be experiencing in the classroom. As an introduction, below are some of the difficulties that pupils with SLCN may experience.

*SLCN can include the following difficulties with **speech**:*

- Speech that is difficult to understand, which might include difficulty in making different sounds
- Problems discriminating between speech sounds, so 'catch' and 'cat' or 'conscious' and 'conscience' might sound the same
- Stammering or stuttering where sounds or words are repeated or may be difficult to produce without effort
- An unusual and persistently harsh voice quality
- Difficulty using intonation to add to the meaning of what's been said

*SLCN can include the following difficulties with **language**:*

- Using sentence structures more appropriate for someone younger, for example, 'Me got them' at four years of age
- Problems linking sentences with words such as 'and', 'but', 'so', and 'then'
- Difficulty sequencing sentences to make a meaningful narrative such as explanations and stories
- Problems learning new words
- Difficulty finding the right words at the right time. This is also known as 'word finding' difficulties
- Limited vocabulary for emotions, thoughts or feelings as this impacts on the curriculum
- Difficulty understanding complex sentences. For example, someone with SLCN might misunderstand the statement 'the boy was kicked by the girl' and think that the boy did the kicking
- Difficulty understanding idioms such as 'don't hit the roof'

*SLCN can include the following difficulties with **communication**:*

- Limited eye contact
- Poor turn taking and difficulty with starting and ending conversations
- Problems getting the conversation back on track after two people have talked at once, or if there has been a misunderstanding between them
- Difficulty understanding or responding to feedback from the listener, for example, not noticing when someone is bored or doesn't understand something
- Difficulty staying on topic in conversation
- Problems using language to negotiate in discussions or arguments
- Difficulty understanding idioms or phrases such as 'get a grip'

1 Cross, M. & Sloan, M., (2004). "Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and communication problems: There is always a reason"

Using structured identification tools

Another way to gain a clearer picture of a pupil's speech, language and communication skills is to use structured identification tools. There are a number of commercially available screening or assessment tools which can be used in schools to identify pupils' SLCN. There is a list of these available in *Don't Get Me Wrong.* The Communication Trust also publishes a series of Progression Tools which are available to purchase on its website. The Tools aim to support teaching staff to identify children who may be struggling to develop their speech, language and communication skills. They can also be used to track progression of these skills over time or following interventions.

To find out more please go to www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/progressiontools

There may also be some locally developed materials available, so it would be useful to contact your local speech and language therapy service to find out more.

Don't forget!

If you have concerns about a child's communication development, you should talk with their parents and carers and, if appropriate, get in touch with your local speech and language therapy department which will be able to give help and advice about the next steps you might want to take.

Find out more information on your local service through Talking Point (www.talkingpoint.org.uk) or the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) (www.rcslt.org).