

# 1.7 million young futures

#YoungFutures

October 2022

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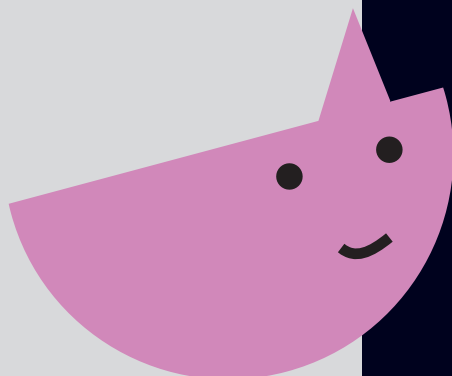
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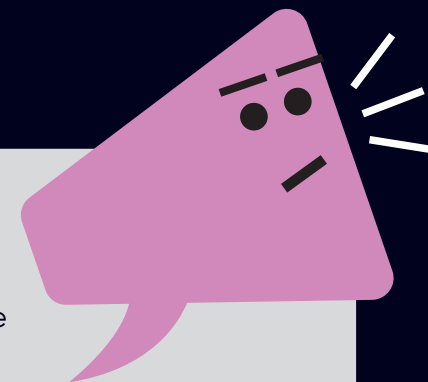


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# Executive summary



- Teachers now estimate that a shocking **1.7 million children in the UK are behind in talking and understanding words.**
- **Without the right support, children with challenges in talking and understanding words face huge hurdles** in learning to read, write, as well as other subjects. They will also face difficulties in making friends, staying in good mental health and in the future getting and holding down jobs and staying out of trouble.
- **Supporting children with speech and language challenges should be as much of a priority as literacy and numeracy.** Yet while successive Governments have invested in literacy and numeracy, they have continually overlooked this fundamental area and as many as 70% of teachers say that the Government has not prioritised this issue.
- With attainment for literacy and numeracy at an historic low, **it is time for Government and education leaders as a whole to reverse this trend and recognise the primacy of speech and language for learning and wellbeing.** This will help to support the recent targets on literacy and numeracy.
- **There is cost-effective support that can help children who are behind catch up with their peers quickly.** Preventative work to reduce the number of children with speech and language challenges is also ripe for investment. And for children with lifelong challenges, there are evidence-based interventions and support that will help them meet their potential.
- **Schools need more support to identify who is struggling.** A new tracking tool should be developed and made freely available so that schools understand the speech and language challenges of their children and who needs support.
- **Nursery staff, childminders and school staff need upskilling and training so they can better support the children they work with** and clear guidance is needed for schools and nurseries on which school and early years-based interventions and support are proven to work.
- To help **prevent speech and language challenges and to identify issues as early as possible**, support for early language development needs to become front and centre of the offer by the new Family Hubs.
- **Incentives also need to be put into the system** to ensure that provision of support for children with speech and language challenges is prioritised. This includes reviewing the Ofsted framework so that schools are judged on how they help children who are behind in their talking and understanding of words.
- **The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) needs to prioritise planning and investment in the Speech and Language Therapist workforce** so that specialist support is available to children who need this.
- **Multi-academy trusts, individual schools and local authorities should learn from existing good practice** and invest in workforce training on speech and language as well as short-term school-based interventions.

# Foreword

To build a prosperous future we need to give all our children the skills they need for a successful life. Most of us take being able to talk and understand words for granted. We don't think about what our life would be like if we found this difficult. But 1.7 million children are living this reality. Without help, they will find it harder to read, write and use numbers as well as learning other subjects. They'll also face challenges making friends and staying in good mental health and in the longer-term in getting a job and staying out of trouble.

At Speech and Language UK, we want every child with challenges talking and understanding words to look to the future with confidence. We design effective tools and training for nursery staff and schools as well as giving families the confidence and skills to help their child and pressing for policy change.

But all our schools, multi-academy trusts, local authorities, NHS and our Government also need to play their part to make sure that the education system is set up to spot and support those children who are struggling. This is even more urgent in the aftermath of repeated lockdowns and school closures.

Last year, our charity (under our previous name of I CAN) commissioned a poll of teachers to uncover the impact of Covid on children's

speech and language abilities. Teachers told us that the Government wasn't providing enough support for children struggling with this and that as a result, as many as 1.5 million children were at risk of not being able to talk or understand words at an age-appropriate level.

We made a number of recommendations to Government on how this could be addressed. While there has been some welcome recognition of the challenges, we have been sorely disappointed at how little action has been taken. A year on, we have undertaken further research to look again at the numbers of children who are falling behind, the impact the lack of support is having on children and young people and what needs to change.

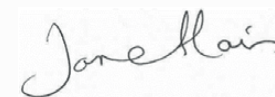
What we have found is alarming. Our research has revealed that more children than ever need help with speech and language challenges. At the same time, more teachers than before feel that the Government isn't focusing enough on speech and language, meaning the situation is only likely to get worse.

Yet, while the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted, schools and the wider system consistently focus on tackling illiteracy and innumeracy, political and education leaders are not paying the same attention to children's speech and language skills.

This is counter-productive – already Government statistics show that literacy and numeracy levels for primary school leavers are at the worst level for many years.<sup>1</sup> Our experience tells us that in no small part this is because children with speech and language challenges aren't getting the right support.

We have also spoken to parents and family members and young people themselves who told us that as well as not getting help to progress at school, a lack of support has resulted in social isolation and mental health issues.

**We need Government to wake up to the scale of this problem. And act.** On becoming Prime Minister, Liz Truss said her vision was of Britain as an 'aspiration nation ... where everyone everywhere has the opportunities they deserve'. If she is serious about this vision, we urge her and Kit Malthouse to take urgent action to give 1.7 million children the chance to be part of this future.



**Jane Harris**

Chief Executive,  
Speech and Language UK



<sup>1</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment-national-headlines/2021-22>



# Who are Speech and Language UK?



Our charity was founded in 1888 as the Invalid Children's Aid Association (later I CAN), supporting a wide range of disabled children with education, health and care. From early on, we enjoyed the support of the royal family and Queen Elizabeth II was our patron from 1953 until her recent death.

We are immensely grateful for the support that she and her sister – Princess Margaret (our President from 1957) – gave to our charity.

We have always concentrated our work on the greatest needs of children, which were not being met by other organisations or the Government. Over the years, this has led us to focus increasingly on children with challenges talking and understanding words. This is now our sole area of work and an area where we hold vast expertise. We develop innovative tools and training for schools and nurseries like our Talk Boost programme. We give advice and guidance to families. We run two special schools for children with the most complex speech and language challenges. And we push for policy change. This year, following consultation with professionals and families of children with speech and language challenges, we recognised our name needed to change to reflect the work we do.

In 2021/22, we directly impacted the lives of over 65,000 children, young people and their families. This included over 63,000 children and young people who took part in our interventions in early years settings and schools. We are making real change to children's lives – over 50% of children caught up with their peers after taking part in one of our interventions and 93% of parents said they would change the way they support their child's talking and understanding skills after we provided them with the knowledge and skills they needed.



# How many children?

**According to our research, at least 1.7 million children in this country are behind with talking and understanding of words.<sup>2</sup>**

In research we carried out last year, we estimated that 1.5 million children were at risk of falling behind. This new figure shows a marked increase and should be a catalyst for urgent action from Government so that we don't find even more children are behind in 2023.

**Wider research confirms this picture. The percentage of pupils formally identified as having a primary special need in speech, language and communication is steadily rising – up to 22.5% in 2021, compared with 18.8% in 2015.<sup>3</sup>**



Last year, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) reported that 73% of schools were worried about their pupil's communication and language.<sup>4</sup> Our research also confirms that the education profession is worried that the right action isn't being taken to address concerns – as many as 70% of teachers told us that the Government wasn't prioritising this issue. This is up from 63% of teachers in our survey last year.

The EEF research focused specifically on reception age children. What is notable from our latest poll is that children across different age groups are being impacted by the lack of catch-up support to help children's communication. 72% of teachers told us that students transitioning from year 6 to year 7 will struggle more with their speech and language in comparison to year groups who started secondary school before the coronavirus pandemic. This highlights how important it is to support pupils of all age groups who face challenges in talking and understanding words.

Importantly, even before the pandemic, it was clear that children with challenges talking and understanding words were not getting the help they needed to catch up with their peers, access learning in the most effective way for them or to develop socially. However, with increasing numbers of children needing help in the aftermath of the pandemic, Government action is needed more urgently than ever before.

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Voice 21 is the UK's oracy education charity. We work with schools to transform the learning and life chances of young people through talk, so that all children can use their voice for success in school and in life.

We support schools to provide a high-quality oracy education to all their students via our membership, Voice 21 Oracy Schools. Our work is particularly targeted at schools with the greatest need, those with above-average percentages of students eligible for Free School Meals. We're currently working with 840 schools across the UK and, since our launch in 2015, our work has benefited more than 290,000 young people.

In recent years and particularly in light of the pandemic's impact on schools, we have found that large numbers of children don't have the communication skills they need to engage in their learning effectively. We are working harder than ever to support more schools to provide a high-quality oracy education to all their young people, and alongside our partners in the education sector to ensure children can access any additional support they need." **Beccy Earnshaw, CEO, Voice 21**

<sup>2</sup> This figure was calculated by using mid-point analysis of a YouGov survey of 1,000 teachers in June 2022 asking "Approximately, what percentage of your class(es) do you think are behind with either their speaking or understanding language?" Calculated to be 18% of pupils.

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education (2015-2021)

<sup>4</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/new-pandemic-adversely-affected-young-childrens-development-with-fewer-reaching-expected-levels-by-the-end-of-reception-class>

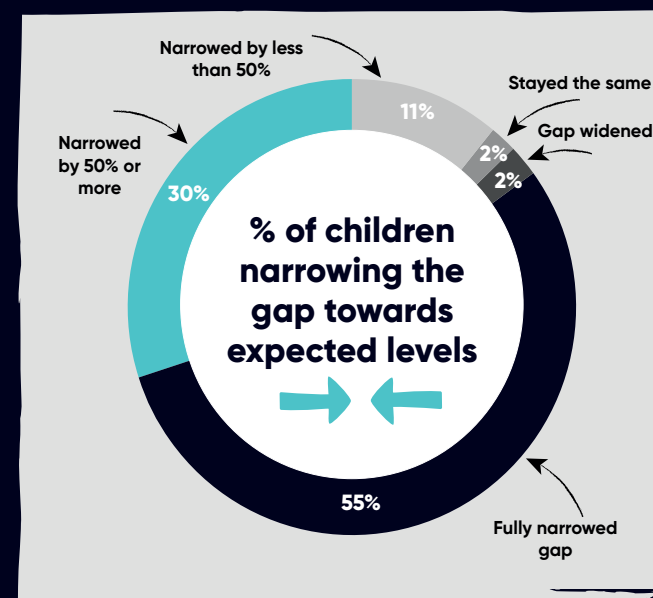
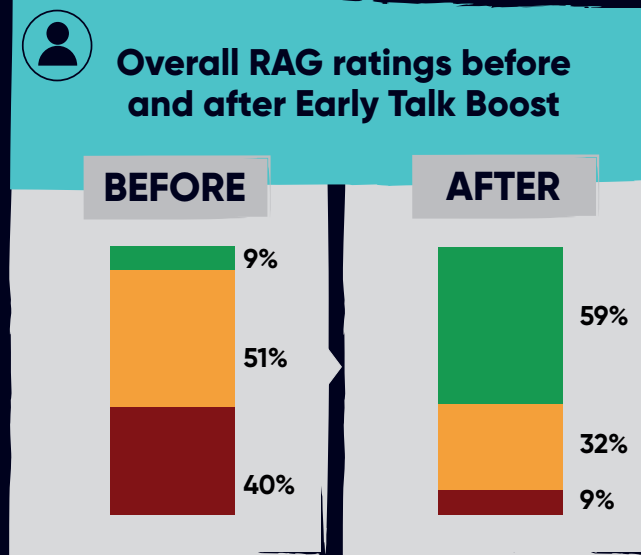
# What help do children with speech and language challenges need?

Around 400,000 children would benefit from a short speech and language programme, such as our Talk Boosts. If given at the right time this eight to ten week programme of three half hour sessions a week is proven to help more than half of the children who take part fully catch up with their peers. In some areas of the country, as many as 50% of children start school needing support of this kind. If all families knew how important early language is and had access to the right support, far fewer children would struggle to learn and make friends when they start school.



About 10% of all children need ongoing adapted teaching and specialist support as they have a lifelong speech and language condition called Developmental Language Disorder or another condition which affects speech and language. Most can make progress in mainstream education if teachers understand their challenges and tweak their approaches and specialists are there to support them. In adulthood, they may also need reasonable adjustments in the workplace and adaptations from local services. The biggest barrier for these children is others' lack of knowledge and understanding and access to the right support.

Very behind Just behind Typical





# Impact of speech and language challenges



We surveyed over 1,000 people with experience of speech and language challenges – whether as a parent or family member of a child with these difficulties or as a young person who has challenges with talking and understanding words. **86% of those who responded to our survey told us that they had suffered negative consequences as a result of not being understood or not understanding what others say.**<sup>5</sup>

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**“People having low expectations of my son due to his speech difficulties and / or talking about him negatively whilst he is present because they assume he doesn’t understand”. Parent**

Our survey revealed that difficulties making friends, being excluded from social activities and experiencing bullying are common for children with speech and language challenges. In the last 2–3 years alone, of those in our survey who said they had experienced negative consequence because of their difficulties, 56% said they had experienced difficulties making and keeping friends, over a third (35%) had been bullied or excluded by their peers and a third (32%) had experienced not being invited to birthday parties or other social events as a result of their speech and language challenges. Having difficulties talking and understanding words can also result in young people excluding themselves from social situations – over a fifth (22%) had not accepted invitations to social events due to anxiety related to their challenges.

As well as the social impact, our respondents also told us of the potential impact of their challenges on progress at school. In the last 2–3 years, 52% of those who had suffered negative consequences said that they had lost motivation or had given up trying as a result of their speech and language challenges. Over a third (36%) had got into trouble because of difficulties expressing themselves and more than a fifth (22%) had refused to go to school.

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**“Education slipping due to being removed out of classroom to ‘draw’ because the classroom work is deemed to be too difficult for him to understand. My son spent an entire academic year in the cloakroom or corridor drawing!”**

**Parent**

Given both the social impact and the impact on educational progress of not getting the right help with challenges talking and understanding words, it is perhaps unsurprising that more than a quarter (27%) told us their child had experienced mental health problems in the last 2–3 years alone.

“

**“Went through a period of self harming when frustrated when he could not produce clear speech.” Parent**

<sup>5</sup> In this section, the use of the word ‘they’ denotes the young person with challenges with talking and understanding words regardless of whether the responses came from family members or the individuals themselves



And we know that children's futures are damaged for many years to come if they don't get the help they need. Children with language disorders in pre-school and early primary years are about twice as likely to develop social, emotional and mental health difficulties.<sup>6</sup>



**"Children with poor mental health are 5 times more likely than peers to have primary language deficits** and at least 50% of adolescents referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services are found to have language deficits on assessment. Our recent research demonstrates that in the first year of school, children with Developmental Language Disorder are twice as likely as peers to have clinical levels of social, emotional, and behavioural challenges. These difficulties persist, and are predicted by early language deficits even after accounting for factors such as general cognitive skills and socio-economic disadvantage. We have also found recently that language supports the development of social-emotional learning, especially emotion recognition and emotion regulation, skills, which in turn predict symptoms of anxiety and depression as children move into adolescence.

Children with speech and language challenges are at an extra disadvantage if they develop mental health problems as we use language to both assess wellbeing and deliver mental health interventions. Parents and young people with language disorders report that traditional interventions are not appropriate and increase distress due to their high reliance on oral language in 'talking therapies' leaving many children unable to access support.

We need to put in adequate support for all children with speech and language challenges as an urgent priority, as well as developing new mental health interventions that are usable for children with lifelong speech and language challenges." **Professor Courtenay Norbury, Principal Investigator, Surrey Communication and Language in Education Study**

If children with challenges talking and understanding words don't get the help they need, they leave primary school without the literacy and numeracy skills they need. Children assessed as having poor language at age 5 are six times more likely to be behind in English at age 11 than those with good language and eleven times more likely to be behind in Maths at age 11.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, only 19% of children with speech, language and communication needs achieved the expected-

<sup>6</sup> Yew, S. and O'Kearney, R. (2013) Emotional and behavioural outcomes later in childhood and adolescence for children with specific language impairments: meta-analyses of controlled prospective studies. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 54: 516-524

<sup>7</sup> Save the Children (2015) Early Language Development and Children's Primary School Attainment in English and Maths: New Research Findings. London: Save the Children.

level in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary school compared with 65% of all pupils.<sup>8</sup> They also do worse in core subjects in year 11. Just 10% of children with speech, language and communication needs gained a 9-5 pass at GCSE in English and Maths, compared to over 40% of pupils nationally in 2019.<sup>9</sup>

"Language knowledge underpins success in learning to read and write, and is an important factor in determining whether students make good progress in literacy. Any student with spoken language or literacy challenges will face barriers with accessing the school curriculum."

Our research focuses on vocabulary knowledge and reading as pupils progress through primary and secondary school. Words are the building blocks of spoken and written language so rich vocabulary knowledge is key to language and literacy success. In addition, when reading skills are secure, reading provides important opportunities for developing vocabulary knowledge, particularly for those words that are not typically encountered in everyday conversations. In upper primary and secondary school, demands on language and literacy are high. Yet, teachers report that they do not have the knowledge and resources that they need to provide effective support for those who have language and literacy challenges. We must ensure that initial teacher education and continuing professional development build capacity in language needs and language development. There is also a need for more evidence-informed resources that provide practical strategies and tools for teachers." **Professor Jessie Ricketts (Royal Holloway, University of London) Dr Laura Shapiro (Aston University)**

They are also more likely to struggle at work. Children with poor vocabulary at age five are twice as likely to experience periods of unemployment as adults.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps most worryingly, they are more likely to get caught up in the criminal justice system. As many as 71% of sentenced children in the youth justice system between April 2019 and March 2020 had speech, language and communication needs.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 2019, National curriculum assessments: key stage 2, 2019 (revised): National, local authority and regional tables, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-curriculum-assessments-key-stage-2-2019-revised>

<sup>9</sup> Department for Education. (2019). Key stage 4 performance 2019 (revised): National characteristics tables, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-performance-2019-revised>

<sup>10</sup> Law, J., Rush, R., Schoon, I., & Parsons, S. (2009). Modeling developmental language difficulties from school entry into adulthood: literacy, mental health, and employment outcomes. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 52(6), 1401-1416.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-review-consultation-yjb-response/send-review-consultation-yjb-response>



# What have the UK Government done so far?



## The positives

In July 2018, the Department for Education (DfE) announced the government's ambition to halve in ten years the proportion of children who finish reception year without the communication, language and literacy skills they need to thrive, but since then their actions have been piecemeal at best. Speech and Language UK has welcomed a number of different Government actions and initiatives aimed at meeting this goal. For example, there is a strong focus on communication and language in the Early Years Foundation Stage for children aged 1-5, which sets out statutory expectations on early years providers. Similarly, we welcomed the centrality of communication and language development in the Early Years Professional Development Programme, which targets training to early years practitioners who work with disadvantaged children. Early evaluations have shown an increase in practitioners' confidence in supporting children's speech and language as well as reported improved outcomes for the children who participants of the training work with.<sup>12</sup> This shows that progress can be made with the right focus and ambition.

In 2019 the DfE launched Hungry Little Minds, a three-year campaign to encourage parents and carers to engage in activities that support their child's early language and literacy.<sup>13</sup> The intention behind this campaign is laudable: aiming to prevent speech and language challenges by giving parents ideas and games to help their children develop their talking and understanding of words. However, more thought needs to be given to those families who are digitally excluded or find implementing the strategies hard.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/about-us/news/early-years-professional-development-programme-pos>

<sup>13</sup> <https://hungrylittleminds.campaign.gov.uk/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/family-hubs-and-start-for-life-programme-local-authority-guide>

This and the BBC's Tiny Happy People need to be part of an overall strategy to prevent speech and language challenges.<sup>14</sup> The more we can prevent, the more we can direct resources to children with lifelong speech and language challenges who need ongoing and specialist support. Both these programmes should be evaluated and the learning used to ensure a joined up approach to messaging and support is provided for all new parents and their families.



## The wasted opportunities

It has generally been policy initiatives in the early years that have better recognised the importance of supporting children with the development of their speech and language skills. That's why we were so disappointed by the missed opportunity by Government to make sure that early language development was built into the roll out of the new Family Hubs.<sup>15</sup> Early language development and speech and language support are only mentioned in passing in the guidance on what the hubs should be doing to support families with babies. There is investment going into a programme on the Home Learning Environment on speech and language, but this is for 3 and 4 year olds. Given how much of a predictor language development is for a child's future outcomes, it is a shocking oversight not to make it a much more central part of the offer of the new hubs and at an earlier age.

Covid recovery programmes have done very little to focus minds on supporting children who are behind in talking and understanding words. The Government made a very welcome investment in the Nuffield Early Language Intervention programme (NELI) for reception age children to help them catch up. However, it was limited as it only sought to help one age group when children of all ages suffered as a result of repeated school closures. The vast majority of investment in education recovery went to the National Tutoring Programme and to the recovery premium which goes directly to schools to support pupil premium eligible pupils and pupils in specialist settings such as special schools, special units and pupil referral units (PRUs).

The National Tutoring Programme has a clear focus on specific academic subjects – maths, English and science for primary school with the addition of humanities and modern foreign languages for secondary school.<sup>16</sup> There is a recognition that other areas of focus may be needed for children with SEND, but most children with challenges talking and understanding words won't be identified as having a special need or disability. We haven't heard of any example of tutoring being used specifically to help with speech and language challenges.

We also lack evidence on how the recovery premium is being used and whether it is helping children with challenges talking and understanding words to catch up with their peers. The current incentives in the education system – for example Ofsted inspections and what is included in Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) – are likely to focus school leaders' minds on reading, writing and maths. More widely, as set out in this report, in order for the recovery premium to be spent effectively to help those with challenges talking and understanding words, teachers need help that they aren't currently getting to spot those who need extra support and guidance on what help would be most cost effective.

**All too often we find that policies and different education initiatives fail to recognise the importance of focusing on the support needed for children with challenges talking and understanding words. The Schools White Paper is a particular case in point. It came with an ambitious target for 90% of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. Yet it was almost silent on the importance of supporting children to talk and understand words. Without an associated plan to improve children's speech and language, the 90% target will not be met while the millions of pounds spent on phonics and reading recovery programmes for children will be wasted unless equal attention is paid to supporting children with talking and understanding words. Government policy needs to recognise that behind its focus on literacy and numeracy is a gaping hole where it should be recognising the primacy of speech and language skills in learning.**

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-tutoring-programme-guidance-for-schools-2022-to-2023/national-tutoring-programme-guidance-for-schools-2022-to-2023#Alternative-tutoring-interventions>





# What can we do?

The good news for us as a nation is that if challenges with talking and understanding words can be identified early and the right support put in place, a huge number of children can be helped to catch up. For example, at Speech and Language UK, we run a programme called Early Talk Boost for nursery aged children. Over half of children who go through the programme catch up with their peers completely after just three 30-minute sessions per week over nine weeks.

More widely the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has assessed these interventions as cost effective. They found that on average, pupils who take part in spoken language interventions make approximately five additional months' progress over a year, with some studies showing progress of up to six months for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is a very high level of progress compared to other programmes to support educational progress. For example, the use of phonics accounts for five months of additional progress and reducing class sizes accounts for two months' additional progress. Reading comprehension strategies showed a similar success to spoken language interventions at six months.<sup>17</sup> All of these areas have higher levels of attention and investment from Government than speech and language challenges.

## The place of speech and language in our education system

More fundamentally, leaders across the education system need to re-evaluate the role of speech and language within our education system. From its first days, our education system has prioritised the 3Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic – and hasn't recognised that speech and language skills underpin progress in all those areas. With the evidence before us, now is the time to change that perspective and recognise the primacy of speech and language.

<sup>17</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit>

Our education system has in recent decades made phonics and reading recovery programmes part of the core of school activity. Faced with this evidence, it must now do the same for speech and language challenges. This means ensuring that speech and language development is built into the mainstream of education policy, locally and nationally. The new Education Secretary, Kit Malthouse, should set out an ambition for our schools and nurseries to place speech and language at the heart of the curriculum, so that teachers no longer say that it isn't a priority for the DfE. The Department should set out an urgent action plan to make this the case and ensure that speech and language is built into education policies and initiatives – from school level to multi-academy trust and local authority levels, as well as nationally within the DfE, Ofsted, the NHS and the wider system. This includes looking at the work of existing programmes such as the Family Hubs, English Hubs, the National Tutoring Programme and recovery premium so that they address speech and language challenges as well as the new actions below.

### Schools and nurseries taking charge

Last year we worked directly with 6,000 schools and nurseries across the UK. These settings understand how speech and language challenges can impact on a child's wider development and educational outcomes and are acting themselves to put in support. Many are frustrated by long waits for specialist speech and language therapy and want solutions they can implement themselves such as our Talk Boost programmes, while recognising that some children will only thrive with specialist support. Some have put in interventions to help children with short-term or preventable challenges. Others have trained up their workforces more generally to work with a wide range of children. These schools and early years settings are directly having an impact on children's lives and helping to reserve specialist support for those who really need it.



“

**The gains in attention, listening and communication and language in particular were amazing. Especially around vocabulary and sentence building.” (Teacher, Child’s Hill School)**

### Ellen’s experience of mainstream education



#### Roisin Dormer, Ellen’s mum told us:

“Ellen is 18 and has Developmental Language Disorder. Transition from primary to secondary school was a real challenge. Ellen’s experience was one of low expectations, a poverty of ambition and unequal access to the curriculum.

Throughout secondary school, there was little accommodation for Ellen. There was no accountability or checking that Ellen’s Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) was being implemented.

She spent a lot of her time withdrawn from classes working solely with a Teaching Assistant (TA) with few chances for her to interact with classmates, leading to isolation in both the social and learning context. Ironically the interventions implemented to support her, excluded Ellen. She was segregated and marginalised – working away from the mainstream classroom environment.

The pace of the day and the ‘one size fits all timetable’ did not help. Ellen was not given adequate time to process information. She was in a noisy atmosphere with time spent listening to the teachers talking at pace getting through content and copying lengthy notes, overloading her working memory causing her to zone out, so progress was limited. Lots of Ellen’s tasks were undertaken by the TA, not Ellen. So Ellen went under the radar.

Ellen has said the thing she found most frustrating was being misrepresented by those supporting her. She could not control her own narrative as others were speaking for her. The teacher often asked the TA rather than asking Ellen herself. People spoke about her and not to her. Assumptions were made and she was underestimated. Often, she felt invisible.”



## Importance of identification and getting the right help

Maeve, now aged 11, was diagnosed with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) at the age of 9 after several years of struggling in school with learning and making friendships which was having a huge impact on her emotional wellbeing. Maeve found learning and using new words in the classroom difficult which made her feel very frustrated. Learning new words before lessons helped. She needed teachers to talk more slowly to give her time to process and understand information.

When younger, Maeve experienced difficulties with friendships which made her very unhappy. She found it difficult to understand the changing rules of games and struggled to repair communication breakdowns. Maeve wanted her peers to understand DLD and what they could do to help her, so she gave a presentation to her class. She told them they could help by explaining things slowly and by being patient with her. This really helped Maeve's friends understand what they could do to help and resulted in more stable and happier relationships.

Despite the challenges that Maeve encounters, she is an inspiration to all of those around her. She has so many strengths and talents which include representing her primary school at regional sports events and being CEO of Forest School including designing the name and logo.

Being diagnosed with DLD helped Maeve's family, friends and teachers have a better understanding of why she finds certain things challenging and what they needed to do to help her. More importantly, the diagnosis has helped Maeve understand herself better. She now knows that her difficulties are not because she doesn't listen or work hard enough, and understands she has 'a difference in her brain, which makes her special' (Maeve's words). DLD is a small but important part of Maeve's story. For a long time, it was a missing piece of the puzzle but once identified, it enabled the right package of support to be put in place.



## Improving earlier identification

The first step to getting the right help in place is spotting who needs help. Some commercial speech and language screening tools are available to schools already, but they are expensive and can be time consuming to administer, which can act as a disincentive for schools to use them. We need to remove these barriers as soon as possible. When it comes to early years the Government commissioned the development of the Early Language Identification Measure (ELIM) to be used as part of the 2-2.5 year review by Health Visitors to help identify speech and language challenges. We believe that the Department for Education should use learnings from the development of the ELIM to commission the development of a new free tool for class teachers that could be used at the start of key stages 1 and 2. This tool would help measure and track where children are with talking and understanding words and identify who needs extra help.

Anonymised data from both this new tracking tool and the existing ELIM data should be collected and published to support planning and commissioning of appropriate services, as well as evaluation of existing supports and interventions.



## Upskilling and training staff

To help class teachers use the tool and identify children who need extra help, as well as helping them adapt their teaching and knowing where to refer children on to, it is also essential that they are upskilled, trained and supported. Teachers themselves tell us they don't feel sufficiently equipped to help those who are behind in talking and understanding words. In our poll, 41% of teachers said they didn't have adequate training in this area, rising to 50% of teachers with 5 years or less teaching experience. It is worrying that the level of training is getting worse with time, not better, a clear sign that more action is needed.



The recent Schools White Paper highlighted the importance of good quality teachers.<sup>18</sup> It said:

“

**“Improving the quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for children, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)”.**

We agree. Yet so far Government has proposed nothing to improve the knowledge and expertise of teachers to support the estimated 1.7 million children with challenges in talking and understanding words. To meet the ambitions of the White Paper and given that our research shows that it is newer teachers who need the training the most, we believe that as a priority, the Government should review and update the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and the Early Career Framework (ECF). This review should ensure that ITT and ECF are properly equipping teachers to identify children with challenges talking and understanding words and how to support them. Ongoing training programmes for existing teachers to upskill them in this area will also be vital.

The SEND Review proposes a new National Professional Qualification (NPQ) for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs). Given that speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are the most common type of special educational need, the new qualification must include a mandatory component on identifying and supporting these children. SENCOs should then be in a position to support class teachers to help children in their classroom with these needs.

<sup>18</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1063601/Opportunity\\_for\\_all\\_strong\\_schools\\_with\\_great\\_teachers\\_for\\_your\\_child\\_\\_web\\_-\\_accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063601/Opportunity_for_all_strong_schools_with_great_teachers_for_your_child__web_-_accessible.pdf)







## Guidance for schools

To support teachers and the wider school once needs have been identified, we urge the DfE to produce guidance for schools on what help and resources are available to improve children's abilities to talk and understand words.

There are a wide range of strategies and interventions developed by a number of different organisations that can be used to help children with both short- and long-term language challenges. However, there is very little information for teachers on the specific programmes and approaches that work and which pupils they are most effective for. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is clear that oral language interventions are effective, however, it holds very little evidence on the effectiveness of specific programmes and currently only recommends the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) for reception aged children to catch up with their peers. However, NELI is just for one particular age group and there is a clear need for teachers to get information on evidenced interventions for both younger and older children. Further guidance is also needed to ensure teachers can get information on how to help children with a range of different needs. This will include looking at the evidence base for interventions used by speech and language therapists as well as those designed as support and programmes to be used by classroom teachers. We are glad that EEF has recognised that it needs to develop more evidence on speech and language challenges in its latest funding round – but some guidance should be produced in the meantime so that schools and nurseries are not left in the dark.

At Speech and Language UK, we work with a range of academics and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists to host a What Works database on evidenced interventions to support children's speech, language and communication development. This was originally funded by the DfE and all content in it is reviewed by a range of academics. We need to make the most of this existing knowledge base in developing new guidance for teachers.

We should align this database with the Education Endowment Foundation research to make it as easy as possible for schools to get help to children in their classrooms with challenges in talking and understanding words.



## Early years and prevention

As well as spotting children who are struggling and putting in place the right support to help them, action should also be taken to prevent children from developing challenges in talking and understanding words in the first place. Exposure at an early age to different everyday conversations, make believe play and reading books as well as outings and visits outside the home all make a significant positive impact on children's language development. The quality of exposure to this range of experiences and conversation is a key predictor of a child's future success. Importantly, we also know that there are specific activities and supports we can put in place with parents to help them to support their child's early language development and prevent later difficulties.

We are calling for local authorities to work much more closely with local health services to ensure a joined-up pathway of advice and support for early language is in place right from the start of new parents' journey, just as it is for diet or vaccinations. This Government has already done much of the leg work on how support for early language should be organised at a local level through the development of Best Start in Life.<sup>19</sup> We believe it should be a requirement of the new Family Hubs to support the implementation of this guidance.

The Department for Education should set out a strategy to prevent speech and language challenges, based on learning from the current Hungry Little Minds and Tiny Happy People campaigns. Families need to know the simple steps that they can take to promote their child's development.



<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-start-in-speech-language-and-communication>

# Recommendations

**To support the estimated 1.7 million children who are behind in their talking and understanding of words the education system must change. We need families to know how they can help their child's speech and language skills, we need children with challenges to be spotted earlier and early years and school staff to have the right skills to support this group of children.**

## **To change the lives of 1.7 million children, the Department for Education must:**

- ! Recognise that its previous work on speech and language challenges has been insufficient and commit to shifting the education system to recognising the primacy of speech and language.
- ! Re-align existing programmes and initiatives on literacy and numeracy to put talking and understanding words at their heart. Ensure that any investment in English Hubs in particular includes funding for programmes to help with talking and understanding words, recognising that some difficulties with literacy are actually a speech and language challenge.
- ! Amend the Family Hubs guidance so that they can support children with speech and language challenges before the age of 3.
- ! Require Family Hubs to bring together local partners to implement Best start in speech, language and communication: Guidance to support local commissioners and service leads, published just 2 years ago by Public Health England along with the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Department for Education (DfE).
- ! Set out an overall strategy to prevent speech and language challenges, based on learning from Hungry Little Minds and Tiny Happy People.
- ! Commission the development of a freely available tool to help classroom teachers in key stages 1 and 2 to measure and track student progress in talking and understanding words and identify who needs extra help.
- ! Collect and publish anonymised data from teachers using the new tool as well as from the Early Language Identification Measure (ELIM) to inform planning and commissioning of services to support children who are behind in talking and understanding words.
- ! Review and update the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and the Early Careers Framework (ECF) to equip teachers early in their careers with the knowledge and skills to spot children with challenges talking and understanding words, know how to adapt their teaching and to know where they can get extra help.
- ! Develop ongoing training programmes for existing teachers to keep knowledge and skills up to date and ensure all teachers are equipped to use the proposed tool to measure and track progress in talking and understanding words.
- ! Ensure content on talking and understanding words is deepened and broadened across the National Professional Qualification (NPQ) system.
- ! Ensure the new Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) qualification includes training in speech and language challenges (SLCN) and is conditional on achieving a good level of knowledge in this area.
- ! Produce guidance for schools and teachers on what works for children with challenges in talking and understanding words, whether it is a preventable/short-term or lifelong challenge.
- ! Recognise that Covid recovery initiatives to date have not resulted in adequate catch up support for children with challenges talking and understanding words. This means both reviewing how the National Tutoring Programme and the recovery premium could be better deployed for this group of children as well as ensuring their needs are at the heart of any future Covid recovery initiatives.

More widely, those responsible for shaping the system in which schools operate – from national and local education policymakers to decision makers in the NHS, as well as other Government departments and arm's length bodies, should act so that supporting children with speech and language challenges is incentivised in the system. Only then will every child be able to face the future with confidence. This means:

- **Ofsted** should review its inspection framework to make sure that schools are judged on how they help children who are behind in their talking and understanding of words.
- The **Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC)** should invest in workforce planning and development for Speech and Language Therapists so that children who need specialist support can get it in a timely manner.
- **The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE)** should develop a new guideline on Developmental Language Disorder to help clinicians better identify children who are struggling with talking and understanding words and to guide commissioners on the cost-effective supports and interventions they should be commissioning at a local level. Once produced, these guidelines should be used to inform future plans of the Integrated Care Boards.
- **NHS Choices** should develop advice content on speech and language challenges to reflect the prevalence of these conditions, including for Developmental Language Disorder which affects 7.6% of children.

**Local authorities, multi-academy trusts and schools should:**

- Learn from existing good practice in areas like Blackburn.
- Review their own workforce's training needs and commission training for teachers, teaching assistants, nursery workers and childminders so they understand how to spot and support children with speech and language challenges.

**As an authority Blackburn with Darwen has invested in a number of initiatives to support children's speech and language development**

because they understand that this is a key skill which many of the children in the authority lack. All pre-school settings and reception classes are required to use the WellComm screening tool and the data is collected centrally. The authority has also invested in the oracy programme run by Voice 21. Blackburn with Darwen's Special educational needs and disability (SEND) Support Service includes a DLD Team, consisting of specialist advisory teachers, specialist support practitioners and a speech and language therapist. They work with mainstream schools to build capacity to support children and young people with speech and language challenges in mainstream schools. They do this by building capacity within schools to carry out small group interventions and by helping schools to understand how to incorporate language development into their lessons. However the team feels the impact of these initiatives is limited because schools have little capacity and scope to focus on speech and language. There are systemic disincentives such as the expectation in terms of curriculum delivery, attainment and Ofsted focus which mean that successful implementation of their work depend on the goodwill and vision of a few schools. Their success is in spite of the system instead of because of it, in order to enable all schools to have an inclusive approach there needs to be a SEND system in place which includes incentives and rewards for this approach.



- Commission interventions to run in their own schools and childcare settings as a complementary alternative to referring children for specialist speech and language support.
- Share resources with families so they understand how to support children's development.
- Work together with the new **Integrated Care Boards**, established as a result of the Health and Care Act 2022 to create local plans across education and health for children with speech and language challenges from low-cost interventions delivered in schools to individual support from speech and language therapists.

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