



# Misunderstood

Supporting children and young people with speech, language and communication needs



**The Communication Trust**  
Every child understood





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# Why should I read this booklet?

Almost everything we do involves speech, language and/or communication. Everyday tasks, learning, sorting out problems, having a conversation, getting a job, making friends and having fun all rely on our ability to communicate.

Being able to say what you want to say and to understand what other people are saying is the most important skill we need in life. Yet many people take communication for granted. Some children and young people have difficulty communicating with others; they have speech, language and communication needs - often referred to as 'SLCN'.

This short booklet provides information about children and young people who may need some additional help with their communication, some signs to look out for and some ways to provide further help.

This booklet is for parents and anyone who works with children and young people.

**What are speech,  
language and  
communication?**

**Speech refers to:**

- Speaking with a clear voice, in a way that makes speech interesting and meaningful
- Speaking without hesitating too much or without repeating words or sounds
- Being able to make sounds like 'k' and 't' clearly so people can understand what you say

**Language refers to talking and understanding:**

- Joining words together into sentences, stories and conversations
- Knowing and choosing the right words to explain what you mean
- Making sense of what people say

**Communication refers to how we interact with others:**

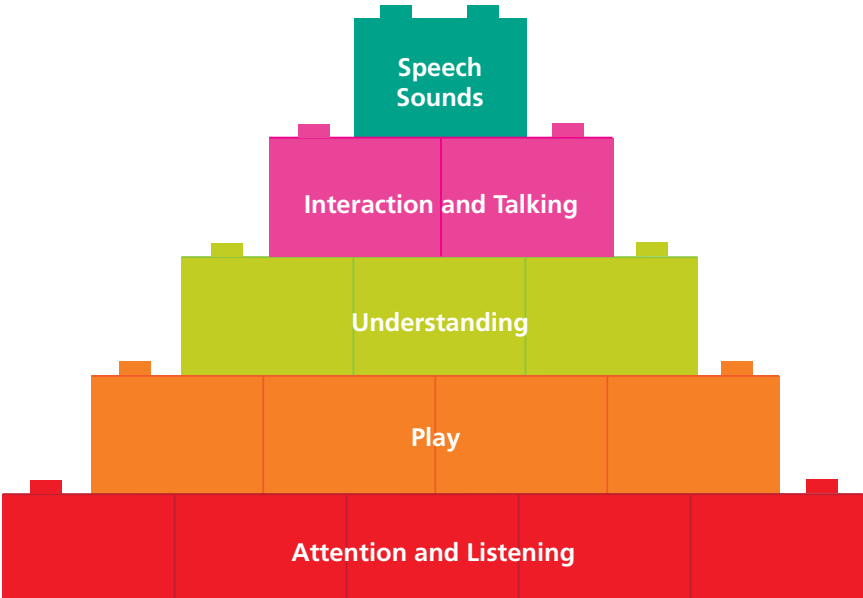
- Using language or gestures in different ways, for example to have a conversation or to give someone directions
- Being able to consider other people's point of view
- Using and understanding body language and facial expressions, such as:
  - knowing when someone is bored
  - being able to listen to and look at people when having a conversation
  - knowing how to take turns and to listen as well as talk
  - knowing how close to stand next to someone





Speech, language and communication develop gradually based on good attention, listening and play skills.

### Communication Development Pyramid



Adapted from a model used in many speech and language therapy services across the UK

**What are speech,  
language and  
communication  
needs?**

## Children with speech, language and communication needs find it difficult to communicate with others.

This may be because they can't say what they want to, they don't understand the words that are being used or they don't know how to have a conversation. It may be a combination of these problems or it may be that they don't have enough words so they don't talk as well as they should for their age.

With help, lots of these children can catch up, though many will take much longer than others. Some will have difficulties throughout their childhood and at school and some into adulthood. However all can make progress with the right support.

Children whose first language isn't English are at no greater risk of speech, language and communication needs than any other child. However there can be challenges with identifying the speech, language and communication needs of children who are learning English as an additional language.

Every child with speech, language and communication needs is different, and their needs change as they get older. This means that every child can have difficulty with one or many of the different aspects of speech, language or communication as described on page 7.



### The Nelson Touch

### The Hero of the Nile



**In some children, language is the only difficulty they have, everything else is OK.**

When Jack started school, his mum was worried as he seemed bright but wasn't talking much - his sentences were only made up of 2 or 3 words and his speech was hard to understand.

Tests showed he was of above average intelligence, but he found understanding what people were saying to him really difficult.

Now Jack is 13 and lots of things about school are hard for him. However, because Jack has had extra support with his language, he does well at maths and science, especially with practical activities.

He still really struggles with English but he works hard, is popular and sociable, and loves playing football. Jack can get frustrated as he knows that he can't do the same things as his friends.



## For other children, their speech, language and communication needs are part of another condition.

Sara has learning difficulties. She started in a mainstream nursery class 4 years ago although she couldn't talk and was very withdrawn. She learnt sign language to help her communicate, then all of her class learnt it so that she can join in lessons and make good progress.

Theo is 11 and has Asperger's Syndrome, a form of Autism<sup>1</sup>. He is bright and wants to socialise with others but his voice sounds monotonous and often others make fun of him. When Theo gets excited or anxious he makes loud noises.

There are overlaps between speech, language and communication needs and other conditions such as Autism, Dyspraxia<sup>2</sup> and Dyslexia.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, having one particular diagnosis can mean that other needs may be hidden. Close working between different professionals and parents is therefore important to ensure a focus on all the needs of the child and not just one condition.

1 Autism is a disorder that makes communicating and interacting with other people difficult, for more information visit [www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk).

2 Dyspraxia is a condition which makes organising movement difficult, for more information visit [www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](http://www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk).

3 Dyslexia is a learning difficulty affecting the skills needed for reading and spelling, for more information visit [www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk](http://www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk)





## Speech, language and communication needs can be very severe and complex.

Michael is 12 and has cerebral palsy - a physical disability that means he can't speak because he can't control his mouth muscles or tongue. Michael does understand when other people speak, just like any other child his age.

Michael has poor control of his hands meaning he can't use sign language. This means it's very hard for him to make his thoughts and ideas known, especially to people who don't know him.

Michael uses a communication aid with an electronic voice. This means he's able to ask and answer questions in lessons but it takes a lot of effort for him to press the buttons so it can be a slow process.

Around 1 in 10 children and young people like Jack, Sara, Theo and Michael have speech, language and communication needs that will last into adulthood.<sup>4</sup> That's on average 3 in every school class.

<sup>4</sup> Law et al (2000) *Provision for children's speech and language needs in England and Wales: facilitating communication between education and health services* DfES research report 239



Some children have less severe forms of speech, language and communication needs. In poorer parts of the country there are higher numbers of these children.

At least 50% of children in poorer areas have speech, language and communication needs.<sup>5</sup>

When Kylie started school she knew only a few basic words, many of which were in baby-form, such as 'da-da' for dad and 'dinky' for drink.

She got her message across by pulling, pointing and smiling but often became tearful and frustrated when this didn't work. Kylie found it hard to sit still and listen with other children at story time and was constantly restless.

She often missed what the teacher said or did the wrong thing as she could only understand and remember one simple instruction at a time.

Children like Kylie may struggle to listen well, know fewer words or talk in shorter sentences than other children the same age. Their difficulties are probably less severe and with the right support they can catch up.

<sup>5</sup> Locke, A., Ginsborg, J., and Peers, I., (2002) *Development and Disadvantage: Implications for Early Years* IJLCD Vol 27 No 1

**How do speech,  
language and  
communication  
needs affect  
children and  
young people?**

Speech, language and communication needs can have a huge impact on many aspects of children and young people's lives, inside and outside of school.

Switching off or acting up in lessons

Difficulty understanding words about feelings

Difficulties explaining what they want or need

Bullying

**Many children with speech, language and communication needs may experience...**

Behaviour problems

Failure at school or poor exam results if additional support is not provided

Difficulties with reading and writing

Loneliness and isolation, difficulty making friends

Difficulties adjusting to changes in routine



For children and young people with speech, language and communication needs, there's a higher risk of unemployment and relationship breakdown. For some young people there's even an increased risk of getting into trouble with the police - between 60-90% of young offenders have speech, language and communication needs.<sup>6</sup>

But this doesn't have to be the case.

There are some very successful ways of helping children and young people who struggle to communicate to enjoy life at home and at school and to fulfil their potential. Some of these are included from page 32 onwards.

Whatever the cause or seriousness of a child's difficulties, the first important thing to do is to identify that there's a problem. Often, because children with speech, language and communication needs look just the same as other children, their difficulties can be hidden or be mistaken for something else such as learning difficulties or bad behaviour.

<sup>6</sup> Bryan, K., Freer, J., and Furlong, C., (2007) *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders* Vol 42 No 5

**How can I tell  
if someone has  
speech, language  
and communication  
needs?**



In younger children, it's usually easier to spot a problem with speech, language or communication.

By the time most children start reception class, they should be able to:

- sit still
- pay attention
- play well with others
- understand long instructions
- know and use a useful range of words
- speak clearly in sentences
- make themselves understood to friends and family



## If a pre-school or primary aged child has speech, language and communication needs you might notice some of the following:

- you often need to tell them several times or even show them before they understand what you mean
- people who don't know them well can't follow or understand what they're saying; their speech is not clear, sentences are short or unusual or explanations get muddled and are difficult to follow
- they only say a few different words
- they might not want to take part in activities that involve talking or they might really want to join in games but don't know how to
- they might be struggling with reading, spelling or maths
- they might get angry or show frustration when they don't understand
- you may get no response to questions or children may repeat back part of what you've said to them because they don't understand
- at home they might understand familiar routines, but struggle when things change
- at home they might struggle to tell you much about what they do at school or who their friends are



Most young people starting secondary school are able to listen for half an hour or more. They can:

- remember new words after hearing them just a couple of times
- understand word play in jokes and give a clear explanation when something has gone wrong
- cope with the change to a more independent way of learning and if they don't understand something they ask questions
- they'll be able to have conversations and can negotiate in family discussions

In older children and young people it can be harder to recognise difficulties with speech, language and communication.



## If a young person has speech, language and communication needs you might notice some of the following:

- they seem to ignore what you've asked them to do or they do the wrong thing because they've misunderstood what you meant
- they really struggle to learn and remember new words and they might try to explain the word they're trying to say. For example, for tripod they might say "that science thing with three legs, it's metal"
- they might have difficulty doing tasks because of the way they're explained. For example, when asked to "evaluate a multi-cultural product", they won't understand that this asks them to describe why they liked curry or chilli
- they might be fine in a conversation with one other person but in a group they appear very quiet and may even not respond as they struggle to keep up
- they find it hard to produce written work and what they manage is very basic
- at home they might sound muddled or disorganised when explaining experiences and events
- at home they can consistently struggle with homework and organising themselves

**How can I support  
a child or young  
person with speech,  
language and  
communication  
needs?**



Wherever they are - at home, school or in social situations - we can support children and young people with speech, language and communication needs by understanding more about their strengths and difficulties.

*“The most important thing – people need to be aware that there are children who have hidden difficulties”*

*(parent of a child with speech, language and communication needs)*

*“The best people, they understand the nature of my condition - I’d say that was the most important thing”*

*(young person with complex speech, language and communication needs)*



It's important to know how to interact with children. The following tips will help to support all children and young people's communication, but particularly those with speech, language and communication needs.

### **Speak a little more slowly than you usually do**

Allow time after asking a question for them to listen, think and work out what has been said

### **Demonstrate**

Use gestures, pictures or anything else visual to help understanding

### **Clarify**

Ensure they understand your instructions by asking them to repeat what they think they have to do

### **Use shorter sentences and simpler language in instructions**

For example say:

"Finish the sentence you're working on". Pause

"Put your books away". Pause

"Then get changed for PE"

Say "make" instead of "produce"

"finish" instead of "complete"

### **Cut down the amount you talk**

Allow children time to talk so that you both get a fair share of the conversation

### **Comment on what children are doing**

This is less pressured than asking questions and encourages children to join in. For example, "You have a robot on your t-shirt" rather than "What's that on your t-shirt?"

### **Give specific praise about what they've done well**

"You really joined in well there" or "Well done, you got dressed all by yourself today." Praise for effort is useful

### **If they can't think of what to say, help them**

Give the words and phrases they need to use. For example, when a child wants to join in a game being played by his friends: "Ben, you could say 'Can I join in?'"

### **Avoid colloquialisms, sayings and idioms**

They can be confusing and children may take them literally. For example, "Pull your socks up"

### **Demonstrate how to say a word or sentence**

This is instead of telling them they've said it wrong. For example, if they say "Car blue school" you can continue the conversation by adding "So you saw a blue car on the way to school"

### **Expand on what children say**

This helps them build bigger sentences. For example, if they say “Daddy going shopping” you could say “Yes, daddy’s going shopping to buy some bread”

### **Ask children and young people what helps them**

Sometimes the results are surprising

These suggestions will support all children and young people’s communication, but some may need more specialist help from speech and language therapists or specialist teachers. It’s also important that any adult working with children and young people with speech, language and communication needs has the right training.

Parents know their children best of all. Sharing ideas of what works for a child between their parents and professionals that know them can work really well for children.

**Does my child have  
speech, language  
and communication  
needs?**

If you think your child has speech, language and communication needs, you may want to talk about your concerns to your friends, family or someone else such as your child's teacher.

Talking to others about your concerns can be difficult because speech, language and communication needs can be very hard to explain. Speech, language and communication needs may also be hidden by other things which are easier to see such as reading difficulties or behaviour difficulties.

To help you to explain what's worrying you, it might be useful to think about the following things:

- Look at the descriptions of speech, language and communication on page 7. Perhaps these can help you describe where your child is having difficulties (as well as the things they can do well)
- Know what to expect from your child's communication for their age. You can find this out at [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk). If you have this information you can point out where there are differences or gaps.
- Gather some examples to help you explain your worries. Write down some of the words your child says, sentences they use or instructions they don't understand.





## A speech and language therapist can tell you about the development of your child's communication skills.

Taylor is 4 and started to talk at the same time as other children, but he had always been difficult to understand. As he got older, Taylor's mum noticed that his difficulties became more obvious; friends and family found it hard to understand what he was saying. He wasn't saying the right sounds in words, so his mum made a note of some of the things he said: "dat" instead of 'bat' and "unny" instead of 'mummy'.

Taylor's mum talked through her worries with her GP, who made a referral to a speech and language therapist. She did an assessment and agreed that his speech was unusual for his age. He's now waiting to be seen for regular speech and language therapy to help his speech improve.

Some children can understand what's being said but they have difficulties talking in sentences. For more complicated difficulties they may need a detailed assessment by more than one person.

Henry's parents were happy when he said his first words. But by the time he was 3 years old, Henry still wasn't joining words into phrases or making short sentences like other children, so his parents started to worry.

Making friends at nursery was difficult for Henry as he didn't have the language skills to do it. His parents felt he was becoming isolated and his behaviour at home was becoming difficult because he was so frustrated.

When Henry started school his parents talked to the staff and his health visitor about their concerns. Henry was assessed by an educational psychologist and a speech and language therapist, which showed that he had a specific language disorder. Henry now receives the support he needs at school.

**Where can I  
find further  
information?**

## Where to go for further information

The website [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk) has a range of information about speech, language and communication development and ways to support children and young people. It also has a progress checker for you to check what to expect from children's speech, language and communication skills at different ages.

Talking Point also includes a database of local support services including speech and language therapy departments. You can search for your local services at [www.talkingpoint.org.uk/talkinglinks](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/talkinglinks), simply type in your postcode.

Or you can talk about your concerns with your child's health visitor, GP or teacher. They might be able to answer your questions or give you more information about local services.

Sometimes you may have to wait to see a speech and language therapist. Some parents don't want to do this so they pay to have a private assessment. You can find details of local private speech and language therapists at [www.helpwithtalking.com](http://www.helpwithtalking.com).

Contact [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk) or [www.afasic.org.uk](http://www.afasic.org.uk) for advice and information – or to discuss your child and your concerns. The websites also give information about a range of places to go for more specialist independent assessment.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists has information about the work and expertise of speech and language therapists. Please go to [www.rcslt.org.uk](http://www.rcslt.org.uk) for more information.

If you work with children and young people the Speech, Language and Communication Framework (SLCF) outlines what you need to know and be able to do in order to support children's communication. For more information about the SLCF go to [www.talkingpoint.org.uk/slcf](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/slcf)

The website [www.hello.org.uk](http://www.hello.org.uk) contains information on the *Hello* campaign, the 2011 national year of communication. The website explains how you can get involved in *Hello*, find out about activities in your area and download free resources.

Further information and support can be accessed through The Communication Trust's consortium members via [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/partners](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/partners)

## Useful resources

We have a range of resources for parents and those who work with children and young people available to order from [www.hello.org.uk/resources](http://www.hello.org.uk/resources)

**Don't Get Me Wrong:** A sister publication to *Misunderstood*, which is for people who already have some understanding about speech, language and communication needs but would like to find out more. This publication is ideal for special education needs co-ordinators (SENCOs).

**Universally Speaking:** A series of three booklets for professionals to show where children and young people are likely to be at with their communication at a given age. The booklets are divided into age groups: Early Years (birth-5), Primary (5-11) and Secondary (11-16), produced with the support of Pearson Assessment.

**Small Talk:** A booklet for parents of children aged 0 to 5 years to give them information and advice on their child's communication development. Produced with the support of BT.

**Early years training materials:** If you work in an early years setting, a speech, language and communication unit has been included as a mandatory part of the new Level 3 Diploma for the Children and Young People's Workforce. The Communication Trust has developed free, expertly written materials for trainers and learners to support the delivery of this unit. These materials will include video footage, activities and handbooks.

Contact [enquiries@thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@thecommunicationtrust.org.uk) for more information or to order these free training materials. Alternatively to view online please visit [www.talkingpoint.org.uk/eypm](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/eypm)

**SLI Handbook:** A book written by I CAN and Afasic that explains what a specific language impairment is, gives advice and support and shows where to go for further information. To order, please visit [www.ican.org.uk/resources](http://www.ican.org.uk/resources) or call 0845 225 4073.

# Credits

Misunderstood has been produced in partnership by The Communication Trust, The Dyslexia SpLD Trust and the Autism Education Trust.



## The Communication Trust

The Communication Trust consists of over 40 voluntary sector organisations that bring together their expertise to ensure that the speech, language and communication needs of all children and young people are met through signposting specialist training support and guidance to people working with children.

The Communication Trust was founded by Afasic, BT, Council for Disabled Children and I CAN.

If your organisation would like to become a member of The Communication Trust's consortium please go to [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/partners/consortium](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/partners/consortium) for more information or e-mail [enquiries@thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@thecommunicationtrust.org.uk)

### **Members of The Communication Trust consortium:**

1 Voice, ACE Centre North, ACE Centre, Action for Children, Afasic, Ambitious About Autism, Association for the Rehabilitation of Communication and Oral Skills (ARCOS), Auditory Verbal UK, Barnardo's, British Stammering Association, Candle, CENMAC, Chailey Heritage Clinical Services, Communication Matters, Contact a Family, DialogueLab, Elklan, Find A Voice, I CAN, KIDS, Language for Learning, The Makaton Charity, Mencap, MERU, National Association of Professionals concerned with Language Impairment in Children (NAPLIC), National Autistic Society (NAS), National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS), National Literacy Trust, Paget Gorman Signed Speech (PGSS), Radio In Schools, St Catherine's, Scope, Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMIRA), Social Emotional Behavioural Difficulties Association (SEBDA), Symbol UK, The Children's Society, The Children's Trust Tadworth, The Learning Partnership.com, The Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children, The Signalong Group.

### **The Dyslexia SpLD**

The Dyslexia SpLD Trust is a consortium of organisations involved in promoting improved practice and outcomes for individuals with dyslexia and specific learning difficulties. The Dyslexia SpLD Trust was established to provide information on effective provision for educating and supporting individuals with dyslexia and specific learning difficulties.

### **Members of The Dyslexia SpLD Trust consortium:**

British Dyslexia Association, Dyslexia Action, Helen Arkell Centre, The Professional Association of Teachers of Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (PATOSS), Springboard for Children, Xtraordinary People

For further information and advice about supporting young people with dyslexia, contact the British Dyslexia Association helpline on 0845 251 9002 or visit [www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk](http://www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk)

### **The Autism Education Trust**

The Autism Education Trust works to raise awareness of autism education across the children's workforce. They bring together organisations involved in delivering autism education services, to share good practice and information, and to involve children and young people with autism and their carers to enhance and improve autism education in England.



**Members of the Autism Education Trust steering group include:**

Autism Alliance, Wessex Autistic Society, National Autistic Society, TreeHouse, Council for Disabled Children, Blackpool Local Authority, West Midlands Regional Hub, South Gloucestershire Local Authority, Autism Centre for Education and Research at University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, Autism Outreach, Torfield School, NORSACA, Training and Development Agency, Asteroids Autism, Blackburn Local Authority

For further information on Autism Spectrum Disorders, contact the National Autistic Society helpline on 0845 070 4004 or visit [www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk](http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk)

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**Thank you to those who made additional contributions to this publication.**

For further copies of this booklet please go to [www.hello.org.uk/resources](http://www.hello.org.uk/resources)

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*Hello* is the 2011 national year of communication – a campaign to increase understanding of how important it is for all children and young people to develop good communication skills.

It's estimated that over 1 million children have some form of speech, language and communication need that requires them to have extra help to communicate. This can affect them severely and for life.

*Hello* aims to make children's communication a priority in homes and schools across the country by providing information on typical communication development, how to spot if children are struggling and where to go for help and support.

Visit [www.hello.org.uk](http://www.hello.org.uk) to find out more about the campaign and sign up for regular updates.

*Hello* is managed in partnership with the Office of the Communication Champion.





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