Classroom strategies for children with communication difficulties

Information for you
Children with language difficulties can find it difficult to cope in the busy nursery/classroom environment. This help sheet aims to give you, the adult, an introduction to language difficulties and ways that you can help a child in your class who has been identified as having speech or language difficulties.

If you have any concerns about a child in your class who you think may have unidentified speech, language or communication difficulties please contact the speech and language therapy department for advice.

**Children who have difficulties understanding**

- There are several reasons why children may have difficulty in listening and understanding in the classroom environment.
- They may find it difficult to pay attention over the background noise of the classroom.
- They may have difficulty taking in and remembering instructions.
- They may not understand question words such as ‘who’ ‘what’ ‘where’ ‘why’ or ‘how’.
- They may not understand new vocabulary (words) or may have difficulty categorising words.
- They may not understand words that can have more than one meaning.
What you can do to help a child in your class

Attention and Listening
If a child has difficulty listening to instruction or is easily distracted here are some things to try:

• Make sure you have the child’s attention before speaking to them.
• Remind the child to use good “listening skills” and praise them when they do.
• Give instructions before an activity rather than during it where possible, particularly if doing practical exercises.
• Encourage the child to repeat back instructions to ensure that they have heard you.

Understanding of Spoken Language
Some children find it difficult to take in and remember large amounts of information:

• Speak slowly and pause between key phrases.
• Use short, simple sentences. Be concise and clear for example, “Pencils down”.
• Emphasise key words when giving information for example, “red group stop working.”
• Slow down your rate of talking. Research shows this is a very effective strategy for children with comprehension difficulties.
• Use clear visual support such as gesture or pictures when giving them information.

• Some children need extra time to process information. Leave a pause if the child does not immediately respond.

• Encourage the child to be aware of their understanding difficulties and ask for help if they don’t understand. Explain that it’s ok if they haven’t understood. Suggesting they say “sorry, I didn’t understand that” may be useful.

• Praise children for asking for help when needed.

• If a child hasn’t understood you try repeating what you’ve said rather than rephrasing. Re-phrasing can increase the language load for a child with difficulties.

• Use closed rather than open questions that is, questions that only have a choice of two or three answers.

• During literacy teaching, revise and summarise stories. Encourage the child to retell what happened in a story to check their understanding.
Some children can have difficulties interpreting implied or ambiguous meanings:

• Think about the language you use in the classroom and try to avoid using language or phrases which might be misinterpreted or have several meanings. Use unambiguous talk where possible.

Some children can have difficulties understanding relationships between associated words:

• Introduce new vocabulary carefully and model it frequently in sentences. Try to limit the amount of new vocabulary introduced at one time to a minimum and use visual support where possible.

Use of Spoken Language

Children who have difficulties with spoken language are generally easier to identify than children who have difficulty understanding. Here are some ways that you can help children who have difficulty speaking in class.
Some children can find it difficult to produce grammatically correct sentences:

- If a child says a sentence using incorrect grammar repeat back their sentence modeling the correct grammar to be used for example, child- “the boy eated his lunch”, teacher- “that’s right, the boy ate his lunch”. This allows the child to learn what they should have said without feeling embarrassed or under pressure.

- If a child is inconsistently using correct grammar that is, they will use pronouns correctly on one occasion but not on others, let them hear that they have made a mistake and provide them with the opportunity to give a correct answer, for example:
  - Child- “he went swimming”
  - Teacher- “if it’s a girl do we say ‘he’ or ‘she’?”
  - Child- “she”
  - Teacher- “that’s right, so we would say ‘she went swimming’ when talking about a girl.

- Only do this if you are sure that the child is able to select the correct answer when given a choice between two.
Some children can have difficulties with naming items or finding right word at times:

• If you know what the word is provide the child with forced alternatives to help them find it for example, “is it a giraffe or a leopard?”

• You could also cue the child by giving them the beginning sound of the word for example, “It’s a llll…”

• If you don’t know the word ask them questions to help establish the word they are trying to find for example, “Is it an object or is it alive?”, “what does it do?”, “what does it look/sound/taste/smell/feel like?”, “what sound does it start with?”

Some children find it difficult to sequence their thoughts to produce coherent sentences/stories:

• Ask the child questions to clarify what they are talking about- who, what, where, why, how.
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