

Learning to COMMUNICATE

Independent speech and language therapist **Angela Hurd** offers tips on how to identify and address issues with children's language development...



According to The Communication Trust, in some parts of the UK more than 50 per cent of children start primary school with poor communication skills – that's 17 in every classroom. With 2011 the national year of speech, language and communication, this is a figure that Jean Gross, the Government's communication champion, wants to see reduced.

Communication skills are critical to a child's ability to progress in their learning and form relationships with those around them. Both the Bercow Report and the Children's Plan emphasised the potential detrimental consequences for children with delayed language abilities, including poor attainment – as without the necessary communication skills, children struggle to access all areas of the curriculum.

Catching it early

The EYFS system of profiling children under the age of five is at the time of writing under review, with revised guidelines due to come into force from September 2012, but speech and language will remain a key area of focus to ensure that young children are ready and able to learn in school.

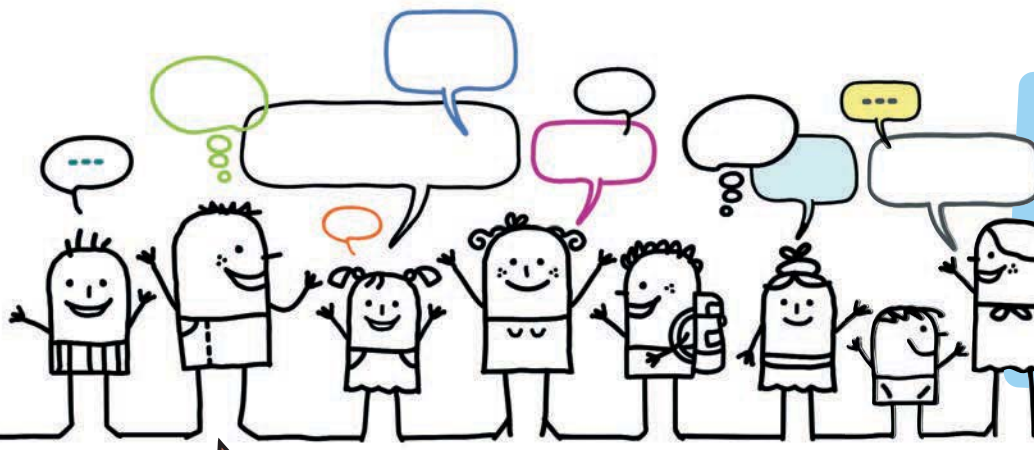
Currently, the EYFS involves observation and assessment of children's development through play-based activity. Although speech and language skills are assessed as part of the profiling, this can be a rather broad-brush approach. The criteria are often focused on areas such as a child's ability to form complete sentences, which can be subject to interpretation by individual practitioners. If problems remain undetected, a child can fall under the radar as they move through the early years and into primary education, and this can have an impact on their future achievement in school.

Early identification of communication problems is essential to ensuring children get the help they need to develop their language skills. But what are the signs that practitioners need to be looking for?

Hidden issues

Children who lack good communication skills can be difficult to identify, especially if they have no other related health issues or special





find out more
 Angela Hurd is co-author of WellComm: A Speech and Language Toolkit for the Early Years, produced by Sandwell Primary Care Trust and published by GL Assessment. Visit www.gl-assessment.co.uk/wellcomm



Observing activities

Good quality observation is key to identifying communication problems in young children. Practitioners need to assess a child's speech and language ability on a one-to-one basis and also when they are interacting with others. They should look at how the child is using language in different areas of play. Do they ask questions? How many words are they using to form a sentence? Do their sentences include pronouns such as 'he' and 'she', verbs (doing words like 'jumping') and adjectives such as 'long' and 'tall'? There are a wide variety of difficulties a child can experience relating to speech and language development. Observing children in as many different situations as possible will give practitioners a broader picture of their speech and language capability. This will help flag up those children who might benefit from more intensive support.

their happiness and wellbeing. Early years settings should consider what pastoral support can be put in place to address this, as language and communication skills are the bedrock of social relationships.

Parental partnerships

One of the challenges practitioners can face when raising concerns about a child's speech and language development is the reaction from parents. Parents can sometimes have concerns about their child's lack of communication skills, but if there is a history of delayed speech in the family they may feel there is nothing to worry about.

There is sometimes an assumption that children will start to speak when they are ready, when, in fact, further intervention from a speech and language therapist may be required. This can make it difficult for those working in the early years to ensure a child receives the help they need quickly. Early years settings need to foster a strong partnership with parents. This will give them a shared understanding of a child's ability to communicate effectively. Parental involvement can be particularly helpful if a child has English as a second language, as parents can reveal whether they are experiencing difficulties communicating in their mother tongue.

educational needs. If a child has profound difficulties with speech they are easy to spot as they are hard to understand. However, some children may have underlying issues with comprehension that are not so apparent and would benefit from further support from a speech and language therapist. It is crucial that screening programmes introduced in the early years are designed to highlight where a child might be having issues with speaking as well as understanding language.

Examine behaviour

Children often develop sophisticated coping strategies early on that can keep their communication issues hidden from view. A child experiencing speech and language difficulties could come across as quiet and well-behaved, for example, giving key workers no cause for concern. Some children will display signs of bad behaviour because they are not able to comprehend what a teacher or another child is saying to them. There are also those children who simply copy their peers when they have not understood what they are being asked to do. Practitioners need to bear this in mind when observing young children so that any underlying issues with speech and language are properly identified.

Making friends

Joining in with social situations or games involving imaginative play can be particularly challenging for many children with impoverished communication skills. These children will often be desperate to interact with their peers but simply don't know how to make a connection. This can result in them feeling isolated, which can have an impact on

Taking action

CHILDREN NEED TO UNDERSTAND WORDS BEFORE THEY CAN START TO USE THEM. HERE ARE FIVE TIPS FOR STRENGTHENING CHILDREN'S COMMUNICATION SKILLS...

- **Build vocabulary:** Group pictures or objects into categories: animals, things to play with or objects that are soft, hard, cold. Talk about the differences between them with the child and expand their vocabulary by introducing new words, e.g. the doll is wearing a jumper; the doll is wearing a red jumper.
- **Reinforce:** Keep sentences short and exaggerate intonations. Also, activities like gluing and sticking pictures in groups will

help to underpin learning and hold the child's interest.

- **Support future learning:** Start introducing words in activities with children that they will need to understand in subjects such as maths: more than, less than, increase, decrease, heavier, longer.
- **Encourage listening skills:** Ask the child what sounds they can hear. It might be a clock ticking, a car outside, children playing or an aeroplane overhead. Encourage them to talk about them.
- **Sing:** Rhymes and songs are fantastic for encouraging speech and language development. Incorporate them in regular activities.