

# FINDING VOICES

## Find their voices



**Mandy Grist**, communication adviser at charity I CAN, looks at the importance of supporting young children's speech in the early years and offers tips to try in your setting...

**C**hildren are hardwired to communicate from birth, but they all need help to learn to talk; though it can seem like it, communication doesn't just develop on its own. Needless to say, making sure that children's communication skills are properly supported is crucial. This article aims to explain some of the ways early years practitioners can do just that.

### Why is it important?

Research has consistently shown that good speech and language skills have a huge impact on educational attainment, and when considering the importance of supporting children's communication in the early years some of the most eye-catching findings are worth restating:

- Vocabulary at age five is a very strong predictor of the qualifications achieved at school leaving age and beyond (Feinstein and Duckworth, 2006).

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## find out more

You'll find more information and tips about achieving a communication supportive environment in *Understanding Communication Development: Working with the under 5s*, published by I CAN and available from [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

■ Children whose language difficulties were resolved by five-and-a-half are more likely to go on to develop good reading and spelling skills (Conti-Ramsden, 2009).

■ Early speech, language and communication difficulties are a very significant predictor of later literacy difficulties (Snowling et al 2006).

Studies have also shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have additional issues to overcome. We know that whilst on average a toddler from a family on welfare will hear around 600 words per hour – with a ratio of two prohibitions (“stop that”, “get down off there”) to one encouraging comment – a child from a professional family will hear over 2,000 words per hour, with a ratio of six encouraging comments to one negative (Hart and Risley, 2008). In some parts of the UK, particularly in areas of social disadvantage, upwards of 50 per cent of children start school with delayed language (Locke and Ginsburg, 2002).

What's more, the impact of poor communication skills is not only seen in a child's educational achievement:

■ 59 per cent of language-delayed three year olds have behaviour problems, compared to only 14 per cent of non-language-delayed children (Richman et al 1975, Silva et al 1987).

■ Children with speech and language difficulties experience more frequent bullying, partly because of the way they speak but also because they often lack the skills to negotiate social situations (Conti-Ramsden, 2003).

■ Two thirds of young offenders have speech, language and communication difficulties, but in only five per cent of cases were they identified before the offending began (Bryan, 2009).

So, we know that those who struggle to communicate are likely to have other difficulties to overcome. But we also know that many children who have difficulties with communication at an early age are able to go on to develop the good communication skills they need in life, if they have the right support and encouragement.

## Supporting speech

Learning to talk relies on several underlying skills, and practitioners can support these from birth. Indeed, the support provided for young babies is

just as important as activities with toddlers and pre-school children when it comes to developing speech.

The following tips are a great way to ensure that you're helping children to become the best communicators they can be:

■ Look at the child you're working with. Show them that you're switched on and ready to listen. It also encourages them to look at you. This is easier to do if your eyes are at the same height, so get down to their level or bring them up to yours.

■ Dummies get in the way of learning to talk, so keep them for sleep times. It might help if your setting had a policy on dummies so that parents know what the rules are.

■ Talk in short sentences. This helps children understand what you're saying, and also gives them a chance to copy the kind of sentence you're using.

■ Understanding words is a skill that's acquired slowly. Build on what each child says: when they say one word, you say two. (“Bus”, “Red bus”).

■ Children need time to process language, so give them a chance to respond. Resist the temptation to jump in too quickly.

■ Children learn to modify the sounds they use by listening to adults, but they can't necessarily change the way they say things straight away. If a child attempts a word, say it back to them. For example, if they say “Dod”, you say “Yes, dog”). Don't make them say it back to you afterwards; they'll do this when they're ready.

■ Children's speech takes several years to mature. They learn through playing, so encourage them to play with sounds, by making animal noises and so on. Nearer school age, playing can involve rhyming games or making up words.

Of course, getting the most from children's communication isn't only about being actively involved with an individual child. It's also about making sure the environment supports communication development too. This means making sure your setting is geared up to encourage good communication skills.

A communication supportive setting is one that amongst other things:

■ has staff with an understanding about how communication skills develop and how to support them;

■ enables children to learn through means other than language, for example, using visual timetables, gesture or

communication systems such as Makaton;

■ has set routines for the sessions so that children know what's going on;

■ has a quiet area with few distractions where children can go to learn to listen to what is being said to them.

Through a combination of strategies used by staff (such as repeating and reinforcing new vocabulary, supporting songs with actions and objects), appropriate language styles (for example, using simple, repetitive language during everyday activities) and suitable approaches (things like modelling activities, using questions that invite conversation), settings can make sure that they support communication development in all children.



## Catching them early

The DfE-funded Early Language Development Programme (ELDP) aims to boost the language skills of all children and help practitioners and parents to support the development of speech, language and communication in the early years.

I CAN is leading the consortium of voluntary sector organisations that will deliver this programme, offering a package of training, support and resources designed to enable more young children to develop the language skills they need to be school-ready, and to improve their life chances beyond education.

With research evidence showing that children's understanding and vocabulary aged two is closely linked with their performance when entering primary school, the ELDP will focus on 0–2-year-olds and their families, living in England's most. To find out more about the ELDP, and to see I CAN's range of resources, visit [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)