

Language and Mental Health



Understanding the links between language and mental health

Speech, language and communication are vital skills that are linked with many different areas including children and young people's mental health. This is a subject that many parents are worried about; in fact a 2015 poll revealed that for 47% of parents the main concern was for their children's mental health and emotional wellbeing. There is some evidence to say that language skills and mental health are linked – this does not mean however that all children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) will have mental health difficulties.

What are the links between speech, language and communication and mental health?

- Mental health and communication skills are linked in different ways. Having good language skills means that children and young people are able to talk about how they are feeling. Children and young people need to have good language and communication skills to be able to understand and talk about emotions and to help them deal with different situations.
- If children struggle to express themselves they are likely to become frustrated. This can cause them to either act out or to withdraw and become socially isolated.
- We know that young children who have difficulties communicating are three times more likely to have behaviour that concerns parents and early years practitioners. We also know that some children and young people with mental health difficulties have some kind of communication problem; one study found that 40% of 7 to 14 year olds referred to child psychiatric services had a language difficulty that had never been suspected.
- Evidence tells us that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more at risk for both SLCN and mental health issues.
- Many treatments for mental health issues rely on language and communication to work effectively, so this might be an issue for children and young people with SLCN.

I CAN Help enquiry service www.ican.org.uk/help

Call 020 7843 2544 to arrange a free phone call from one of our speech and language therapists or email enquiries@ican.org.uk

Talking Point www.talkingpoint.org.uk

Visit this website for information about children's communication.

Is there a risk of mental health difficulties as children get older?

This may be true, but it isn't inevitable. Children and young people who have ongoing language and communication difficulties have a risk of ongoing mental health difficulties.

One report showed that without effective help for their communication difficulties a third of children with SLCN need treatment for mental health problems in adult life.

Why might children with SLCN be vulnerable to mental health difficulties:

- They may have anxiety or frustration caused by not understanding what people are saying or not being understood
- They may struggle socially and at nursery/school as their vocabulary (words they understand and use) is poor
- Consequently, they may have low self esteem
- They may have difficulty with thinking things through and working out what might happen and so not really understand the implications of their actions
- They might be feeling socially isolated as a result of their poor communication skills
- Their difficulties with language and communication might not have been recognised and so they may not be getting the support they need.

What supports children's mental health and emotional wellbeing?

- Secure attachment experiences - developing good relationships and bonding with key people in their lives.
- Good communication skills - being able to understand what's being said, express themselves and how they are feeling, get their message across and get on with other people.
- Having a belief in control - feeling that they have a say in things and can make choices. They might be simple choices such as choosing what to eat, drink or do.
- A positive attitude
- Experience of success and achievement - everyone needs this whether the achievements or big or small. This helps develop our sense of self and self esteem.
- The ability to reflect - being able to look back on things, think about them and work out why something happened and if they might do or say something different in the future.

Some, but not all, of these positive factors depend on language and communication skills.

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What can I do to help a child who might be struggling?

Keep an eye on a child's language and communication skills to see how they're doing. This will enable you to identify if they are struggling. You may want to use the Talking Point [Progress Checker](#).

Follow up any concerns about behaviour to see what led up to an incident and how it was resolved. Is a child's behaviour linked to their language skills (e.g. is behaviour the result of being frustrated or poor understanding)?

Make sure you provide opportunities for children and young people to develop their [understanding of emotions](#) and behaviour.

Can you make opportunities to practise social skills as a way to rehearse for different situations? This can support a child's confidence and ability to cope in these situations.

Check your Local Offer to see what support might be available for children and young people who have mental health needs and/or SLCN.

Organisations who can offer help

[I CAN Help](#)

[Place 2Be](#)

[Royal College of Psychiatrists - checklist for parents](#)

[Young Minds](#)

[MindEd](#)

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