



Opportunity for all: maximising spoken language and communication February 2024

The centrality of spoken language

Spoken language and communication is central to children and young people's attainment and life chances.¹

The next government must ensure that the impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis on children and young people's education is addressed through supporting good spoken language and communication skills for all. We urge all three major UK parties to seize this opportunity, so all children and young people are able to achieve their potential, both in school and life.

The scale of the Issue

There have been long-term challenges with developing children's spoken language and communication skills and with supporting children and young people who communicate differently or with difficulty.

These existed before the pandemic but the need has only grown as a result of lockdowns and their effect on children and young people's development.

We know the scale of the challenge from the DfE's own statistics:

- In 2022, 20.5% of children finished their reception year without the early communication and reading skills that were deemed necessary by DfE to thrive (Expected Level by Early Learning Goal 2022)².
- 344,883 children pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England have Speech, Language and Communication Needs as their primary need, This is the most common type of special need, representing nearly a quarter of all pupils with SEND. This number has been steadily rising (DfE 2023).

In addition:

- **one in ten** children have long-term speech, language and communication needs.
- **1.9 million** children and young people struggling with talking and understanding words.³

¹ In this briefing, for ease we use 'spoken language and communication' throughout. We take a broad and inclusive definition. We are talking about supporting children through oracy. In using oracy, we are not reflecting on or seeking to change diversity of speech, communication or voices, but to promote spoken language effectiveness. We are also talking about supporting children and young people with speech, language and communication needs. This includes those who speak using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and sign languages, such as British Sign Language.

² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/>

³ <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/media/4703/listening-to-unheard-children-report-final.pdf>

- as many as **50% of children in areas of social disadvantage** start school with language difficulties.
- **more than 7% of all children** have a lifelong condition called Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) which reduces their ability to understand and express language.

We also know from polling conducted for a recent report by the Centre for Social Justice that:

- two-thirds of primary school teachers said a lack of support for children with speech, language and communication needs was the biggest barrier to pupils gaining expected levels in foundational skills post-pandemic. This concern was especially prevalent in areas of higher deprivation and in schools rated below Outstanding.
- 68% of head teachers use a local NHS or out-of-school speech therapist service for speech and language support in their school, often with a long waiting list, and only 15% of teachers say there is an in-school speech and language therapist for pupils to access.
- four-in-five teachers say that demand for speech and language needs support has increased post pandemic. The majority of teachers and headteachers say they cannot meet this demand with current provision, and just 8% of teachers said their school had a clear plan on how to meet this demand⁴.

What needs to change

It is vital that developing children's spoken language and communication forms a key pillar of any future government's efforts to recover children's education following the pandemic, and longer-term strategies to close the attainment gap, including:

- Recognising that spoken language is at the heart of developing and improving literacy and numeracy, as well as fundamental to children's emotional development and mental health;
- Building on efforts to develop all children's language and communication in the Early Years by a sustained focus on spoken language across all ages and stages of education;
- Ensuring children with long term speech and language challenges receive the support they need, including identifying those difficulties in the first instance, and timely access to speech and language therapy where required;
- Supporting teachers and schools to develop their students' spoken language and embed the spoken language requirements through high quality guidance, training and resources;
- Additional targeted support to address the ongoing impact of the pandemic on children's speech, language and communication development.

Supporters

⁴ <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CSJ-Cracks-in-our-Foundations.pdf>

53 organisations have signed the letters to Rishi Sunak, Sir Keir Starmer, and Sir Ed Davey which accompanied this briefing. They are:

Ace Centre
Action Cerebral Palsy
Action for Stammering Children
ADHD Foundation - The Neurodiversity Charity
Afasic
Ambitious about Autism
ASLTIP (Association of Speech and Language Therapists in Independent Practice)
Association of YOT Managers
Auditory Verbal UK
Autistica
BACCH (British Association for Community Child Health)
BACD (British Academy of Childhood Disability)
BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy)
BATOD (British Association of Teachers of Deaf Children and Young People)
Better Communication CIC
British Association of Social Workers (BASW)
British Dyslexia Association
British Psychological Society (BPS)
CICS Group (Cochlear Implanted Children's Support Group)
Different Strokes
Dingley's Promise
Disabled Children's Partnership
Down's Syndrome Association
Elklan
Embracing Complexity Coalition
Headlines Craniofacial Support
Intermediaries for Justice
Kids
N-ABLES
NAPLIC
NASS (National Association of Special Schools)
NASUWT - The Teachers' Union
NatSIP (National Sensory Impairment Partnership)
NDTi (National Development Team for Inclusion)
Pace
pdnet
RCSLT (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists)
SAPHNA (School and Public Health Nurses Association)
sen.se
Signalong
SMiRA
Speaking Citizens
Special Needs Jungle
Speech & Language Link
Speech and Language UK
Speech Bubbles
SPTS (Specialised and Personalised Training Services)
STAMMA

Symbol UK
Talking Mats
The Elizabeth Foundation
The National Organisation for FASD
Voice 21

Further information

For more information, please contact:

- Amy Gaunt amy@voice21.org
- Peter Just peter.just@rcslt.org
- George Carr george.carr@speechandlanguage.org.uk