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I CAN Talk Series – Issue 7

Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

I CAN is the children's communication charity.

Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

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Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

Summary

The early years is a critical period for children's development – most importantly for children's speech, language and communication which in turn underpin so many other areas of children's development.

There is growing recognition of the role of language in young children's lives, and this is reflected by the recent government review of services for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and by the Scottish Parliament cross party group on children and young people identifying language and communication as a strand in the 2007-2008 session.

This *I CAN Talk* report illustrates how language is a crucial part of the current cross sector themes in early years: social disadvantage and mobility,

early identification and intervention, children's changing childhood and integrated working. The increased awareness of the importance of language is made clear; but what does this mean for children and families?

This report explores the implications of this in terms of outcomes for children, services for the family, the early years workforce and the settings they work in. At a time ripe for UK-wide change, the final section looks at what is needed to inform commissioners so that effective, authority wide services which both support children's language needs and develop communication supportive environments are established.



Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

Speech, language and communication: foundation skills for life

Background

Being able to speak clearly and process speech sounds, to understand others, to express ideas and interact with others are fundamental building blocks for a child's development. Analysis shows that good communication, language and literacy at a young age have the highest correlation with outcomes in school at seven years.¹

Children with SLCN in the early years can have difficulty learning² and accessing the curriculum.³ Language difficulties can impact on emotional development,⁴ with resultant behavioural difficulties⁵ and problems forming friendships.⁶ We know from longitudinal studies that, without the right support, SLCN can be persistent⁷ with wide-ranging impacts⁸ and often reduced life chances.⁹

Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

SLCN is an umbrella term. Children with SLCN may have difficulty with any or many aspects of communication. These can include difficulties with fluency, forming sounds and words, formulating sentences, understanding what others say and using language socially.

Persistent SLCN

Around 10% of all children have SLCN which may be complex and long-term.¹⁰ 7% of young children may have SLCN as their main difficulty,¹¹ others may have communication difficulties along with or arising from other impairments, for example autism, learning disability or cerebral palsy. These children may have unusual or disordered speech, language and communication. They will need specialist support to reach their full potential.

Poor or delayed language

There is a group of children who are starting school with SLCN who have poor language skills; inadequate for starting formal learning. These children may have a small vocabulary, be just starting to join words together, find it hard to listen and may sound like a much younger child. With the right support, they may catch up with their peers. In some areas, particularly areas of social disadvantage, this group may be upwards of 50% of children at school entry.¹²

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Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

Speech, language and communication: foundation skills for life

The early years: a critical time

The early years, often described as a 'window of opportunity' or 'sensitive window', is a period of rapid neurological development for children.¹³ This means that the time before a child starts school is critical for their visual, language and emotional development. This development can be strengthened and reinforced through positive and reciprocal interactions between parent and child.¹⁴ However, equally at this time babies can also learn negative behaviour patterns which are very resistant to change.¹⁵ Positively supporting young children's development during this critical time, as early as possible, is essential.

Language development in the early years: important factors

The rate of language development in the first few years of life is dramatic, demonstrated by a shift from non-verbal to verbal communication. Typically, three year olds can produce clear words and string them together into short sentences, they can tell simple stories, understand instructions and interpret others' non-verbal communication. Our understanding of how children acquire language has moved on considerably over the past 50 years; researchers agree that although there is some innate tendency for language to develop, interaction between adult and child¹⁶ and the environment to support it are crucial.

Given that the early years is such an important time for language development, much attention has been paid to how development at this time can be supported. A recent study focused on late talking toddlers¹⁷ identified the key factors which support early language development in children. Personal characteristics such as good hearing¹⁸ and the development of cognitive processes such as working memory and attention control¹⁹ are important, but what happens between care-giver and child, in particular the mother,²⁰ is seen to be of crucial importance.

There is increasing evidence that the amount of oral language input received can have a marked effect on children's communication development,²¹ but the type of this has been shown to be equally important.²² Features such as encouragement, positive reinforcement and range of different types of language relate to both language and intellectual development.

The lack of any of these factors affecting children's development can contribute to the risk of poor language; a combination may increase that risk.²³ It is also important to note that although these environmental factors do not cause more persistent or specific SLCN such as specific language impairment (SLI), they can contribute to the nature of language difficulties.²⁴

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Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

Children's language in the early years: on the agenda

The need to give children a better, and safer, start in life has never been more at the centre of children's policy.^{25 26} With this is an acknowledgement of the role that language plays in children's development. This represents a significant shift in thinking over the past 10 years illustrated in the following key strands of current thinking.



Social disadvantage and mobility

Concern that in some deprived parts of the UK children are massively underachieving²⁷ is reflected in the current political agenda which aims to increase social mobility²⁸ through initiatives such as the *Narrowing the Gap* programme.²⁹ Of further concern has been the knowledge that the link between disadvantage and achievement is cumulative: poorer children are less likely to have high early scores on tests of achievement, but even if they do they are very likely to lose this early advantage.³⁰ Interestingly, in Scotland, the recent Early Years Framework is described as being a key part of social policy.³¹

Given the impact of a child's early environment on their language development it is perhaps not surprising that levels of verbal skill are linked to socio-economic status (SES); children from low SES backgrounds are more likely to have poor language than their peers from high SES backgrounds.³² Many of the studies which have demonstrated this difference are focused on children in the early years³³ and the impact of these poor language skills on their readiness to access the curriculum has been noted by primary school staff.³⁴ The longer term effect is that, without appropriate support, the gap in their language skills persists, impacts on academic achievement,³⁵ ultimately limiting life chances.³⁶ The role of language in a generational cycle of poverty is highlighted.

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Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

Children's language in the early years: on the agenda

Early identification and intervention

Two hard-hitting reports produced by the Centre for Social Justice have focused on early intervention as the essential solution to breaking the cycle of disadvantage in the early years of a child's life.^{37 38}

Early identification and intervention is supported both in terms of having the greatest impact,³⁹ but also being most cost-effective.⁴⁰

Early intervention is strongly advocated for children's language development,⁴¹ with some programmes encouraging positive interaction and communication skills prior to birth.⁴² An essential component of local Sure Start projects, speech and language therapists (SLTs) are seen increasingly as having a public health, preventative role.⁴³ Although there is some suggestion that the impact of this early intervention on children's communication can only be seen in the longer term,⁴⁴ the evaluations of local projects are enthusiastic about the difference they make, with early identification of language difficulties highlighted as making a real difference.⁴⁵

There is evidence that early intervention can help to ameliorate SLCN⁴⁶ and can be cost effective.⁴⁷ Given that resolving language difficulties by age five can reduce associated literacy difficulties,⁴⁸ the development of tests to identify SLCN in the

early years is encouraging.⁴⁹ The reintroduction of health visitor screening in England, together with screening tools,⁵⁰ a focus on language development in the NHS early years life check,⁵¹ as part of the Foundation Stage Profile and as a national indicator in England, will help to address the identified need for early surveillance and monitoring of children's language.⁵²

Childhood

Concerns have been expressed about the changing world in which children are growing up, and the impact on their development, with the UK rated low in relation to other European countries regarding children's well-being.⁵³ Specifically there has been concern about societal changes and impact on language development.⁵⁴ The increase of central heating,⁵⁵ viewing of television⁵⁶ and forward-facing buggies⁵⁷ have been suggested as potential reasons for a decline in early communication development. A recent inquiry into our understanding of modern childhood identified excessive individualism as causing a range of problems.⁵⁸ Interestingly, many of the recommendations focus on improving opportunities, space and structures for positive interaction. This supports guidance⁵⁹ and

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38 Gross, J. (Ed) (2008) *Getting in early: primary schools and early intervention* The Smith Institute and the Centre for Social Justice

39 *Fade or flourish – how primary schools can build on children's early progress* The Social Market Foundation 2006

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59 *Sure Start Promoting Speech and language Development: Guidance for Sure Start programmes*

Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

Children's language in the early years: on the agenda

resources⁶⁰ for structuring everyday experiences so that they are opportunities rather than barriers to language development.

With changes to family structure⁶¹ and the majority of mothers now returning to full or part-time work within 12 months of giving birth,⁶² many children are spending their formative years in care outside the home. Despite concerns that this results in a reduction in the opportunity to spend time interacting with children,⁶³ there is no evidence that the amount of time spent in childcare settings is associated with negative language or cognitive outcomes.^{64 65} In fact, studies suggest that it is the quality of interaction rather than the quantity which is important.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, this move towards support for early child development outside the home has meant a focus on the need for high quality childcare, and this is discussed later.

Integrated working

The vision, across the UK,⁶⁷ is to create a joined-up system of health, family support, childcare and education services so that all children get the best start possible in the vital early years. Partnerships between education, health and social services have been shown to be most well established in the early years.⁶⁸

While evidence of the impact of integrated working is as yet limited,⁶⁹ some of the longer-standing Sure Start programmes report improved outcomes in areas such as more positive parenting and social and emotional development as well as better organised services.⁷⁰

The benefits of integrated working in specific approaches such as combined childcare and education are more clearly identified,⁷¹ and strongly advocated as best practice in supporting children's speech, language and communication development.⁷² Collaboration between agencies and in turn professionals is a key identified element in supporting both children's language and communication development⁷³ and in ensuring success in programmes which support children with SLCN.^{74 75}

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Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

What the evidence says: the implications of an increased focus on language in the early years

With speech, language and communication becoming established within children's policy, the report now explores what this means in practice.

What it means for children

The recognition of language as a foundation life skill, has resulted in a greater awareness of the importance of language, specifically interactional style, in quality early years services.⁷⁶ For all children, the impact of this focus on supporting communication is improved outcomes. A language focused curriculum,⁷⁷ developing adults' interaction skills⁷⁸ and improving carer-child interaction⁷⁹ have all resulted in improved oral language skills. Recent Foundation Stage Profile results in England highlight that although communication, language and literacy are still low achieving areas, there is positive movement in results and can now be considered improving areas. Nowhere is this impact more clearly evidenced than in Stoke upon Trent where an integrated city-wide project focused on communication has resulted in a 14.5% reduction of children starting school with delayed language. The project aimed to develop knowledge and awareness of speech, language and communication across the early years workforce and in parents and families.

Accompanying this increased focus on language and communication is a better understanding of what works to support children who have SLCN, again resulting in improved outcomes for children. For children with delayed language research

suggests that specific interventions targeting language and literacy in the early years help to narrow the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, with a focus on professionals working closely together being important.⁸⁰ Class or group based intervention in early years settings such as Speaking and Listening through Narrative,⁸¹ Nursery Talk⁸² and Talking Time⁸³ have also been shown to develop language skills in this group of children. What is important is continued focus on children's language through interventions such as this; it has been suggested that if not consolidated at primary school these gains made in the early years may not be sustained.⁸⁴

For children with more persistent SLCN both direct and indirect intervention can be effective in developing children's communication.⁸⁵ What is important is skilled practitioners who are able to tailor this to a child's language level and type of need, and know when to select the appropriate intervention.⁸⁶

Despite this evidence of impact, there is concern about the lack of research into the most effective language support services,⁸⁷ and also that knowledge about what works has yet to be transferred to early years settings.⁸⁸ For the child, when appropriate support is available, there is a positive impact on outcomes. Longitudinal studies show that the quality of provision is developing with resultant impact on life chances.⁸⁹ However, the recent review of services for children with SLCN shows an inconsistent picture of services nationwide.⁹⁰

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Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

*What the evidence says:
the implications of an increased focus on language in the early years*



With a focus on language, for children we can expect improved outcomes and knowledge about what works to support speech, language and communication. However, there is limited evidence of this being applied consistently across the UK.

What it means for parents and families

With parenting identified as a much stronger predictor of children's progress than any childcare experience,⁹¹ a factor in reducing the risk of social exclusion⁹² and key to achieving the best physical, mental health and well-being outcomes for their children,^{93 94} parents and families increasingly find support and interventions centred on them and not their children. For some, this has been identified as a tension,⁹⁵ but it has resulted in an increasing range of advice and support about speech, language and communication available to parents

from both national and local sources and in a variety of formats.⁹⁶

Ensuring information and support reaches parents has been identified as a challenge⁹⁷ but in response to this a range of innovative projects which explore different ways of working with families have been introduced. Initiatives which have been successful are those which focus on the nature of the relationship that is developed with families. Viewing the professional less as the expert, and developing relationships which empower is seen as important in engaging parents and shaping the environment;⁹⁸ this has been shown to impact on all children's language development. The promotion of better quality relationships offered through Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) meant that the children made significantly greater progress over time in key areas of language development.⁹⁹ However, establishing parent activities which challenged children's thinking or extended their language was identified as a challenge in the Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP).¹⁰⁰ The frequent, intensive visiting fundamental to Family Nurse Partnership pilots support parents in the way they respond to babies, and in understanding their children's communication. This has been identified as supporting the bonding relationship between parent and child.¹⁰¹

The recently launched *Commissioning Toolkit for Parenting Programmes* acknowledges the need for high quality support from practitioners trained in working with parents.¹⁰²

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102 www.parentingacademy.org

Speech, Language and Communication Needs and the Early Years

*What the evidence says:
the implications of an increased focus on language in the early years*

For parents of children with SLCN, this partnership relationship is also important. Parent Child Interaction Therapy¹⁰³ enhances parent knowledge and understanding of their own child. Parental reports have suggested that this form of support encourages greater commitment and motivation. Other interventions, such as the Hanen Programme, have demonstrated greater progress through empowering parents rather than through direct therapy,¹⁰⁴ and have been shown to be more cost effective.¹⁰⁵

Despite this more positive picture, parents and families in some parts of the UK – particularly of children with SLCN – report great difficulty in accessing information and support.¹⁰⁶



There is an increasing range of information and support for children's speech, language and communication available for parents and families both locally and nationally. Ensuring this reaches parents and families who most need it is a challenge.

What it means for early years settings

With rising numbers of childcare places, and knowledge of the importance of early language environments there is increased attention paid to the *nature* of different settings.

Findings from the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE)* study show that high quality integrated care and education centres, as well as nurseries, have been shown to promote better outcomes than other settings;¹⁰⁷ these differences being maintained even at age 11.¹⁰⁸ Others support this, finding that attending pre-school improves children's intellectual, and social and behavioural development¹⁰⁹ and that high quality childcare can benefit a child's language skills over the long term, predicting better vocabulary scores up to the age of 12.¹¹⁰

The role of early years settings in promoting language has long been emphasised;¹¹¹ fewer interactions between children and adults have been seen to be associated with lower quality provision in low SES areas.¹¹² It is the type of adult-talk that is used which affects children's participation and interaction¹¹³ but embedding this within an appropriate curriculum is also important.

Changes to the curriculum offered in the early years period have taken place across the UK, with a move towards a more play-based approach which focuses on practitioner interaction with children. In Wales explicit links between language and thinking are shown, and communication emphasised as a foundation life

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skill through a skills across the curriculum design.¹¹⁴ Identifying language and communication as one of the key focuses of the curriculum is showing a positive impact on children's language through Foundation Stage results in England,¹¹⁵ and in a longitudinal study in Northern Ireland.¹¹⁶

Setting-based programmes such as I CAN's *Early Talk* or the *Every Child a Talker* programme which aim to develop early years environments to become more communication supportive can be successful in supporting all children's language¹¹⁷ and be cost effective in supporting those with SLCN.¹¹⁸

In early years settings, an awareness of the importance of language is seen as a key component of a high quality setting – both in terms of adult and curriculum approach.

What it means for the early years workforce

The collaboration between professionals identified as best practice in supporting children's communication,¹¹⁹ is resulting in increasingly diverse teams, with increasingly flexible roles.¹²⁰ Within Sure Start programmes, for example, speech and language therapists have more of a preventative role,¹²¹ including ensuring that other

team members feel able to support children effectively.¹²² Following training in interaction knowledge and skills, effective interventions to support children's communication can be delivered by a range of staff.¹²³

A growing awareness of speech, language and communication as fundamental to children's development means that there needs to be an increasingly aware and skilled early years workforce,¹²⁴ with many more opportunities to access training. Although there is controversy over the effect of training on outcomes for children,¹²⁵ sustained, collaborative continuing professional development has been identified as having the most impact on all children's language development.¹²⁶ Ways to support this are described in the Speech, Language and Communication Framework (SLCF) developed by The Communication Trust.

The limited number of opportunities for accessible training in speech, language and communication has been concerning. However, an increase in professional development through authority-wide initiatives such as *Communicating Matters*,¹²⁷ the *Inclusion Development Programme*,¹²⁸ I CAN's *Early Talk* and most recently *Every Child a Talker*¹²⁹ is encouraging. Many programmes such as *Elkan*, I CAN's *Early Talk* and *Hanen* also focus on supporting children with SLCN.

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Training for the workforce in speech, language and communication is higher priority at both a local and UK-wide level. There are increasingly flexible roles within integrated settings in supporting children's communication.

What it means for commissioners

This section relates to the increasing focus in England on the joint commissioning of services and as such may read as less relevant to other nations. However, despite most examples coming from England, the underpinning principles which it discusses relate to planning of all services.

With effective joint planning at the heart of improving outcomes for children,¹³⁰ increased knowledge about speech, language and

communication is essential so that SLCN is seen as a priority.¹³¹ Existing campaigns such as *Talk to Your Baby*,¹³² and I CAN's *Make Chatter Matter*¹³³ and the work of Communication Forum Scotland¹³⁴ have raised the profile, and this will be built on through the *Better Communication Action Plan*. However, commissioners will also need to know what to commission.

Although there has been some tension reported about where services should be focused in the early years,¹³⁵ there is a strong recommendation that a continuum of universal, targeted and specialist services should be commissioned for children's speech, language and communication.¹³⁶ The children's centre model of integrated working across sector boundaries, with a strong universal preventative offer of support for speech and language, offers a solution for meeting *Every Child Matters* outcomes in the early years. However, the fact that there is no one single approach,¹³⁷ the complexity of factors involved outlined in this report, the changing nature of SLCN¹³⁸ and the lack of a strategic framework for this joint commissioning¹³⁹ presents commissioners with a challenge. What has been suggested is that intervention cannot just be specific programmes; a 'pervasive' approach is recommended.¹⁴⁰ The current pathfinder project in England, research programme¹⁴¹ and 0-7 partnership pilots¹⁴² are designed to move towards solutions to this challenge.

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Most importantly, effective commissioning relies on having evidence of the most effective services. A recent early years evidence review yielded few studies which focus on the link between integrated services and outcomes for children,¹⁴³ with an equal lack of evidence to indicate that any impact is sustained in the long term.¹⁴⁴ This report describes a growing body of evidence to support interventions for children SLCN, and there is also evidence of the risks of not supporting children's communication.¹⁴⁵

However, an inadequate evidence base and specifically a paucity of evidence of cost-effectiveness has been identified as a key priority to be addressed in supporting effective commissioning.¹⁴⁶

An increase in knowledge about speech, language and communication and evidence of effective services are needed to meet the challenge of commissioning effective services.

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¹⁴⁴ Kendall et al (2008) *Narrowing the Gap in Outcomes for Vulnerable Groups: a review of the research evidence NIER*

¹⁴⁵ Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (undated) *Evidence for the Commissioning Toolkit – risks of not providing speech and language therapy* www.rcslt.org.uk

¹⁴⁶ Lindsay, G. et al (2008) *Effective and Efficient use of Resources in Services for Children and Young People with SLCN DCSF Research Report RW053*

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Conclusion

Awareness, knowledge, understanding of the importance of speech, language and communication in children's early development has developed considerably; it is seen as a factor in many cross sector themes in early years and has never been higher on the political agenda. Our knowledge of what works in supporting young children's communication has similarly developed.

At a critical point, when there is opportunity to ensure that children's speech, language and communication is thoroughly and effectively embedded in policy and practice, this report summarises the implications of this heightened awareness for young children, their families and those working with them in early years settings and at home.

There is a wide range of information, innovative practice and effective support available but there continues to be a significant number of children in some areas starting school with limited language. More and more is known about what works in ensuring that children's needs are identified and supported. For this support to continue into primary schools information on effective UK-wide models are needed. Without evidence of outcomes underpinning service models, and evidence it continues to be difficult to commission effective and cost effective services.

I CAN Talk Series

I CAN Talk is a series of reports exploring contemporary issues in children's speech, language and communication. The *I CAN Talk* reports review current research and literature and offer practical evidence based solutions to inform debate on speech and language and to support practitioners, parents and policy makers.

I CAN Talk Speech, Language and Communication Needs and Literacy Difficulties Issue 1

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I CAN Talk The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication (Scotland Edition) Issue 3

I CAN Talk Language and Social Exclusion Issue 4

I CAN Talk Speech, Language and Communication and the Children's Workforce (I CAN / The Communication Trust) Issue 5

I CAN Talk Speech, Language and Communication Needs and Primary School-aged Children Issue 6

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