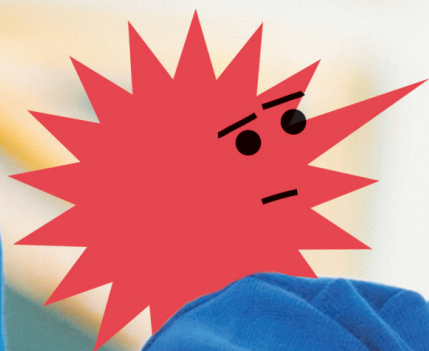


Speech and
Language UK



A perfect storm: **Mental health** and speech and language challenges

speechandlanguage.org.uk

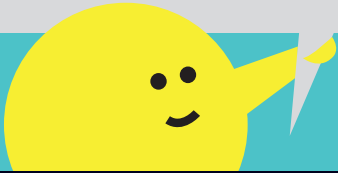
Supported by



Speech and Language UK is the operating name of I CAN Charity, a registered charity in England and Wales (210031) and Scotland (SC039947), which is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (00099629). Registered address: 17-21 Wenlock Road, London, N1 7GT.

About Speech and Language UK

Our vision is that every child who is facing challenges with talking and understanding words can look to the future with confidence. We give children and young people the skills they need so they aren't left behind, waiting to be understood. We do this by creating tools for schools and nurseries, giving advice and guidance to families, generating new practices from our two special schools, and putting pressure on politicians.



Introduction

Children with speech and language challenges are more likely to struggle with mental health issues than their peers. Yet they're also less likely to be able to get mental health support when they need it.

This shocking double disadvantage is robbing young people of a happy, healthy childhood. But it doesn't have to be this way.

The facts are clear. Right now, two million children in the UK are struggling with talking and understanding words. Too often left isolated, unheard, and misunderstood, it's no surprise this can have a devastating impact on their mental health. 81% of children with emotional and behavioural issues have significant speech and language challenges, often unidentified.

These children desperately need help. But many schools don't have speech and language support in place beyond the early years. And speech and language therapy services are oversubscribed, overstretched, and under-resourced. What's more, accessing and benefiting from things like traditional talking therapies is challenging – if not impossible – for children who struggle with talking and understanding words.

A lack of collaboration between speech and language therapy and mental health services is making things worse, delaying crucial early intervention. And professionals in schools, nurseries, and mental health services are often not given the training on speech and language challenges they need to support every child effectively.

Thankfully, the solutions are as clear as the facts. We know what needs to be done. We know how to do it. By coming together to create change at national and local levels, we can build mental health services that work for every child – including those with speech and language challenges. And we can put in place speech and language support that reduces children's chances of developing mental health problems in the first place.

This report's recommendations are logical, practical, and grounded in evidence. They will have real impact. **We must invest in the next generation with urgency and compassion. And give children with speech and language challenges – and our society – the opportunity to thrive.**

Jane Harris

Chief Executive, Speech and Language UK

Andy Bell

Chief Executive, Centre for Mental Health



Key figures



- Currently, **2 million children in the UK** are struggling with talking and understanding words.¹



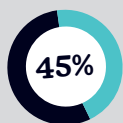
- Children and young people with speech and language challenges are at **greater risk of developing mental health problems like anxiety or depression.**²



- More children and young people than ever are struggling with their mental health. **1 in 5 children and young people (aged 8 to 25) experienced a mental health problem in 2023,**³ up from 1 in 9 in 2017.



- **81% of children with mental health problems** have significant speech and language challenges, often unidentified.⁴



- **45% of young people** referred to mental health services have been found to have difficulties with language skills.⁵



- Children and young people with mental health problems are **five times more likely** to have problems with speech and language.⁶

1 Speech and Language UK (2025) Support not sanctions: Making school fair for 2 million children, <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Support-not-sanctions-Making-school-fair-for-2-million-children-FINAL.pdf>

2 Conti-Ramsden, G., & Botting, N. (2008) Risk of affective disorders in adolescents with a history of SLI. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49, 516–525. Doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.2007.01858.x.

3 NHS digital (2023), Mental health of children and young people in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey, *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey – NHS England Digital* <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up>

4 Hollo, A. et al (2014) Unidentified language deficits in children with emotional and behavioural disorders: a meta-analysis. *Exceptional Children* 2014; 80(2): 169–186.

5 Cohen, N et al (2013) Higher order language competence and adolescent mental health. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(7), 733–744

6 NHS Digital (2018) Mental health of children and young people in England, 2017, <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>

How do challenges with talking and understanding words impact you?

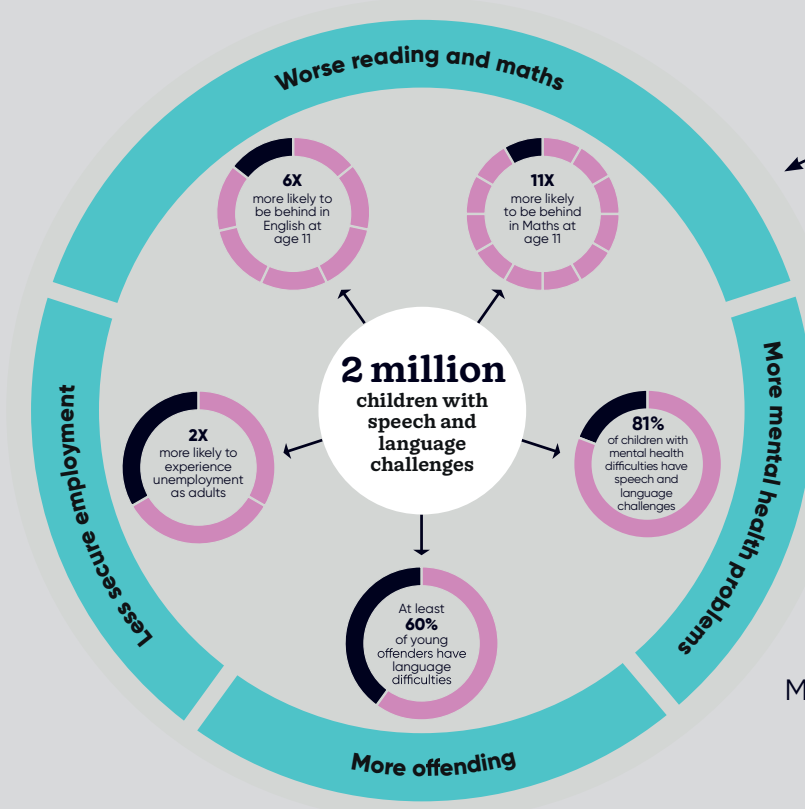
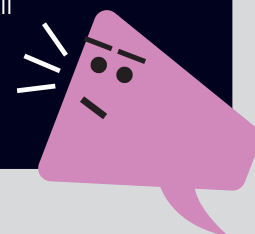
Language skills are crucial for developing an understanding of our own and other people's emotions, managing our feelings, and taking part in social activities.⁷

When you have challenges with talking and understanding words, you might have problems including:

- Difficulties with understanding language, like making sense of what people say
- Challenges with using language, such as knowing and choosing words and making sentences
- Challenges with social communication skills, like knowing how to join a conversation or change the topic
- Difficulties in developing positive relationships with others and navigating a range of settings.⁸

“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 classroom or corridor drawing!” Parent⁹

Without speech, language and communication skills, children will struggle to make friends, learn, have good mental health, and get a job.



Some children and young people face additional challenges. Poverty and speech and language challenges are connected. Up to 50% of children in disadvantaged areas started school behind in communication and language before Covid and the cost-of-living crisis.¹⁰ The ongoing impacts of both crises are clear: in both the rising level of speech and language challenges seen in schools and increased referrals to Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS).¹¹

⁷ Norbury, C. et al, (2024) Developmental language disorder: a hidden condition. The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health, 8 (7) pp.473–475

⁸ Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (2020) Promoting social, emotional and mental health

⁹ Speech and Language UK (2022) 1.7 million young futures, <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/1.7-million-young-futures-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁰ Law, J., McBean, K., and Rush, R (2011) Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage. International journal of language & communication disorders / Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists. 46. 657–64. 10.1111/j.1460-6984.2011.00036.x.

¹¹ NHS Digital (2024) Mental health services monthly statistics, performance September 2024 <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-services-monthly-statistics/performance-september-2024>



What impact do speech and language challenges have on your mental health?

Good speech, language and communication skills can protect our mental health. So, when children and young people have challenges with talking and understanding words, it can negatively impact their mental health.

Children facing challenges with talking and understanding words particularly struggle with language for emotions. This impacts their ability to process and manage their emotions, often leading to mental health problems like anxiety and depression.

"There is definitely an impact and an increase in nonverbal children who struggle with emotional dysregulation because they can't articulate their needs or how they feel." Primary school teacher¹²

Over half (56%) of children and young people with speech and language challenges have difficulties making and keeping friends. Over a third (35%) have been bullied or excluded by their peers. And a third (32%) have experienced not being invited to birthday parties or other social events as a result of their speech and language challenges.¹³

Having difficulties talking and understanding words can also result in young people excluding themselves from social situations – over a fifth (22%) have not accepted invitations to social events due to anxiety related to their challenges.¹⁴ This is worrying; we know isolation is a big risk factor for developing mental health problems.

"Went through a period of self-harming when frustrated when he could not produce clear speech." Parent¹⁵

Put simply, children with speech and language challenges are more likely to struggle with their mental health and less likely to be able to access support than their peers.

¹² Speech and Language UK (2023) Listening to unheard children: a shocking rise in speech and language challenges, <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Listening-to-unheard-children-report-FINAL.pdf>

¹³ Speech and Language UK (2022) 1.7 million young futures, <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/1.7-million-young-futures-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁴ Speech and Language UK (2022) 1.7 million young futures, <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/1.7-million-young-futures-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁵ Speech and Language UK (2022) 1.7 million young futures, <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/1.7-million-young-futures-FINAL.pdf>

What impact do challenges with talking and understanding words have on access to mental health support?

Talking-based mental health treatments

Children and young people with speech and language challenges struggle with talking and understanding what others say to them. However, mental health referrals, assessments, and interventions put a significant demand on speech, language and communication skills. For example, the success of talking therapies like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) relies heavily on your speech, language, and verbal reasoning skills.¹⁶

Families of children with speech and language challenges face multiple barriers when trying to get mental health support for their children. They tell us that challenges with speech, language and communication skills can significantly affect how psychological therapies and treatments are delivered and how well they work. What's more, families report that professionals often do not have the knowledge to support their children effectively.¹⁷

"I might go and observe a psychology session with them and then the language they are using is far too complex, the psychological language, the therapy materials, they often use a metaphorical language, they're using kind of these images and symbolism, which is far too complex for the person in general and then they're not really understanding." Speech and language therapist¹⁸

As a result, speech and language challenges can prevent many children and young people from accessing and benefiting from those mental health treatments and programmes that are delivered through talking, like talking therapy. Creative therapies like art, play, and drama therapy are also good alternatives or additions to traditional talking therapies, especially for younger children. They can offer the opportunity

to express thoughts and feelings for those children and young people who find it difficult to talk about them.

Professionals should consider these therapies as part of a package of treatment for children and young people with speech and language challenges. They should also continue to collect evidence to show how well these therapies work.

"He built a bow and arrow in the wood, went fishing, so that it wasn't sit down and talk, because I knew that wouldn't work, and I communicated quite clearly about how it might become difficult for [the child] to engage with words. So he [the therapist] worked with [the child] in a very gentle way in different environments, and so language got taught then for expressing...it was a gentle approach." Parent¹⁹

"So I think the use of toys and play can help bring their outer world about what's going on when, what they see inside, and speech doesn't need to be, it doesn't need to be a part of that." Mental health professional²⁰

Unless children with speech and language challenges are identified and supported, referrals, assessments, support and treatment programmes for mental health needs may be inaccessible or deliver inaccurate results. This risks public resources being wasted on treatment that does not work.

¹⁶ Snow, P.C (2013). Language competence: a hidden disability in antisocial behaviour.

¹⁷ Hobson, H. et al (2022) Supporting the mental health of children with speech, language and communication needs: The views and experiences of parents. Autism & Developmental Language Impairments, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415221101137>

¹⁸ Hancock, A. et al (2022) Speech, language and communication needs and mental health: the experiences of speech and language therapists and mental health professionals. Int J Lang Commun Disord. 2023 Jan;58(1):52–66. doi: 10.1111/1460-6984.12767. Epub 2022 Sep 18. PMID: 36117337; PMCID: PMC10087343.

¹⁹ Hobson, H. et al (2022) Supporting the mental health of children with speech, language and communication needs: The views and experiences of parents. Autism & Developmental Language Impairments, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415221101137>

²⁰ Hancock, A. et al (2022) Speech, language and communication needs and mental health: the experiences of speech and language therapists and mental health professionals. Int J Lang Commun Disord. 2023 Jan;58(1):52–66. doi: 10.1111/1460-6984.12767. Epub 2022 Sep 18. PMID: 36117337; PMCID: PMC10087343.

Lack of joined-up services

Speech and language therapy and mental health services are not working together effectively. This lack of integration means that care is often fragmented and confusing.

"It was sort of, oh no, that has to be CAMHS,* CAMHS has to deal with them, and if they were under 7, then CAMHS would say, oh no, that has to be speech therapy, speech therapy is dealing with them." Speech and language therapist²¹

*Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), now known as Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS).

"We're often funded by different streams and funded by different people, we work in different health trusts quite often, and that actually has massive implications." Mental health professional²²

This is stopping children from getting vital early help when they're struggling. This means problems often get worse and children then need more support from stretched public services.

Professionals' training

Many professionals working in schools, like teachers and teaching assistants, have not been given enough training in identifying and supporting children with speech and language challenges and mental health problems. Indeed, 53% of teachers believe they don't have the training they need to support children's speech and language in the classroom.²³

And mental health practitioners often don't have the knowledge and skills needed to effectively support a child with speech and language challenges with their mental health. This means they're not able to adapt their support and treatment to meet those needs.

"I don't think that's typical for mental health practitioners [to consider language difficulties] ... most people would not think about language, particularly language disorders in a young person as part of their [psychology] assessment, unless a parent disclosed something like that, or unless they were very, it was very clear evidence that there were quite obvious difficulties." Mental health professional²⁴

Children, young people, and their families are being let down on both fronts.



²¹ Hancock, A. et al (2022) Speech, language and communication needs and mental health: the experiences of speech and language therapists and mental health professionals. Int J Lang Commun Disord. 2023 Jan;58(1):52-66. doi: 10.1111/1460-6984.12767. Epub 2022 Sep 18. PMID: 36117337; PMCID: PMC10087343.

²² Hancock, A. et al (2022) Speech, language and communication needs and mental health: the experiences of speech and language therapists and mental health professionals. Int J Lang Commun Disord. 2023 Jan;58(1):52-66. doi: 10.1111/1460-6984.12767. Epub 2022 Sep 18. PMID: 36117337; PMCID: PMC10087343.

²³ Speech and Language UK (2023) Listening to unheard children: a shocking rise in speech and language challenges, <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Listening-to-unheard-children-report-FINAL.pdf>

²⁴ Hancock, A. et al (2022) Speech, language and communication needs and mental health: the experiences of speech and language therapists and mental health professionals. Int J Lang Commun Disord. 2023 Jan;58(1):52-66. doi: 10.1111/1460-6984.12767. Epub 2022 Sep 18. PMID: 36117337; PMCID: PMC10087343.

What needs to change?

Children and young people with speech and language challenges need to get the right support for their mental health problems. Here are our key recommendations for what needs to change nationally and locally to make that happen.

Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England's recommendations:

- The Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England should include the mental health needs of children and young people with speech and language challenges in its new 10 Year Health Plan.
- As the Government works towards its manifesto pledge for a Youth Futures Hub in every community, it is crucial that these hubs are equipped to identify and support the mental health needs of children and young people who also have speech and language challenges.

Mental health service commissioners, providers and professionals' recommendations:

- Commissioners and providers of CYPMHS must better recognise that a high proportion of the children and young people they support with mental health issues also have speech and language challenges.
- The UK Government's commitment to placing mental health practitioners in schools must include a requirement for comprehensive training on how to recognise and adapt support for the significant number of children who have speech and language challenges.
- Mental health trusts and other local providers (including voluntary and community organisations) should make sure mental health professionals are trained to recognise and support children and young people with speech and language challenges and mental health needs, and adapt their services accordingly.
- Where mental health professionals identify that a child or young person they're working with

has challenges with talking and understanding words, speech and language assessments and therapy should be offered in conjunction with the mental health provider.

- When developing and evaluating therapies and treatments, mental health trusts and other local providers must listen to and learn from young people with speech and language challenges and mental health issues, and their families.

Schools and nurseries' recommendations:

- School leaders must make sure staff in wellbeing and mental health teams receive training to enable them to adapt their practice to support children with speech and language challenges.
- Nurseries and schools should use tracking tools to help identify speech and language challenges early on. They should also provide early help that focuses on language for managing emotions. Together, these tools would help stop later problems and identify children who may need support long-term.

Research funders' recommendations:

- UK Government, NHS England, UK Research and Innovation and other UK research funders like Wellcome should fund and deliver more research in this space. That includes research into how effective current talking-based mental health treatments are and how they could be adapted so they work for children and young people with speech and language challenges.
- They should fund and deliver more research into the effectiveness of creative therapies like art, drama and play therapy for children and young people with speech and language challenges. This would help build evidence of the impact of these approaches.
- Funding should be made available to develop and test school-based programmes that aim to improve children's ability to use language about emotions.

**Speech and
Language UK**



Follow us @SpeechAndLangUK | speechandlanguage.org.uk

Speech and Language UK is the operating name of I CAN Charity, a registered charity in England and Wales (210031) and Scotland (SC039947), which is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (00099629). Registered address: 17-21 Wenlock Road, London, N1 7GT.

