Building language and literacy in the secondary school years

In the final part of their series, language and learning specialists Helen Ortner and Ian Abbott look at supporting adopted children with language and learning difficulties at secondary school.

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Children and parents alike are often both excited and daunted at the prospect of starting secondary school. Secondary schools are 'big ships' with large sites and frequent changes of subjects, teachers and classrooms. However, for every challenge there are pragmatic strategies and adjustments that can be made.

Demands of secondary school

Secondary school involves getting around the site within a larger community, greater independence skills and higher demands on learning and speech, language and communication skills (SLCN). The pace of the curriculum significantly increases and delivery style alters, with the use of a wider vocabulary and more abstract concepts. Accessing websites and textbooks can be problematic for those with language and learning difficulties as the language used may be too sophisticated and unstructured and feature unfamiliar vocabulary, even on websites designed for young people. This leads to difficulties understanding the content and working through schoolwork or homework.

Unwritten rules

During the secondary school years, there is more emphasis upon peer interaction and social 'chit chat.' Teachers may use more complex language, sarcasm and expressions such as "Pull your socks up!" or "You've let yourself down!" which can be confusing for children with literal understanding. There is an expectation th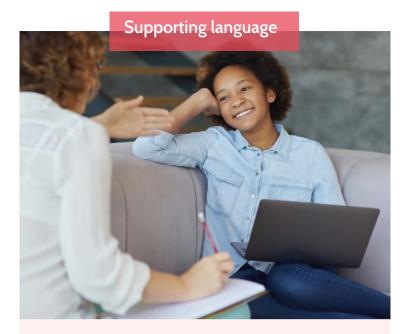at pupils notice and acquire unwritten social 'rules' not explicitly stated, for example not using your drink bottle in assembly. This is coupled with greater exposure to the online world via mobile phones and the use of technology in lessons. Pupils with SLCN can be socially naïve and therefore vulnerable to misunderstanding or even exploitation.

Organisation

There may be a lack of awareness in school that pupils with language and learning difficulties often struggle to organise their time and belongings, and have poor sequencing skills meaning that they struggle to recall exactly what happened in which order. Open-ended tasks, used more frequently as pupils get older, are especially problematic. These sorts of tasks require careful planning, which is exactly the type of difficulty targeted by limited sequencing skills.

Time

Many pupils with SLCN and learning difficulties also struggle with temporal concepts - they may be able to tell the time, but can't reliably judge time and don't know key times throughout the day. Children with attentional difficulties for example, can become distracted or off-task, or more focused on topics outside of the lesson's frame of reference. These issues may lead to school-based anxiety, frustration or unwillingness to accept support as pupils develop better awareness of their difficulties in comparison to their classmates. This can be further exacerbated by difficulties expressing their feelings.

AdoptionUK

Supporting language

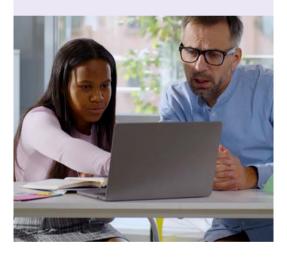
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There are a few things you can do at home to support older children with language and/or learning difficulties. It is better to focus in on one or two areas, rather than to risk becoming overwhelmed or to bring stress to the parent/child relationship.

- Provide opportunities for your child to openly discuss any new vocabulary used by peers, particularly slang. You may need to explain why particular terms are offensive or inappropriate. Not understanding sexual references or other teenage jargon can single out children, potentially putting them at risk of bullying.
- Use and explain language around emotions so that your child understands what these words mean and can express their feelings. You may need to make staff aware of particular issues for your child, for example that many adopted children have a strong sense of failure or may react adversely to being reprimanded due to their previous life experiences.
- Going over or 'pre-teaching' key curriculum vocabulary and concepts at home can make lessons more effective. Pre-teaching can give a learner a 'heads-up' for the lesson, allowing them to spend more time on the learning and reducing anxiety.

Supporting time management and organisation

- Support your child to better understand time by finding out their preference for digital or analogue. Digital clocks can be easier for some children (but perceived as 'not a proper clock' by others). Encourage the most useful method and write times on their timetable if needed (it's worth noting that many don't have breaktimes on). Supported personalisation by your child can make their timetable more meaningful.
- Promote organisational skills and independence by establishing morning and evening routines at home and writing simple visual checklists with times, for example '7.15 get up', '7.30 have breakfast' etc. Your child can then follow this themselves.

General considerations

- There are a few things you can do at home to support older children with language and/or learning difficulties. It is better to focus in on one or two areas, rather than to risk becoming overwhelmed or to bring stress to the parent/child relationship.
- So-called softer skills (or any skill for that matter) may not be acquired naturally by many children. Your child may need to be explicitly taught, over time.
- If your child complains of running out of time, or difficulty reading/understanding the questions in a test or exam, Access Arrangements are a possibility. These are reasonable adjustments for learners with evidence of need, to level the playing field between those disadvantaged in some way when compared to their peers. Our advice is to talk with your school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) as early as possible. The school will have the facilities to investigate possible needs and support as necessary.

Helen is a communication and autism specialist and Ian is a learning specialist. They support children and young people with Special Educational Needs in and out of school. To find out more about their work go to their website unravelled.info.

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