



# Building the foundation of language

*In part two of an ongoing series, language and learning specialists Helen Ortnor and Ian Abbott give us an overview of children's language and learning development in the primary years.*

## Primary years

From the small four-year-old child wearing an oversized uniform to the 'think-they're-cool' year 6s, the primary years span an important period of language and learning development. Reception children suddenly find themselves faced with unfamiliar, sometimes formal school routines, and start to learn a myriad of new skills. During the primary years, the language environment that a child is exposed to becomes much richer - the technical vocabulary and increasingly abstract concepts contained within the National Curriculum for example, alongside 'teacher talk' and the social chit-chat of a peer group.

## Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

Adopted children can respond to the demands of school in different ways, dependent upon their early life experiences and age of adoption. Some may adore the structure and stimulation of school, others may find it overwhelming, particularly if they have attachment needs. Children entering school from an impoverished language background or those with SLCN may not fully understand instructions and what is expected of them, or have the vocabulary to express how they're feeling or describe their learning.



Adopted children's needs are often poorly understood in schools, as are SLCN. The latter can be easily missed or misconstrued as behavioural difficulties, especially if combined with emotional needs due to life history. Inappropriate behaviour at school, either passive (such as daydreaming or being very quiet) or more tricky behaviour such as refusal, tantrums or defiance, can be a result of underlying SLCN and/or learning difficulties. The starting point is empathy and curiosity about what might be causing the child to behave in

this way. Teachers will need to think about simplifying language, reducing attentional load and regularly checking understanding. Your child may need a safe space to retreat to if they are struggling to communicate or are feeling frustrated because they are not understood. SLCN can affect social interaction so your child may need support with understanding others and friendships.

## Mind the gap

Even with good school attendance, there can be many gaps in a child's learning. Early traumatic life experiences can impact on our ability to pay attention. Attachment issues often lead to anxieties, meaning a child is overly vigilant, concentrating on danger rather than the task-in-hand. And early checks on hearing and vision may not have taken place. School work can feel inaccessible and daunting and some children may try to avoid it. A good starting place for any support is to compile a

learning profile of the child's strengths and areas for development. The trick is to exploit strengths, building on things the child can do, to develop those they cannot.



## Working memory

Short-term working memory refers to our ability to store and work with mental information. Children use this skill to recall lists, instructions or strings of letters/sounds for literacy. Typical adults can hold around seven chunks of information and with experience develop strategies to work within their limitations, but children need to develop both their working memory and these supportive techniques. Many children with SLCN and/or learning needs have poor working memory. We also know that anxiety hinders a child's working memory capacity even further.

## Things that can help

Visual support is important. Try illustrating typical routines or the order of the school day.

Hands-on resources such as beads or plastic letters serve as a concrete reminder when counting or spelling.



Assistive technology can be game-changing. Talking Tins or Talking Postcards are simple recording devices that capture short audio clips, like a sentence a child is trying to write down, or a key piece of vocabulary they need to use. They support a child's short-term memory by holding onto the information for the child, allowing them to hear it back independently, as many times as they need to.

Helen is a communication and autism specialist and Ian is a learning specialist. They support children and young people with Special Education Needs in and out of school. Find out more on their website [unravelled.info](http://unravelled.info).

## Top tips for primary years

- Check the basics. Satisfactory vision and hearing are essential for learning – if in doubt, check it out.
- Keep your language clear and concise, use short instructions and allow your child time to process to help your child's understanding.
- Instructions given one at a time, and in the right sequence, supports short-term memory.
- Communication is not just talking. Encourage your child to write, draw or use signs or gestures if she or he struggles with verbal language.
- Reinforce and repeat key vocabulary in different contexts to help your child learn it.
- Encourage a profiling approach, supporting the identification of gaps in your child's individual learning, rather than 'measuring the gap' between a child and their peers.
- Consider progress, however small-step that might be, from your child's unique starting point.
- Use practical, hands on learning to help develop understanding of concepts like 'heavy' and 'light'. Manipulating objects is crucial for underpinning mathematical understanding.
- Ensure school staff are made aware of relevant aspects of your child's background as well as any learning difficulties or SLCN. Behaviour needs to be viewed sensitively within context rather than interpreted as non-compliant.
- Don't be tempted to do homework for your child. If she or he is anxious, doesn't understand the task, struggles to express their ideas etc. their teacher needs to know this.
- When supporting your child with homework, differentiate the work. This means helping make the work more 'doable' by for example breaking down the task into meaningful chunks, providing visuals or hands-on resources, or even increasing motivation by introducing materials or topics that your child loves.
- Encourage your child's 'can-do' attitude, rather than focusing on the outcome. Offering support is fine, but encourage your child to have a go first, ask for help after!
- Adopted children with additional needs are likely to need an enhanced transition to secondary school. Encourage school to begin that transition early.

The next issue of *Adoption Today* will contain a more detailed guide to the different stages of language development in the primary years.