



Removing the Barriers

Each child with speech and language difficulties is an individual and you will need to tune into their particular needs in order to remove as many barriers to their early learning as possible.

▲●■ Creating the Right Environment for Language Development

What can you do in general terms to make your setting the right place to foster children's speech and language development?

- Encourage confidence in all the children. Confident children are more likely to talk and find communication less threatening. Everything that you do to encourage close relationships between staff and children, establish secure routines and take children's own choices into account will also help the children's language development flow more smoothly.
- Be aware of noise levels in your rooms. High noise levels can get in the way of successful communication. You need to plan activities so that they do not interfere with each other and aim to reduce the overall noise levels by using absorbent soft surfaces where possible.
- Create a noise-free area for quiet work and talking if you can.
- Try to become more aware of your own listening and talking skills. Do you take the time to listen carefully to each child? Do you provide a good model of language for the children to follow? Have you developed a communication style that promotes interaction, encourages, enables and stimulates children to talk with you? Try to listen to what the child is telling you, rather than how the child is saying it.
- Look for ways of making language and communication meaningful and fun. Make sure that the child enjoys talking, use constant praise and reassurance and ignore mistakes by modelling the correct version instead.

▲●■ Top Tips for Overcoming Barriers

Even if you have created the best environment for language development, there will still be children who find it hard to make progress. Here are some key strategies and approaches borrowed from what we know about speech and language difficulties and the techniques on offer. If there is a speech and language therapist involved, always liaise first so that you know which are the best approaches for the child's particular set of difficulties.

Being patient

You may need to wait longer than usual, or to patiently repeat what has been said before a child responds to what you have asked for. Give a child with a language processing difficulty time to respond or to imitate before you come in with a repetition or the answer. Sometimes a 'Makaton' language programme involving signing is used in order to make instructions and requests clearer (see page 8).

Some children opt to speak in one situation and not another – this is sometimes called selective mutism. Be patient and never try to force the child to speak. Visit the child at home if you can in order to hear them talk there. Offer non-verbal ways of responding in your group such as a nod or a hand up at register. Once you have a



nod/shake, move on to expecting the child to indicate choices. Above all, allow these children to develop speaking in their own time – if they feel anxious about hearing their own voices, then other people's anxiety will only make things worse.

Choices

Offer choices or alternatives when asking questions of a child with a severe expressive language difficulty (such as 'Do you want to finish your story or work on your model?'). Illustrations and concrete props can help the development of vocabulary. Help parents and carers to offer their child choices (and to develop language, confidence and relationships at the same time) using the 'Supportive Play' format. See page 87 for a photocopyable sheet to take home.

Cue children's listening

Explain to the children what is involved in good listening (staying still, looking at the speaker and thinking about what has been said). Focus the children's attention onto what is being said by slowing down your pace, repeating important points and reinforcing important information by providing visual prompts (for example, pointing to a book when you ask a child to fetch a book) or giving situational clues (for example, pointing outside when you ask the child to fetch their coat).

Ditch the dummy

There are many children whose language development has become delayed simply through lack of opportunity to speak. Dummies can become a real habit within families and stubbornly difficult to get rid of (see the Play plan on page 31 for some general ideas). For children who are now old enough to manage without, try a joint parent-setting initiative to become a dummy-free environment! One group created a 'magic dummy tree' and involved a persona doll called Molly to hang her dummy on the tree only to find it had transformed into a little teddy bear the next day. Within a week, each and every child brought in a dummy for the tree and delighted in its 'magic'. When you work in a group like this, the confrontation is removed and everyone supports each other.

Double meanings

Children with a language disorder often find it hard to understand double meaning, sarcasm, metaphor or irony. They may interpret it too literally and become confused. Avoid ambiguous requests such as 'Would you like to sit down now?' Replace this with 'Ashley – sit down please'. Make sure that your instructions are concrete, direct and explicit and support these with picture prompts if necessary. Give examples of any double meanings and give an explanation for humour and metaphor if you have to.

Engaging attention

Children with language and communication difficulties often have poor looking and listening skills. Say their name clearly, get down to their level, try to encourage eye contact albeit briefly (to signal your intent to communicate) and then speak. When you are issuing instructions to the whole group, address the child with difficulties by name first to engage attention. Give very clear and simple messages, showing the child as well as telling her what to do.