

Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN)

Play, language and learning

One child in five starts primary school in England without the language skills they need to succeed, a figure that rises to one in three of the poorest children (Department for Education 2015). The findings are based on an analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study undertaken by the UCL Institute of Education for Save the Children. The analysis looks at the relationship between children's language skills at age five and their attainment in English and Maths at ages 7 and 11. It shows that:

- One in four children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school compared with one in 25 children who had good language skills at age five
- One in five children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in Maths at the end of primary school compared with one in 50 children who had good language skills at age five.

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1: Play, language and interaction: an overview

Why is it important?

The development of play is closely linked to the development of language. Play is a really important skill that children need to learn and practise. It helps with vocabulary development, sequencing, creative thinking, attention and listening skills, social skills and turn taking. Developing an understanding of objects, relating objects to play people, understanding miniature toys and playing socially with peers are particularly important.



Top Tip

If a child has delayed language, observe and encourage their play skills as this is likely to promote the understanding and use of communication. This cannot be achieved by planning

children's play, as this takes away the importance of choice and control from the child. Practitioners can, however plan opportunities for children's play by creating high-quality learning environments and allowing for uninterrupted periods for children to develop their play.

Useful Link

This [video](#) features play experts Sue Palmer and Tim Gill; and chief executive of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. Different aspects of play are set out: exploratory play vs representational play; the role of play in the development of fine- and gross-motor skills; the links between play and speech and language; the difference between adult- and child-led play.

"Almost everything that we become as adults has its roots in play." (Sue Palmer)

2: Follow the child's lead

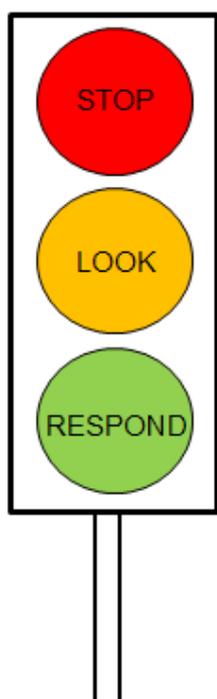
Why is it important?

Follow the child's lead means letting the child choose the activity and letting the child play with it in their own way. Following the child's lead helps because it:

- shows the child you are interested in them
- helps the child concentrate because they are playing with something that interests them
- encourages them to talk
- develops their understanding because what you say will be more relevant.

Top tip

How to follow the child's lead:



Stop

- Stop what you are doing so that you can focus on the child.
- Let the child lead the play and choose what they would like to do

Look

- Look at what the child is doing.
- Listen to things the child tries to say.
- Think about what the child would like to be able to say.
- This will make your responses more relevant and appropriate.

Respond

- **Explain:** describe what the child is doing or looking at, say something short and simple which you think the child would like to be able to say.
- **Repeat:** repeat back what the child says using a correctly structured and articulated sentence.
- **Expand:** repeat what the child says but add 1 or 2 words

Useful Link

This [checklist](#) from our Pinterest page can be used to evaluate the adult-child interaction within your setting.



You will also find links to many other useful resources, publications and blog posts on our Pinterest page.

<https://uk.pinterest.com/SpTeachersSLCN/>

Reflecting on Adult-Child Interaction

The grid below can be used to reflect on adult-child interactions that support children's spoken language and communication.

This can be completed by a colleague who has observed your interactions with a child or as a reflective tool for you to use. (Video material can be very useful to support reflecting on interactions, especially to have the necessary permission in place.)

It is important to complete the grid in various situations with different children to find out your style of interaction; this should show strengths and areas to be developed. Consider how you might modify your interactions.

THINKING OF YOU:	NO	SOMETIMES	YES
Can the child discuss and describe the activity?			
Observe what the child does			
Whether the child focuses on the play by gesture or talk			
Follows the child			
Describe what the child is doing (verbally)			
Ways the child's knowledge and understanding of the child's needs			
Make your voice interesting (use intonation)			
Can the child see your face/body for non-verbal cues			
How you questions/spacing (see below)			
Use praise often			

Remember
One question - to four comments

Comments (duration, repetition, expansion)
Question (duration no. of seconds etc)

3: Different types of play

Why is it important?

Play and language go hand in hand. Children need a wide range of different types of play to develop their language skills. There are different levels of play, which are developmental, and each level links with a child's development of language.

Level of Play	What does this mean for the child?
<p>Exploratory Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring objects and situations Recognising objects Using everyday objects on themselves. 	<p>This stage is very important because it suggests that the child is storing information and developing an internal awareness of a variety of objects. Over time the child will gradually add more information about the object including how to recognise and say the word.</p> <p>THINK: If a child is not talking, do they play appropriately with a wide range of everyday objects?</p>
<p>Large Doll Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognising dolls/teddies as representing people Involving these characters play Use objects to act out everyday events. 	<p>This stage is important as it indicates that the child's internal concept of a range of words is developing. With appropriate adult-child interaction, this type of play provides valuable opportunities to use and reinforce everyday vocabulary and language. This stage suggests that the child is beginning to develop more abstract thoughts because they can use objects on other people and not just themselves</p> <p>THINK: Can the child use a variety of objects in their play on a doll/teddy?</p>
<p>Small World Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using small world toys, eg animals, cars, trains Understanding what these objects are by using them appropriately. 	<p>This stage is very important as it is the beginning of symbolic understanding. The child realises that one object (a miniature bed) can stand for another (a real bed) just as a 'word' can represent an object. The child can now begin to deal with the critical level of symbolisation to develop language and thinking.</p> <p>THINK: Can the child play with small world toys appropriately or do they put them in their mouth/throw them/try and do something different with them?</p>
<p>Imaginative Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acting out simple sequences of play Acting out more complex 	<p>At this stage the child is starting to use internal language to organise their play. They are able to link ideas and subsequently language together. This is an important step in being able to re-tell an event, news, or what happened.</p>

scenarios and stories.	THINK: Can the child demonstrate that they can sequence their ideas in play?
<p>Role Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dressing up and taking on the character of another person • Using props not always for what they are intended • Playing cooperatively with other children, acting out and negotiating situations. 	<p>Role play enables a child to experiment with the roles and feelings of different people in a safe environment and encourages children to interact with one another. The child learns to empathise with others which is crucial for social and emotional development. Role play supports the development of more complex language skills, creating roles, negotiating and retelling. It also supports complex thought processes and language needed for narrative development.</p> <p>THINK: Can the child engage in role play successfully with other children?</p>
<p>Cooperative Imaginative Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in elaborate make-believe play with others • Planning and leading play • Understanding that rules and roles can change quickly. 	<p>Cooperative imaginative play supports complex thought processes and language. Children use language to be part of a group; to understand rules quickly, negotiate, problem solve and sometimes manipulate!</p> <p>THINK: Look out for the child who plays on their own or who is on the edge of social play.</p>

Top Tip

The development of play, especially the development of symbolic understanding, is really important for language development. If a child's language skills are delayed, **observation of their play** can tell us a lot about their general development and readiness for language. It can also inform us which type of play to target in order to encourage language development.

Useful Link

This [link](#) allows you to access the completed table of levels of play summarised above, which also provides information about the ages at which these levels should typically be achieved and the level of language you would expect at each stage.

4: Exploratory play

Why is it important?

Play is important for language development and imaginative thinking. As children play they explore the world, and begin to understand more about how things around them work.

Initially a child will put everything in their mouth. Through mouthing, handling and observing others, a child will learn what to do with different objects. This is known as 'defining an object by use' and usually begins at 9 months. During this time, a child begins to understand the meaning or concept of different objects. A concept is an internal awareness of an object or an idea. Each concept has a 'file' of information about the object in the mind. This file will contain an internal picture of the object, information such as what you can and can't do with it, what it is made of, what it is associated with but also, with time, the word.

Being able to play appropriately with real objects is an important step in preparation for learning language. It is like a jigsaw; the first pieces involve knowing what an object is. This creates a

framework so that, in time, the child can add other crucial pieces which include how to recognise and understand a word and then how to say the word. Without this vital framework, the child has nothing to 'hook' the word onto.

Top Tip

It is important to provide access to a collection of everyday objects as well as 'toys' when trying to encourage exploratory play. This is particularly important for children with delayed language who are not ready to play in the role-play corner or do not use objects appropriately.

Useful Link

The Nursery World magazine featured an interesting [article](#) which looks at **exploratory play** and an [article](#) describing **heuristic play**.

5: Imaginative play

Why is it important?

Imaginative, or 'symbolic' play, is important because it suggests that the child understands that one object or picture can symbolise another, just as a word represents an object. The child is beginning to understand the idea of symbols, which eventually leads to being able to think in abstract ways. In time, the child will be able to use words and marks or drawings to express ideas and predict or solve problems. When a child can play appropriately with teddies, dolls and large doll sized toys it indicates that they are ready to cope with symbolic information. They are also ready for language because language depends on words which are the ultimate, abstract form of symbols.

Imaginative play involves a developmental sequence including:

- Large doll and teddy play
- Miniature or small world play
- Play with pictures
- Pretend play



Top Tip

Large doll and teddy play

Involve a dolly or teddy in everyday situation and provide appropriate matching objects so, for example, the child can feed teddy as he is being fed, the child can wash teddy's face when his face is washed etc. If necessary, show the child how to use the objects on teddy. Gradually provide these opportunities at other times, ie not in the real situation.



Miniature or small world play

To encourage the understanding of miniatures, play with the real object and then the miniature, eg the child pretends to drink from a large cup then hand the child a miniature cup. You may need to model drinking from the miniature. Show the child how to relate these miniature objects to dolls and teddies. With older children at this level, play matching games matching real sized and miniature objects.

Play with pictures

If pictures appear to mean little to the child, use photos. Match objects to photos initially in real situations. Children usually respond to coloured pictures first but the child's visual perception skills should be considered. Move onto the use of inset puzzles and jigsaws.



6: Role play

Why is it important?

Role play involves the next development of imaginative play, where a child is able to 'become' someone or something else. When children participate in role play, they copy and practice the words they have heard others saying, which ultimately develops their vocabulary and language skills. In addition, children are aware that in order to participate well in the game they need to listen to others in order to respond and follow the game in an appropriate manner. This type of play, therefore, promotes the use of speaking and listening skills.

In taking on a role, a child sees how it feels to have another point of view, and learns that the world looks different to different people. Role play also helps the child to learn to empathise with others. This is crucial for their social and emotional development. Children become more aware of their own mind, and that they can think of different strategies to try when faced with a task or a problem.

Top Tip

Allow opportunities for deconstructed role play; where children are provided with a range of open-ended resources which they are free to develop into whatever scenario they like. A blog post from [ABC Does](#) includes some helpful ideas from Alastair Bryce-Clegg on developing deconstructed role play.

Useful Link

A blog post from [Speech Blog UK](#) outlines the best toys to use for early language development, one of which is you!

7: Developing social play

Why is it important?

All children go through a process of social play development. These stages are outlined below:

- **Solitary Play:** Early play tends to be solitary, where the child is happy to be on their own and direct their own play without needing to be concerned about others
- **Parallel Play:** At this stage children play side by side without interaction. They may watch other children and make some attempts to make contact. Towards the end of this stage, they may begin to cooperate with other children, eg share toys.
- **Cooperative Play:** This is the stage where children are beginning to be able to interact with each other. They are able to play together, share toys and take turns in games. The increasingly co-operative nature of the play provides opportunities to practice using language for different purposes including arguing, questioning, explaining and directing what other do.

Top Tip

Children with communication difficulties may find more advanced social play difficult. Adults may need to encourage children to develop the whole area of social play as it is crucial to their development in society. It is important to support these children through the different levels of social play development and only move through these stages when the child is ready.

Useful Resource

This [checklist](#) from Talking Point describes the typical stages of speech and language development, including social skills/play.

8: A summary

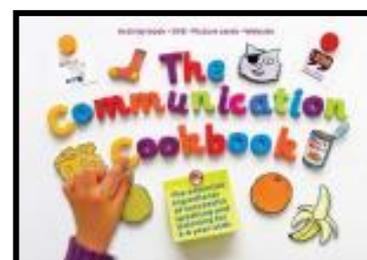
The previous seven sections have focused on the importance of play in supporting language development.

- 1 – Play, language and interaction: an overview
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Useful Links and Resources

[Communication Cookbook](#)

This is an activity book for schools packed with ideas for activities and games focusing on the five essential 'ingredients' that support children's communication skills (4–6 years); attention and listening, vocabulary, building sentences, storytelling and conversation. The Communication Cookbook is available from the following website, where there are also links to some free pdf sample activities.



[Progression Tools – The Communication Trust](#)

The Progression Tools aim to support teaching staff to identify children who may be struggling to develop their speech, language and communication skills. They can also be used to track progression of these skills over time or following interventions. The tools aim to provide a relatively quick way of determining where children are against where they should be for their age and provide more information about how these vital skills are progressing. They will also help to decide whether children would benefit from a targeted intervention or whether they need specialist assessment and support.



There are 8 Progression Tools, which highlight children and young people's language skills at the following key ages of development: 3, 4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-10 in early years and primary school, and 11-12, 13-14 and 16-18 in secondary school.

The Progression Tools are available from the following website: [Universally Speaking](#).

Universally Speaking is a series of booklets for anyone who works with children and young people. The booklets show where children should be with their communication skills at any given age. You can use the booklets to find out whether the children you work with are on the right track, what helps them learn to talk and listen and what to do if you have concerns about any of their communication abilities. There are 3 documents that cover different age ranges; birth-5, 5-11 (plus a checklist) and 11-18.



This [blog post](#) (ABC Does) further discusses the importance of play in children's learning, particularly around effective transition into Year 1.

This [document](#) from the I Can Charity gives you suggestions for the top 10 toys to support the development of communication skills.

This [page](#) from Talking Point provides links to articles and case studies which describe the development of play in different age-groups and settings and how it can be used to support speech, language and communication development.

