

What is ... 'expressive language'?

What do we mean by 'expressive language'?

- The language we produce ourselves, usually spoken (but may also be through sign or another form of communication)
- The ability to produce utterances, usually sentences, that make sense to other people
- The ability to produce utterances that are grammatically accurate and that express our communicative intent, using appropriate vocabulary
- Speech (including speech sound production) and expressive language are independent of each other i.e. it is possible to have a difficulty with one and not the other (but some people do have difficulties with both)
- Difficulties with expressive language include: grammatical difficulties, word-finding difficulties and limited vocabulary; these areas may be delayed (i.e. following the typical pattern but more slowly) or disordered (following an atypical pattern)
- Some children and young people have difficulties specifically with expressive language, whereas others will have difficulties with all aspects of language
- Some children and young people will be identified with 'Developmental Language Disorder' when their difficulties with language cannot be explained by an obvious cause
- Some children and young people will have difficulties with expressive language as part of another learning difficulty or disability, or as part of a global developmental delay
- Be careful not to assume that a difficulty with expressive language means there is necessarily a difficulty with understanding (receptive language) – some people can understand more than they can express

How are difficulties with expressive language identified?

- A parent, carer, health visitor or education professional is usually the first person to identify when there might be a difficulty with expressive language
- It is important to first rule out a possible hearing loss, by making sure that the child's hearing has been checked
- Before making a referral to Speech and Language Therapy, implement strategies in the classroom, possibly including a speech and language intervention. This will meet the needs of many children
- If there continue to be concerns, the child may then be referred to a Speech and Language Therapist; the therapist may identify a delay or a disorder with one or more aspects of speech and language, including expressive language. They may then provide a course of speech therapy, usually accompanied by a programme to be followed at home and/or in the education setting. This will be reviewed on a regular basis until the child is discharged
- It is increasingly common for children and young people to be identified with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), particularly in the early years and primary, where SLCN is now the most commonly identified need (SEN data, July 2024, DfE); most of those identified will have difficulties with expressive language

How can difficulties with expressive language affect learning?

- Most people with expressive language difficulties will experience significant frustration because it is likely to be hard for them to say exactly what they mean
- These frustrations may manifest in challenging or withdrawn behaviours; where there are issues around behaviour, always consider whether there may be a language difficulty, whatever the age of the child or young person

- Some children and young people may be socially isolated
- Some children and young people may try to use their behaviours to make friends because they cannot use language well
- Difficulties with expressive language will translate into difficulties with written language; when there is a difficulty with writing, always consider whether there may be a language difficulty, whatever the age of the child or young person. 'If you can't say it, you can't write it'
- The difficulties will be apparent across all areas of the curriculum that require language i.e. not just in literacy or English

What can I do in the classroom to support those with expressive language difficulties?

- Make children and young people feel confident that they will be listened to and understood as much as possible
- Be prepared to wait for the child or young person to formulate their response – at least 5 seconds may be needed
- Do not correct their language – if appropriate, model back the correct form but in a supportive way (e.g. if they say 'I falled off the swing' you could respond with 'Oh dear, you fell off the swing')
- If they are having difficulty with finding the word they want in their head, ask them to 'talk round it' i.e. describe it, clap it, give a similar word, or offer a 'forced alternative' (e.g. 'do you mean geography or geology?') etc
- Avoid finishing sentences for people or 'putting words into their mouths'
- Have clear, accessible displays/prompt cards with key vocabulary accompanied by images wherever possible
- Explicitly teach new vocabulary at the start (or preferably before the start) of a new topic; also consider whether you need to teach known vocabulary that might be used in a different way
- Some children and young people will continue to need speech therapy advice and/or programmes even if they are no longer receiving direct therapy; ensure that time is built into their day to do this, usually with an adult, as short, regular input is likely to have the greatest impact
- Offer alternative methods of showing their understanding, not just through speaking or writing
- Continue to communicate with parents and carers about progress, current focus etc
- If you have a child in your class who has not been identified with an expressive language difficulty but you think there is one, talk to the SENCO – you may be the first person to have identified their primary need. This is particularly important if the child is presenting with behavioural issues, which may be as a result of a language difficulty

What can schools do to improve provision for pupils with expressive language difficulties?

- A language rich environment will support every child, including those with expressive difficulties
- Encourage reading for pleasure widely, and discuss books and reading
- Ensure there is access to a reliable assessment tool for expressive and receptive language
- Ensure all staff are trained to understand the implications of SLCN and what effective practice looks like

Where can parents, professionals and young people find further support?

- Speech and Language UK: www.speechandlanguage.org.uk
- GL Assessment sell the WellComm assessment and intervention pack for ages 0-11: www.gl-assessment.co.uk
- Elklan offer training in SLCN: www.elklan.co.uk
- Black Sheep Press has a wide range of resources: www.blacksheeppress.co.uk