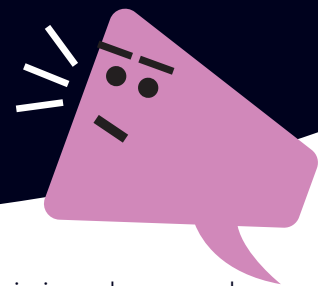


Our manifesto

for the next general election



If the parties are serious about helping the 1.9 million children struggling with talking and understanding words, then they need to include these policies in their manifesto:

Training

1. All teachers and early years staff should receive training on how to support children's speech, language and communication skills. This should include training on how to spot a child who is struggling. They also need to know where to refer children for further support and possible diagnosis, if necessary.

Identification

2. Schools need to be able to measure and track children's talking and understanding of words in the same way they do literacy and numeracy. We need a free tool that can be used at the start of KS1 and KS2 by class teachers so that they can spot when children are struggling. Currently schools must pay commercial rates to do this, which many schools can't afford.

What Works

3. Schools and nurseries need to know what is available to help children with speech and language challenges. We need guidance about what evidence-based tools and programmes work best, and which might be most appropriate for each school or early years setting.

Mental health

4. There needs to be better recognition throughout Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) of the high proportion of children with mental health problems who also have speech and language challenges. Staff should be trained in how to identify signs of possible speech and language challenges in the children and young people they work with. As well as this, more research is needed into how to adapt mental health treatments so they work for children and young people with speech and language challenges.

The system

5. New parents deserve advice and support on their child's early language development right from the start, just like they get for diet or vaccinations.

The Government should commission a large-scale national campaign to undo the damage of the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis on speech, language and communication skills.

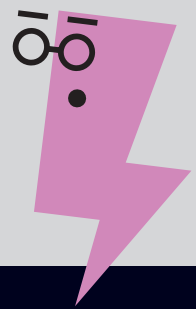
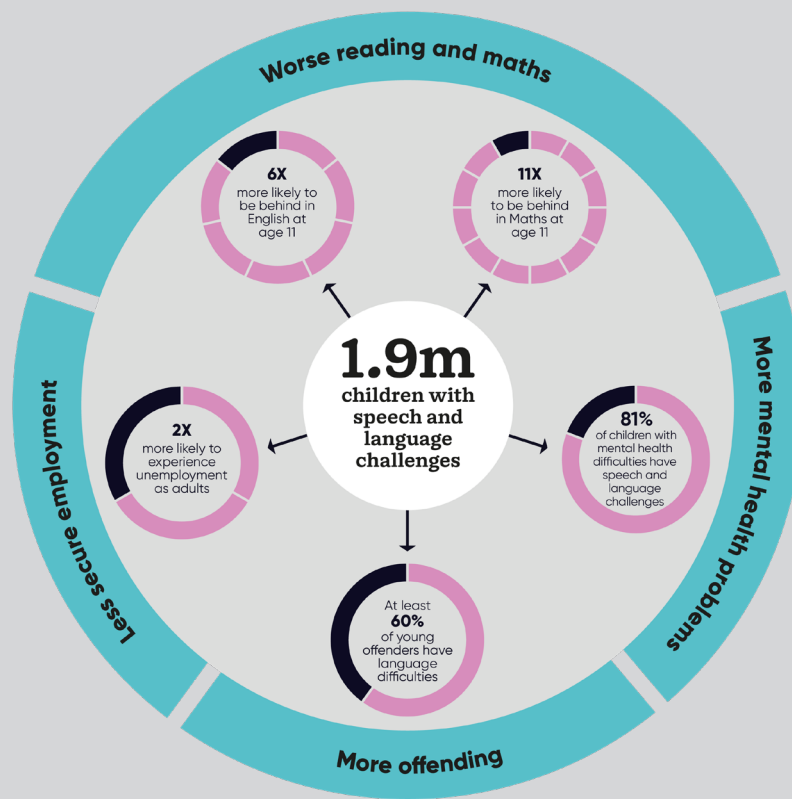
6. Schools should include speech and language in their improvement and development plans and should be held accountable for this. In the short-term, Ofsted should revise their guidelines so that they are more ambitious about what is expected from our educational institutions as language development underpins children's progress in all areas of learning.

Early years

7. Family Hubs should be able to provide early language support to parents of children younger than three years old. At the moment the funding makes it hard for them to provide any support to new parents around language development before the age of three. We want early language programmes available in every Family Hub.
8. The Early Years Professional Development Programme which is providing vital training for staff in supporting speech and language development, should continue. It's currently due to end in March 2025 having only reached 3% of the current early years workforce. The programme also covers maths skills and emotional development.

Specialists

9. There is a massive need for more speech and language therapists and many other types of specialists that help children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). We need proper workforce planning and training, with the Government working with us and our partners in the SEND in the Specialists coalition, to ensure there is enough specialist support available for children with life-long challenges.
10. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) should develop guidance on Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) so that NHS Trusts and families are clear about what support is needed to get the most effective outcomes for children and young people.



At Speech and Language UK, we are working to help the 1.9 million children in the UK who currently face challenges in talking and understanding words.

Last year, we directly reached 80,234 children by designing tools and training for nurseries and schools and giving advice and guidance to families. We generate new practices from our two special schools for children with the most complex speech and language challenges. We give free advice and guidance to families and young people. We believe that speech, language and communication skills are fundamental to a child’s development and ability to thrive later in life. We want to ensure that help is given to the one million children and young people with lifelong speech and language challenges and that speech, language and communication skills are prioritised throughout children’s education.

Even before the pandemic, our education system had problems identifying and helping children who were struggling with talking and understanding words. Since the Covid lockdowns, the problem has only been exacerbated. Last year we published a report which found a growing number of children face challenges talking and understanding words – from an estimated 1.7 million in 2022 to 1.9 million in 2023 – a marked increase of 200,000.

Research shows that in some parts of the country even before the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, up to 50% of children started school struggling to talk and understand words.¹ If they continue to struggle, this will affect their socialisation, mental health, educational and employment outcomes as well as their likelihood of ending up in the criminal justice system. But if their challenges are identified early, low cost programmes can be put in place from age two, allowing most to catch up with their peers, improving their outcomes and saving on costly public services.

More can also be done for the one million children and young people with lifelong speech and language challenges, if the Government is prepared to train teachers in how to adapt their practices and develop a proper workforce plan that will provide enough specialists to help everyone who needs it.

We need all parties to start facing up to the fact that this is a significant and growing problem, with ramifications being felt throughout society. If they all include our suggestions in their manifestos then hopefully, whoever forms the next government, can start helping the 1.9 million children currently struggling with talking and understanding words.

¹ Locke, A., Ginsborg, J. & Peers, I. (2002). Development and disadvantage: implications for the early years and beyond. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 2002, 37 (10), 3-15