

# The Link

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**19**  
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INVEST IN STAFF TRAINING,  
INVEST IN YOUR  
PUPILS' FUTURES



## **MAKING THE LINK FROM LITERACY TO ORAL LANGUAGE**

Why the development of oral language should be a priority

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**the LinkLive**

**SAVE THE DATE**

Our first ever SLCN online conference

**May 21st - 22nd 2021**

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## Editor's Letter

Happy New Year to you all!

As I write, the new COVID-19 vaccine is just being introduced and our fingers are firmly crossed in the hope that in 2021 we will start to see some semblance of normality.

We know, however, that we still have difficult times ahead and that schools are under intense pressure to close the attainment gap for children with poor language skills (which have undoubtedly been exacerbated further by the Covid-19 pandemic), whilst continuing to deal with the daily challenges that this pandemic is throwing at us.

This issue of The Link has been carefully put together to help everyone working in school settings to be able to put in place an effective whole school approach for SLCN. Creating a communication friendly school supports all children's learning, but particularly those with SLCN, helping to close the attainment gap.

Practical advice for SENCOs striving to create a communication friendly setting is provided by SaLT, **Angharad Welch**, (page 8) while resident therapist, **Juliet Leonard**, reminds us the key to success when introducing an idea to parents/carers is collaboration. Her article (page 14) has plenty of ideas to help you inspire and involve your families in your communication friendly vision. SEND provision, however, should not be left entirely to the SENCO and their 'magic wand' says **nasen's Mandy Wilding**, (page 3) and her article poses questions the senior leadership should consider, to ensure SEN provision remains firmly on the agenda

We know that communication takes many forms, and we are delighted to welcome guest contributor **Adam Annend** from

**The London Speech Bubble** who offers activities for working on SLCN in a drama lesson and at home (page 16).

The clear message from all our contributors is that to establish a truly inclusive, communication friendly environment in your setting, investing in the development of staff skills around SLCN is vital. On pages 6 and 7 you'll find lots of information about our new online training programme, **The Link CPD**. The training modules will empower staff to become 'SLCN champions' facilitating the development of children's language skills and, in turn, their academic attainment. While you're there why not register for Speech and Language Link's first conference, **The Link Live**. This 2-day virtual SLCN conference takes place in May this year and will provide inspirational sessions delivered by specialist speakers to inform and motivate your team in supporting your pupils' SLCN journey.

We are delighted to offer our Speech Link and Language Link subscribing schools, free entry to the Link Live and special subscriber discounts for The Link CPD modules.

We wish you all the best for this term, and if you'd like to get in touch regarding this issue, or content for a further issue, our wonderful Help Desk would love to hear from you.

Have a good term  
Best Wishes

*The Speech and Language Link  
Editor*

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[www.speechandlanguage.info](http://www.speechandlanguage.info)

Contact our Help Desk at  
[office2@speechlink.co.uk](mailto:office2@speechlink.co.uk)  
or phone 0333 577 0784





# The Importance of a Whole School Approach to SEN

By Mandy Wilding, Education Officer, (Early Years), nasen

Today, more than ever, a whole school approach to SEN is necessary if effective SEN provision is to be achieved. Over the past decade, there has been a substantial move away from the SENCo with the 'magic wand' of specialist knowledge and sole responsibility for every child in the school with a SEND, to the increasing understanding that **every teacher is a teacher of SEND and, equally important, every leader is a leader of SEND**. This fundamental principle needs to be at the heart of every setting to meet the needs of all pupils through high quality teaching. While the SENCo is key to this shift in understanding, it is important that effective provision management is in place in schools and that this is not entirely left to the SENCo.

There are increasing numbers of pupils with SLCN in schools and general adaptations to teaching can be made in the classroom that can benefit all pupils - particularly pupils with SLCN. Such changes can be used to weave in opportunities throughout the curriculum to develop speaking and listening. It is imperative that schools take a strategic approach to workforce development, to provide teachers with the knowledge, understanding and skills required to enable them to meet the needs of all pupils. This involves high quality teaching at the universal level of provision.

## Good universal provision includes:

- Modifying language
- Adapting pace and levels of questioning
- Repetition
- Recapping and offering alternative explanations
- Sequencing or chunking of information
- Considered/limited teacher talk
- Modelling language and pronunciation
- Use of sentence starters and differentiated questioning

If these examples of pedagogy are part of good universal provision across the school, SLCN is likely to be addressed, resulting in fewer pupils requiring targeted and specialist support.

## The graduated approach should be embedded in the practice of all schools by:

- A constant cycle of teacher assessment, in all its varied forms
- Lesson planning
- Continuous implementation and review of learning and teaching

This sharper focus meets the needs of all pupils, not just those with SEN.

## Effective deployment of resources maintains high level teaching across the school:

- The use of visual resources or cue cards, task boards
- Providing high frequency and relevant topic vocabulary for reference, phoneme charts
- Spelling aids and simplifying written instructions

Resources used flexibly and creatively by teachers and TAs, based on a sound understanding of individual needs, contribute to effectively supporting the learning of all pupils. The benefits in the classroom can be remarkable and give pupils confidence and independence in their learning.

The monitoring and evaluation of provision for all pupils needs to be carried out regularly by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT).

## Key questions for the SLT along this journey may include:

- How much time do staff have to share and communicate good practice and what works for individuals?
- How do we manage transition and the exchange of information?
- How do we develop and extend staff skills and knowledge?
- Is this integral to the School Improvement Plan?
- Where can we look for support to develop and extend skills and knowledge?
- How, as a SENCo/leader, are the strategies and approaches, employed within the classroom, monitored?

The identification of effective provision and identification of future provision needs in the school must remain firmly on the agenda to maintain a whole school approach to SEN.



(National Association for Special Educational Needs) is a membership charity organisation that supports all educational practitioners. They provide Continuing Professional Development, resources, advice and information to enable all staff to meet the needs of children and young people from 0-25.

From January 2021, nasen membership will be free for all individuals across the UK.

**For more information go to: <https://bit.ly/2JznblC>**

This article's title relates back to the time when wearing masks was an unusual activity – unless as a surgeon or a deep-sea diver! Nowadays, we are all more used to wearing masks, so do we abide by the airline adage of putting on our own oxygen mask before helping others?

I remember being stunned hearing this announcement in airline safety briefings, why would I want to be saved when my child could be saved first? As I have got older (and a little wiser maybe), I realise that I am no use to anyone if I don't look after myself. And (continuing the analogy), I can't help my child out of the aircraft if I haven't put my mask on as a number one priority.

We are increasingly more aware of the importance of self-care as part of a positive attitude to mental wellbeing. We understand physical and mental fitness as important and resilience as a skill to be honed, helping us get through the ups and downs of life. We also need to model these skills to the children that we work with and care for, and perhaps to their parents and other team members too. And there is no time like the present.

Self-care is rarely at the top of our priority list when working with children, especially those with additional needs and in this line of work we naturally put others first. There is certainly little opportunity for thinking about your own needs when you have been on your feet all day long, planning and delivering learning and looking after children's personal, social and emotional development. We shouldn't lose sight however, of the value that being healthy, and in a good place mentally, has for ourselves and the children and young people we work with.

Once we have identified what supports us to maintain a positive outlook, we can consider how this links to being part of a strong team around the children we are working with.



### Sharing the load

Working in a team helps share the load and ensures that all aspects of a child's development are enabled to be as strong as possible. This also involves recognising how focussing on one area of a child's needs might negatively impact on meeting other aspects of their development.

#### TOP TIP



Work with other practitioners to identify what your piece of the support puzzle looks like and what the pupils' targets are. Identify how your targets can be incorporated into other practitioners' support - and theirs into yours.

### Communication

Looking outwards to the rest of the team, it is important to communicate with others about how best to support a child - what the child needs in all areas of their development and what the individual involved in supporting them also needs. Reports, meetings and informal discussions can all help with this type of communication.

#### TOP TIP



Build strong working relationships with parents, other staff and practitioners. This will help individuals to informally highlight any concerns or areas of success and make it easier to co-ordinate diaries for formal reviews of the pupil's progress.



# SKILLS FOR TEAMWORKING



- Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others!

By Kate Freeman, Consultant –  
Speech and Language in Education

## Working with parents

Does your 'team around the child' include the parent as an active player? Interestingly, in researching this article, there were some models which omitted the parent completely. I would propose that, not only is the parent a key player in the team that supports their child, but they are also often the conductor enabling the orchestra of support to work harmoniously with their child.

### TOP TIP



Demonstrate to the parent that you are 'on their side' by supporting them in whatever way you can. For aspects out of your field of expertise, this may include signposting them to other organisations. Whatever supports the parent, will ultimately enable better progress for the pupil.

## Supporting the whole child or young person

Let us not forget the child in the middle of this all. They will have the same emotional, creative and social needs as any other person. At a recent conference, I heard from a parent that the 'homework' being given by all the therapists and educators supporting his child, with special educational needs, totalled more hours than the child was awake between coming home from school and bed-time! Do we really want children to stay up extra late so that they can do their homework or the exercises that should support their learning the next day? Would the child getting an earlier night be more beneficial? With the team around the child working in partnership, overload can be avoided.

### TOP TIP



Find out about the pupil's additional strengths, pastimes and family and make sure that what you are doing relates to them as a whole person.

So next time a parent or colleague needs support, know that the conversation you have, the arm around their shoulders (when that is allowed again) or the words of support you offer are indeed helping the child you are all working with. They are mechanisms to build resilience and we all need that, to be the best we can be and to offer energetic, committed learning and intervention to those who really need it.

# The Link CPD

## SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

"The Language Skills List was a useful activity and made me think about the things I should be looking out for in the classroom. It will be a useful discussion tool for further conversations with our Speech and Language TA at school."

"I enjoyed completing this lesson. Completing the check list determining where children are working within the different areas of speech was interesting. I had previously identified some concerns with individual children, but the results of the checklist were still surprising; in general, there needs to be a greater learning focus on speech and language."

## THE LINK CPD – INVEST IN STAFF TRAINING, INVEST IN CHILDREN'S FUTURES

Evidence shows that one of the best ways to boost children's language skills, and in turn their attainment, is by ensuring that school staff are knowledgeable and confident in supporting children's language and communication skills. Children who are learning within an inclusive communication friendly classroom make the most progress and staff who have an understanding of speech and language development are able to promote these skills for all children. They are better able to identify when children may be having difficulties, reducing the risk of children falling through the gaps without support.

Staff training, is an investment in the future of all the children that you are working with. The Link CPD online course has been written by experienced speech and language therapists, with the content and delivery created specifically with school staff in mind.

### THE LINK CPD CONTENT

#### INTRODUCTION TO SPEECH AND LANGUAGE MODULE

Our introductory module underpins the learning for all further modules by ensuring staff can understand and use key terminology needed to support children with SLCN. An awareness of typical speech and language development enables staff to promote the speech, language and communication development of all children they are working with, and to better identify children who may be at risk of SLCN. The course enables staff to feel confident in developing an inclusive communication friendly environment for the children that they work with. This is the best way to boost children's language skills, and in turn their academic attainment.

**Cost £90+VAT per person**

\*(discount available for schools subscribing to Speech Link or Language Link)

#### LANGUAGE INTERVENTION MODULE

Building on our Introductory module, our Language Intervention module enables staff to embed language interventions into the contexts that they are working in. Staff will develop their ability to use evidence-based strategies to develop children's understanding of language and their talking, in turn supporting their ability to access their learning. Staff will increase their skills in delivering language interventions to pupils both within the classroom and in group sessions. The course supports their ability to plan and deliver these sessions, and to monitor and measure children's progress.

**Cost £90+VAT per person**

\*(discount available for schools subscribing to Speech Link or Language Link)

### THE DELIVERY

- Complete the learning at a time and place that works for you
- The training utilises a blended learning approach, with an introductory webinar, informative videos, interactive activities and assignments, to suit all types of learners
- Assignments enable you to apply what you have learned to real practice
- With a speech and language therapist assigned to each group of learners, you will receive individualised support and feedback, tailored to the context and children that you are working with

**\*(schools that subscribe to Speech Link or Language Link will be able to purchase each module at the discounted price of £80+VAT per person)**





The Link CPD modules aim to provide staff with the confidence and skills to support the many children whose language difficulties can be resolved within school, reducing the need for more specialist support. We will be launching these first two modules this term, with further modules, targeting speech and social communication, released later this year.



To find out more about The Link CPD and to register your interest, go to:

**[speechandlanguage.info/CPD](https://speechandlanguage.info/CPD)**

# The LinkLive

**SAVE THE DATE**

Brought to you by Speech and Language Link

**THE LINK LIVE – AN SLCN JOURNEY FROM 4-14 YEARS**

**DATE:** 21ST MAY – 22ND MAY 2021 **VENUE:** ONLINE

Our first ever virtual conference will take place next spring and will showcase specialist SLCN content, including a range of evidenced interventions, to help you and your school boost the SLCN attainment gap.

Our seminars will be delivered by specialist speakers and we are delighted to kick off our guest line up by announcing our keynote speaker, education expert and former Communication Champion, Jean Gross CBE.

Find out more about The Link CPD training and our evidenced SLCN support packages.

**To register your interest and find out more please contact: [office2@speechlink.co.uk](mailto:office2@speechlink.co.uk)**



# CREATING AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

By Angharad Welch, Speech and Language Therapist and Owner, Find the Key Speech and Language Therapy

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“WHEN A FLOWER DOESN'T BLOOM, YOU FIX THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH IT GROWS, NOT THE FLOWER.”

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There has never been a better time to maximise opportunities to support children's communication. SLCN is the most common type of primary need for pupils on SEN support (DfE, 2019). The number of children with identified SLCN rose by 6% between January 2018 and January 2019. At the same time, the Children's Commissioner for England found a real-term reduction in spending on Speech and Language Therapy in 57% of areas (July 2019). Plainly, a model of support for children with SLCN that focuses solely on waiting for increasingly inaccessible specialist skills is not sustainable. Additionally, with increasing

numbers requiring interventions, delivery becomes more difficult to achieve in practical terms.

Lastly, our understanding of SEN has (hopefully) evolved beyond an impairment-focused mentality that dwells on 'fixing' the child. Neurodiversity models imply schools adapting to the wide range of strengths, needs and ways of functioning that children display, rather than adapting children to the ways we teach. As Alexander Den Heijer says, "When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower."





encourage 1:1 interaction and talking? For example, a common issue is open-plan spaces that encourage flitting and make it difficult to control noise. Do you carry out focussed interactions and interventions in quiet, less distracting spaces?

- Is your space visually distracting? Do displays serve a purpose, and are they referred to explicitly to aid understanding? Are they at a level that children can see? Are focussed activities planned at times and in spaces that discourage interruptions from staff members crossing the space or setting up for the next activity?
- Are visuals used actively and explicitly by adults in ways that encourage understanding and expressive language development?

### Interactions

Are one-to-one interactions given priority? Does every child have an opportunity to talk with an adult every day? Are you encouraging peer interactions? Do you model many forms of communication support to your children through the day? Do you maximise the use of routines to develop understanding and language use?

### Knowledge and staff training

Do staff have good understanding of what typical communication looks like? Do staff know how to maximise their effectiveness in talking to children in ways that support communication, and using effective questioning to extend learning? Do you have a robust plan for staff training and maintaining skills year on year? Do staff understand their individual responsibility for children's communication development?

### Making your setting more communication friendly can:

1. Embed high quality teaching and learning approaches that support all children's communication
2. Include approaches that support your identified children with SLCN
3. Support the effectiveness of your Speech and Language Therapist

What do I mean by a communication friendly environment? These are practices that optimise every part of your space and activities to support communication development, for all pupils.

### Some areas to think about in making a more communication friendly environment are:

#### Physical environment

- Are there quiet spaces that maximise opportunities for concentration and listening, and

Tips for Getting Started with improving your communication environment



#### Give safe spaces to reflect

Many of our everyday practices have evolved from personal preference and habit. One of the best things about developing a communication friendly environment is that it gives people the opportunity to reflect on how and why they do things. Often staff can identify many small positive changes they could make to their routines with minimal difficulty.

#### Start small

Staff are always amazed at the impact small changes make. Adapting even one interaction in one routine during the day can create noticeable change. When staff see this, it will help you to increase staff understanding and momentum.

#### Let people choose their own priorities

Sometimes we will need everybody to focus on making the same improvement, but equally each practitioner could choose one small strategy to try out in their own practice. This gives a sense of ownership.

#### Help people identify change

People often have high expectations for changes they are making. But therapists often measure change differently and do not expect huge improvements in functional communication in one go. How will your staff know when their change has been effective? It could be as simple as a child using a new word, joining in with an activity by gesturing, or staying another minute at a learning opportunity. Make sure you recognise and celebrate every small positive step forward.

Find the Key Speech and Language Therapy works directly with Herefordshire-based schools and families to unlock the potential of children with SLCN. It also offers online learning options for primary school staff.



[www.findthekeyslt.co.uk](http://www.findthekeyslt.co.uk)  
 @FindTheKeySLT [www.facebook.com/findthekeyslt](https://www.facebook.com/findthekeyslt)

For more information on Communication Friendly environments, I recommend The Communication Trust ([www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk)) as a starting point.

# Making the Link from Literacy to Oral Language



By Louise Bingham, Speech and Language Therapist



Good literacy skills are vital for children to access learning and to navigate work and life as adults. It is easy to see why the development of literacy skills is given so much emphasis within the national curriculum. Educational policy, however, puts very little emphasis on development of oral language skills after Year R/P1, which sadly sends a message that it should not be a priority for schools. This is despite the strong evidence base showing that oral language skills underpin the development of literacy skills, and, if you think about it, we need to use our listening and talking skills so much more in our everyday lives than our literacy skills.

Children starting school with poor speech and language skills will struggle to develop literacy, because reading and writing are language skills; they must apply random shapes (letters) to the

sounds in words. In the same way, children with literacy difficulties, may struggle to develop their language skills, particularly their vocabulary and world knowledge, because so much of our language learning happens through reading.

For all children, completing more tasks focused on oral language skills and less tasks focused on reading and writing, will help them to engage in their learning and boost both literacy and language skills. It is not essential, or effective for many children, to only use tasks that rely on reading and writing for learning.





to provide more opportunities for the children to do the talking.

Address questions to the class and ask them to discuss their answers in groups, before feeding back to the class. Encourage children to question each other's ideas by asking "Do you agree with that?" or "What do you think about that?" Asking children 'why' and 'how' questions supports them to extend their thinking using language and develop their problem-solving skills. They will only be able to explain, debate, analyse and reason in their writing, if they can do this successfully when speaking.

### Vocabulary

The importance of vocabulary knowledge for learning cannot be overstated, but we can tend to focus on the number of words that children know (or are able to read) rather than building children's systems for learning and storing words. Children need to build up strong links between words to successfully understand and retrieve them for talking, reading and writing.

Talk about the features of words, describing key points about its meaning, sound structure and spelling. Using new words, lots of times in your talking in context and providing children with opportunities to use the words in their spoken language, will consolidate their knowledge and support them to transfer this to their written work.

### Making inferences

Being able to understand spoken or written language, is often not just about understanding the words, but about understanding how their meaning can change according to the context that they are in. When

talking (and writing) we don't always explicitly say what we mean, so it's really important to be able to read between the lines to work out the implied meaning. Children often struggle with this, when reading, so it is important to develop children's abilities to make inferences and deductions from visual and spoken information before they are required to do this from text.

Try watching video clips, pausing them and asking what might happen next and why. During science lessons, make predictions about the outcomes of different hypotheses. Present the class with a picture and ask them questions to deduce what they are looking at, e.g. "When do you think this picture was taken? Why do you think that?" Children who are can make inferences from pictures and videos have been found to be better at comprehending texts.

### Metacognitive Strategies

Sometimes we realise that we have not understood a word or sentence that we are reading or we have become distracted and need to go back and reread that part again. This skill: identifying when we don't understand and knowing what to do about it, is crucial for independent learning, and children need to be taught how to do this. Many new readers focus on the decoding and not on understanding what they are reading.

Support children to identify when they don't understand something that has been said in the classroom and to ask for help to clarify their understanding. This can then transfer to their reading and encourage them to develop problem solving skills that they can use, such as using the context around a word to work out what it might mean.

**So try putting down the pens and paper to focus on oral language and see the impact on engagement and learning for yourself!**

### Put down the pens and paper

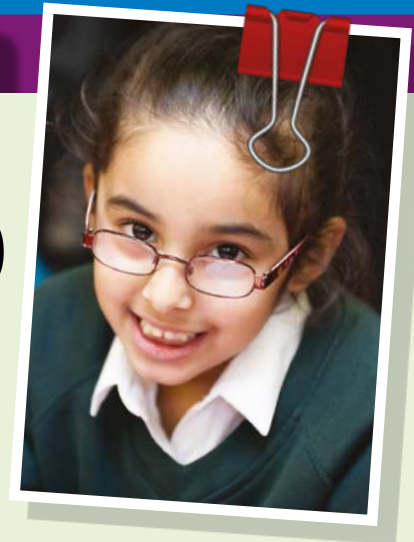
Include activities that do not rely on only reading and writing, but focus on developing listening skills, understanding of spoken language and talking. Consider the aim of your lesson and whether this can be achieved by a task focusing on oral language.

You could organise a debate to develop pupils' abilities to structure an argument, or read part of a story as a class and ask the pupils to role play what the characters might do next. Use photos, videos or voice recordings to collect evidence of the outcome of tasks.

### Who's talking in the classroom?

Often, it's the adults who do most of the talking, while the pupils are expected to be quiet. To develop spoken language skills, we need

## Maisie's story



# SPEAK UP – YOU NEED TO BE HEARD

By Claire Chambers, Former Teaching Assistant and SLTA for the NHS

**Being a TA comes with its own set of challenges, that's for sure. Not only do you need professional collaboration with your teacher and add value to the class environment (rather than replace the teaching for the weaker children), you also need to try and help the children you are carrying out interventions with transfer these skills back to the classroom!**

How many times have you worked with a child 1-1 or in a small group and they get it: you see their progress, you evidence their progress, but back in class, it's a different story? It can be really easy to slip in to overhelping a child when you are desperate for them to 'prove' what they can do. But sometimes this can mean that other staff are less aware of the child's difficulties and how they can help.

Isn't a child far more likely to be successful if everyone knows what the expectations for the child are? If everybody knows the skill the child is working on, and has had success with, then these expectations allow the child to demonstrate this. And this isn't just about all members of staff **knowing** about a difficulty that a child has, it's about them **understanding** the way the child works best and facilitating as many opportunities as possible for them to be successful.

Let me tell you about the lovely Maisie\* – year 4, a reluctant speaker who struggled with her attention...

*A simple blue laminated communication card, kept in the pocket of her cardigan, gave Maisie a little bit of extra support and confidence when she needed to ask for help. I had emailed all members of staff asking them to look out for Maisie's blue card and, in class and on the playground, she began to grow confident in showing it to adults when she was unsure about something.*

*One email alone isn't enough of course and when, blue card clutched in her little hand, Maisie was singled out in assembly, made to stand up and explain why she wasn't listening, it was a sharp reminder that our school community had a way to go in achieving an environment that was truly inclusive for ALL of our pupils.*

A whole school approach is essential and a TA has a real part to play in this. Working closely with your SENCo and the rest of the support staff goes without saying; but it's not always easy to speak up with confidence around more qualified or experienced colleagues.

However, your suggestion might just make a difference to your pupil like Maisie, and so you need to voice it.

It may not be a reasonable expectation that every member of staff should remember every child's individual need, but it must be a reasonable expectation that everyone understands why 'speech, language and communication skills are so fundamental to a child's development success and well-being, that the United Nations now regards the ability to communicate as a human right'.\*\*

**So, keep speaking up, keep reminding staff and supply teachers about your children with SLCN, keep trying different ways to help your pupils communicate and keep on making difference!**

\* Names have been changed for this article.

\*\* The Ultimate Guide to SLCN, 2020, By Sophie Mustoe-Playfair and Louse Bingham.



# The LinkNews

PUBLISHED BY SPEECH LINK MULTIMEDIA LTD

FIND OUT WHAT'S  
NEW IN THE  
WORLD OF SLCN

## 5 REASONS TO SIGN UP FOR THE LINK NEWS TODAY:

- 1 Get the latest SLCN news delivered to your inbox monthly
- 2 Boost attainment with blogs and tips from our speech and language therapists
- 3 Get free resources and activities to use with your pupils
- 4 Become part of a community passionate about helping children with SLCN reach their full potential
- 5 Get your FREE eCopy of The Ultimate Guide to SLCN (RRP printed copy £23.99)

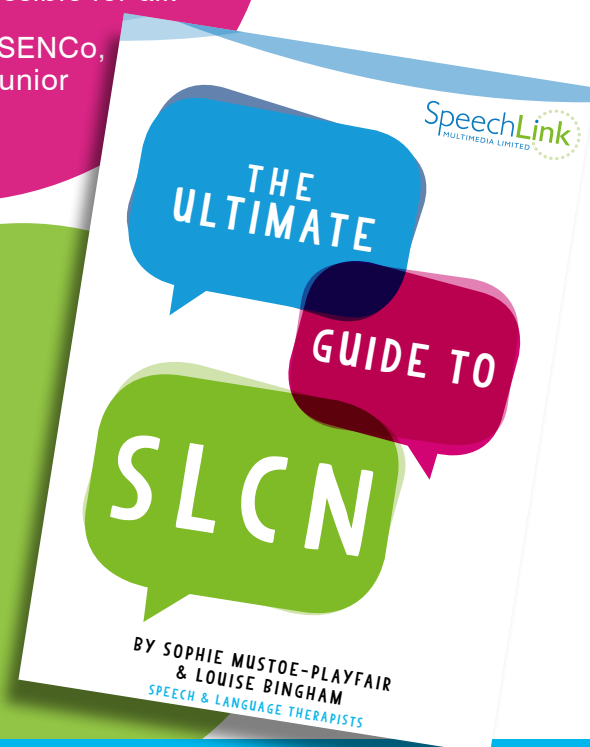
### Bonus eBook

The Ultimate Guide to SLCN has been written for schools by Speech and Language Therapists. It offers practical and specialist advice on how to support children in the classroom with regard to their particular SLCN diagnosis. The guide normally costs £23.99, but we are giving away a digital copy to all schools who subscribe to our monthly online newsletter, The Link News.

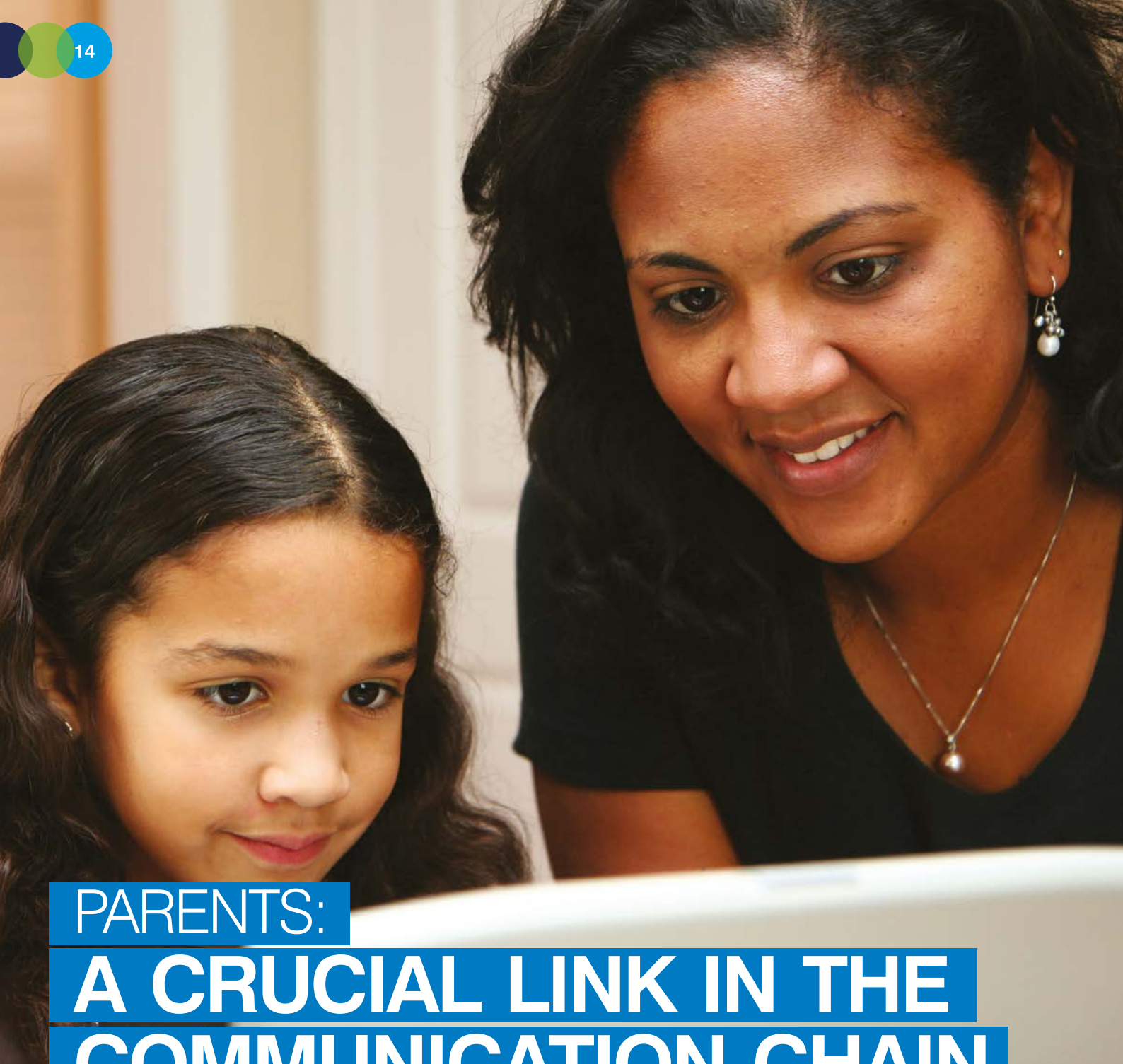
*"The first section of the book focuses on background information and provides some strategies to help all children including those with SLCN. The core strategies are particularly useful and support the Mainstream Core Standard and QFT. They provide reminders for both more experienced and new staff at making learning accessible for all."*

Kirsten Collin, SENCo,  
Whitstable Junior  
School

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VISIT [WWW.SPEECHANDLANGUAGE.INFO/LINKNEWS](http://WWW.SPEECHANDLANGUAGE.INFO/LINKNEWS)



PARENTS:

# A CRUCIAL LINK IN THE COMMUNICATION CHAIN

By Juliet Leonard, Speech and Language Therapist



Every school desires to be a communication friendly environment, where the school community has optimised opportunities for listening, understanding, talking and taking part. It is also recognised that engaging parents in a collaborative approach yields the best results for children and young people. So how do we engage parents in a communication friendly vision, what does this mean to them and how can it be fostered?

Parents are a unique force for any school: Constantly changing and bringing an array of skills, challenges, knowledge and enthusiasm. Most schools observe a broad spectrum of parental engagement, from those

who give freely of their time and support - wholeheartedly embracing the school's vision, to those who may struggle to engage due to time, life stressors, or competing demands and motivations.

For parents and carers to be on board they require an understanding of why a communication friendly environment will benefit the whole school community, an idea of what this entails and practical strategies that they can see in action.



## Sell It!

A vision needs to be sold for everyone to be on board. This means weaving the communication friendly message in at every opportunity. An assembly presented to parents, about how the school has become more communication friendly, visual supports clearly being used at a (parent attended) harvest festival, signs and posters around the school and grounds detailing the main messages, which parents can read at drop off and pick up, or a quiet area which is explicitly labelled so ("This is an area for quiet thinking and talking") are all ways that the message can be conveyed to parents. The aim is for a parent to unconsciously understand this message, identifying their child's school as 'communication friendly' and in turn, identify that it benefits all.

## Inspire and Involve

Parents are resourceful people with amazing ideas. The key to success when introducing a vision is collaboration. Once the vision has been explained, families will feel more part of the approach if they have had a hand in its design and implementation. This might be achieved through a parent working party, a questionnaire, an ideas board outside school, or simple chalkboard tick or cross opportunities to encourage participation.

It is important that ideas are ratified by families. A good example of this is the "Greet your child with a smile, not a mobile," campaign which has been introduced in recent years, with the aim of reminding parents of the importance of being 'present' at this crucial end of day moment. The response to this has

## "GREET YOUR CHILD WITH A SMILE, NOT A MOBILE"

been mixed, with some considering it to be a healthy reminder, whilst others perceiving it to be an attempt to manage their parenting skills or condemn them for life's competing demands. Consulting parents on this idea and asking them what their thoughts are opens a dialogue, providing opportunities for differences of opinions, questions, listening to viewpoints, resolution and developing a shared understanding. These are all skills we encourage in a communication friendly school, and we can likewise be fostering these with parents and carers.

Involving pupils in the communication friendly vision will also involve parents. Poster competitions, ideas boards and nominated class communication champions will all encourage parents to be proud of the vision to which their child has contributed.

## Upskill

Keeping the message 'alive and growing' is about continued learning for all. Adding a 'Communication Corner', a sign or a visual support used in school, a 'Word of the Week' or a 'Did you know?' communication fact to the school's newsletter keeps this learning and awareness alive. Some schools have been able to take this further with parent workshops or training opportunities for parents and teacher to share.

## FLO Focus

Your school FLO is a fountain of knowledge when it comes to engaging parents; they understand the dynamics of some of the more hard to reach families and is likely to experience greater success in sharing ideas and visions with them. The language that the FLO uses with parents, to promote a communication friendly school is more likely to be taken on board by those families with whom they have a relationship.

## The Big Picture

A whole school communication approach benefits every child but is of particular benefit to children with SLCN as it fosters understanding by all of the school community, to overcome barriers and provide opportunities for communication. This is a powerful tool for parents to understand because it has the ability to 'open their child's world' beyond their classroom, and to dispel the idea that their child can only make progress with certain members of staff who understand their communication needs. An understanding of the benefits of this and a demonstration of it working in practice may encourage engagement from parents who would otherwise not choose to be involved.

## Celebrate!

When you have a communication friendly school, it should be celebrated – shout it from the rooftops! When possible, celebrate this with your new intake parents, reward it at achievement events and keep adding to the vision.



# SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH SLCN USING DRAMA INTERVENTION

By Adam Annand, Speech Bubbles National Lead  
& London Bubble Associate Director



Speech Bubbles is a drama intervention that supports children in KS1 with communication needs. Most of the referred children wouldn't be considered at a high enough level of need to access local Speech and Language Therapy services, however they are still struggling academically and with social interaction.

Our small group approach is centred on the telling and acting out of each child's own imagined story supported by focussed creative activities. The emphasis is on whole body communication, gesture, sound making, interaction, imagination and enjoyment. The pleasure that comes with sharing your story, with connecting with one another, with being playful – this is serious messing about!

During the first lockdown we had to put the programme on pause. We were aware that not only had

the issues for the children not gone away but in many cases they were intensified. We wanted to do something, and we wanted to do something that felt safe. So we created three booklets of drama activities that were directly influenced by Speech Bubbles activities and support children's creative communication. Two of the booklets are designed for children to use at home, maybe on their own, maybe with a sibling or a cousin, or maybe with a willing grown up. The third booklet is for use in school and has been

designed for teachers working in small bubbles with vulnerable children or children from key worker families. The link for the booklets is at the end of this article – please download and share widely!

Here are three activities, from the booklets you can try in school or share with your parents:

## **From Drama at Home – THIS IS NOT A SPOON, IT IS A...**

Pick any household object. Pretend it is something else and act it out. So a spoon could become a telephone! See how many different ideas you can come up with. Pick another object and try again! Play by yourself or with any number of people, taking turns to come up with ideas.





### From Drama at School – NAMES IN A BUCKET

This activity can be used to practise names and to build confidence speaking aloud. Tell the children that you have placed the bucket somewhere in the room and you need to collect it. This is an imaginary bucket so you can play around with the size and the weight when you pick it up and place it in the middle of the circle.

Tell the children that we are going to take it in turns to throw our names into the bucket. The adult models this first and then you go round the circle with each child having a go. You can do this multiple times and each round the way you throw the name in the bucket can be changed. For example; quiet, loud, like a superhero, like a dog etc.

Once you have finished you can ask a child to place the bucket somewhere in the room for next time and the other children must remember as you can ask them to collect next time you play the game.

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“I DIDN'T ACTUALLY  
LIKE IT - I LOVED  
IT, BECAUSE WE  
COULD EXPLAIN OUR  
IDEAS AND MAKE UP  
OUR OWN STORIES  
AND EXPRESS  
OURSELVES.”

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### From Drama at School – MIRRORING

This game is played in pairs. Each pair of children stand facing each other (2 metres apart). Get the participants to label themselves 'A' and 'B'. Person 'A' will start a gentle movement and person 'B' must copy their moves as if they are a mirror. It helps to keep good eye contact. Play the game again but swap over, so that 'B' gets to move and 'A' copy.

To add an element of performance you can ask the pairs to choose who will lead and who will follow. Give them 10 seconds to do this and make sure they don't share their decision with the group. You can then spotlight certain pairs to complete the game, whilst other members in the group form an

audience to watch and guess who they believe is leading and who is copying in each pair.

**Speech Bubbles has been the subject of several qualitative and quantitative research programmes<sup>1</sup> with reported benefits such as:**

- Improved confidence and self esteem

And measurable improvements in:

- Understanding spoken language
- Storytelling and narrative
- Social interaction.

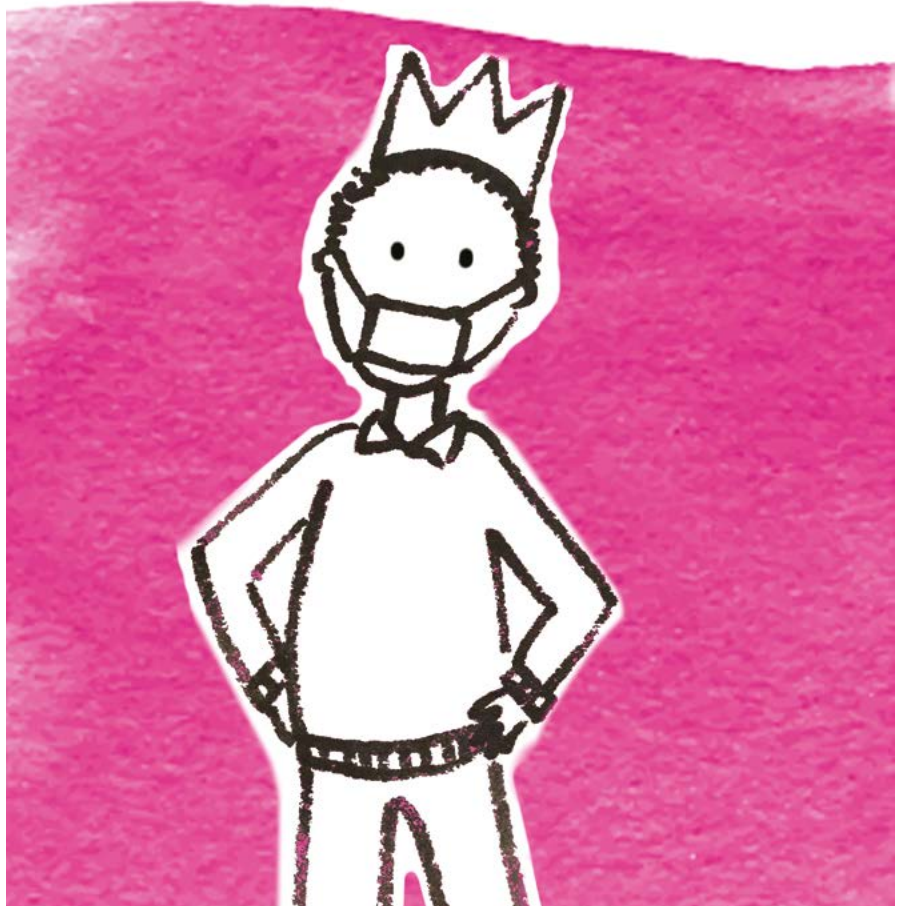
Earlier last year Dr Jonathan Barnes interviewed a small group of year 5 and 6 children who took part in Speech Bubbles four years ago. His paper, published by the Royal Society of Public Health,<sup>2</sup> included the following self-reported benefits:

*"...at first I wasn't really listening, I felt like it was going to take years to get to my turn, but ...I realised that everyone was listening to me so that I should listen back to them because they're giving me their time and attention and I am giving them mine."*

*"I didn't actually like it - I loved it, because we could explain our ideas and make up our own stories and express ourselves."*

*"I upgraded myself to be confident in class and out of class. When I am doing a question I [now] can get up in front of the whole class and answer it without thinking 'I don't want to do this anymore' it made me understand and speak out."*

As this article is written, we are in the midst of a second lockdown and schools are open to all children. Speech Bubbles is back and our drama practitioners are working face to face with the children in a Covid-secure way. The stories from



the children remain as glorious and diverse as ever with tales of dragons, dinosaurs, superpowers, and trips to the park with friends and cousins. In a few notable instances the stories have been directly influenced by the pandemic. In one story a dragon roared at everybody but really they just wanted to visit their friends and in another story a prince wore a face mask as part of his party costume – 'just like me' said the child story teller pulling his mask from his pocket!

The impact of the pandemic on individuals, on families, on school populations and on whole communities will be felt for many years to come. Being back in schools and talking to staff, we can see a growing and immediate need for social and emotional support for many children. With thanks to Paul Hamlyn Foundation, we will be

offering a Speech Bubbles recovery model this spring and summer term; a shorter programme aimed at supporting children that schools identify as being adversely affected in their communication and social interaction. This adapted version of Speech Bubbles will maintain all the practical and creative activity, the games, the stories, the moving and chanting. It will provide children with a creative, enjoyable low pressure space to tell the stories that they want to tell and to act them out.

Of course it's not just about the children. The drama activities in the booklet give adults a chance to interact with the children in low pressure, imaginative and creative ways and enjoy the opportunity to connect and communicate!

Have fun and let us know how you get on.



**Download Drama Activity Booklets here:**

[https://www.londonbubble.org.uk/parent\\_project/speech-bubbles/free-drama-resources-for-home-or-school/](https://www.londonbubble.org.uk/parent_project/speech-bubbles/free-drama-resources-for-home-or-school/)

**Get in touch:** [adam@londonbubble.org.uk](mailto:adam@londonbubble.org.uk)

**Follow us on Twitter:** @SpeechBubbles20 #Speechbubbles  
#SpeechBubblesRecoveryModel



<sup>1</sup> All Speech Bubbles research papers available at [https://www.londonbubble.org.uk/parent\\_project/speech-bubbles/reports-research-writing/](https://www.londonbubble.org.uk/parent_project/speech-bubbles/reports-research-writing/)

<sup>2</sup> 'Perspectives in Public Health' September 2020 Vol 140 No 5



# ASK A THERAPIST:

## Becoming a Communication Friendly School

By Sophie Mustoe-Playfair, Speech and Language Therapist



**Question.** What does it mean to be a 'Communication Friendly Setting' and how can I achieve this in my school?



**Answer.** A communication friendly school has an environment which makes it easy, effective, and pleasant for all members of your school community to communicate with one another. The goal is for all children to be able to express themselves clearly, understand others, and participate fully at school.

Simple adjustments to the environment will boost communication, but for these to have real impact they must be applied consistently across the whole setting. This means support for SLCN does not stop at the classroom door, and children will be supported in developing their communication skills at every opportunity throughout the day.

### HERE ARE **5** WAYS TO HELP YOUR SCHOOL BECOME COMMUNICATION FRIENDLY

#### **1** Training for staff

All members of staff can benefit from developing their understanding and knowledge of speech and language. This knowledge can be applied in every interaction with a child to support the development of functional communication skills. Training should focus on raising awareness of SLCN and core classroom support strategies and how staff can adapt the language they use so that it doesn't become a barrier to a child's participation. Having one 'communication champion' in your school, with a special interest in SLCN, can ensure best practice is followed throughout the school.

#### **2** Visual support

This helps to alleviate the pressure for children with SLCN (and it's helpful for children with a range of other difficulties too!). Use pictures, symbols, photographs, gestures

or signs, demonstrations, colour-coding, and even the written word. Remember that visual support isn't a one-way street: interactive displays, such as working walls, confidence indicators and communication boards can help children become active participants in their own learning.

#### **3** Be clear and consistent

All children should be familiar with daily routines and with the expectations you have of them. Consistency throughout the whole school is important, not only for applying rules and behaviour management, but so that children know how to interact and participate. Children should be able to anticipate the strategies that will be applied in different classrooms and know how they can access help. They should have reliable opportunities and strategies to use to say when they don't understand or need support.

#### **4** Places and spaces

Consider adapting spaces around your school to encourage quiet communication by creating comfortable spaces to talk in different situations and for different purposes. You could rearrange the furniture in different places to facilitate a variety of opportunities for talking.

#### **5** Audit your setting

Carry out a communication audit for the setting, taking account of the practice observed within classrooms and in shared areas, the features of the environment, policies, and staff training. Using audit tools and communication friendly checklists can help you to develop a clear action plan to boost the inclusivity of your setting.

TURN OVER FOR OUR 5 TOP TIPS COMMUNICATION POSTER...

# 5 TIPS for a Communication Friendly School



By Sophie Mustoe-Playfair, SaLT



1

## **Embed speech and language training in your professional development programme**

This will raise awareness of SLCN, improve teaching practice, and help all staff to make the most of everyday opportunities to support children to develop good communication skills.

2

## **Provide lots of visual support**

Visual support provides a life-raft for children with SLCN, and many other children as well. Use visual support strategies whenever possible to support children's understanding and remember that children can use visual support strategies to help them to communicate too.

3

## **Be clear and consistent with routines and strategies**

Familiar routines will help children to know what is expected of them at different points in the day and consistent strategies can help them to communicate effectively and access help when they need it.

4

## **Build the right environment**

The environment shapes the opportunities children have for communication. Some environments will support effective and enjoyable interactions, and others will put up barriers. Try to create spaces in your school to support good opportunities for talking.

5

## **Audit your setting**

An audit tool can help you to find out about the strengths in your school so you can spread good practice, and to identify points for improvement. There is no more efficient way to develop a clear action plan and become more communication friendly.