

The Link

SECONDARY

ISSUE
1
2023



THE SPEECH & LANGUAGE MAGAZINE FOR SCHOOLS



NEW
1st issue of our
magazine for
Secondary
Schools

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LANGUAGE DISORDER (DLD)
IN CLASS**
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Hello and welcome to the very first issue of The Link Secondary magazine, brought to you by **Speech and Language Link**. Our award-winning primary magazine is now in its 10th year and so this edition for secondary schools is long overdue.

Who are we? We are Speech and Language Link. Our online identification and support packages, Speech Link and Language Link, have been developed by speech and language therapists (SaLTs), and have provided speech and language assessments and interventions to schools in the UK and overseas for over 20 years. Secondary Language Link is an innovative online assessment and intervention package used by schools to identify and support pupils, aged 11-14 years, with language and communication needs – including those with EAL. The comprehensive package includes training and support from our SaLTs, structured intervention programmes and resources, progress measures to track improvement and materials for families to support children at home.

Find out more about how the package can help your students in this issue.

The aim of The Link magazine is to provide SENCos, support staff and teachers with high-quality advice and information about different diagnoses of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and how to support pupils alongside their current SaLT provision. We know there is a disparity of services across the UK, but in general SaLT waiting lists are long and often clogged up with inappropriate referrals for students that may be able to be managed by schools using an evidence-based package such as Secondary Language Link.

By now your new students will have settled in and, while you will be aware of some of your new intake who have already been identified with SLCN, there may be many more who have undiagnosed language difficulties. Their struggle to understand language and communicate effectively may well impact their behaviour, academic progress, attendance and ultimately their life chances.

We have some really great articles from eminent specialists in this issue, which I hope you will find interesting and relevant in helping you to support students with SLCN.

Our primary schools tell us that they use **The Link** as an essential resource and reference tool so please share this magazine. Leave it in the staff room, perhaps photocopy relevant articles and why not send this link, for the online version, to your colleagues:

www.speechandlanguage.info/the-link-magazine

We hope you find The Link useful and relevant. Please get in touch with your comments and to share your ideas for future editions via: helpdesk@speechlink.co.uk

Have a good term.

Claire Chambers



Editor, The Link Speech and Language Link – award-winning assessments and support for SLCN



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Meet the Therapist

Speech and Language Link's lead speech and language therapist,
Derry Patterson

Derry's vision and commitment to improving the lives of students with language disorders led to the development of **Secondary Language Link**. Here she provides some insight into how the package was developed.

Secondary Language Link has possibly been our most ambitious package for mainstream schools working with increasing numbers of students who require support with their speech, language and communication skills.

After the success of our award-winning range of packages aimed at primary schools, Secondary Language Link came into being in 2012 following a conversation with a local working group. Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) were increasingly recognised in our local secondary schools, and the scale of the problem seemed to be growing.

Ten years later, it's clear that SLCN is still a necessary priority for all schools. **In the academic year 2021/22, 22.4% of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support in Y7 were identified as having SLCN as their primary need.** And this only represents the students whose needs have already been identified.

From countless discussions with schools, speech and language therapists, and other specialists, we know that this is just the tip of the iceberg. Language needs are so often missed and, in the case of older children and young people, not well understood. They may be more likely to stand out for another reason, such as inappropriate behaviour.

Our vision was to build a toolbox for all secondary schools. Something that all staff could access to feel confident that they understand their students' needs and know how to put effective support in place. We wanted Secondary Language Link to be a comprehensive package focused on a 'Whole School Approach':

- We believe in universal screening so that no student's needs are missed or misidentified
- We are committed to developing age-appropriate, engaging interventions that are meaningful for young people
- We want all staff to have access to the knowledge, skills and tools they need to support every student to access the curriculum and achieve their potential

We wanted Secondary Language Link to be a comprehensive package focused on a 'Whole School Approach'

We worked with experienced SENCos and teachers who had worked day in and day out to support students with SLCN to fully understand the challenges faced by secondary schools. Passionate speech and language therapists provided insight into common challenges, best practice, and evidence-informed tools.

In 2019, we made significant updates to Secondary Language Link's universal and targeted intervention resources. Engaging and motivating the growing numbers of students who were accessing our interventions was at the heart of this update; we poured ourselves into developing innovative new intervention groups and consulting with real staff and students along the way. A little over 10 years since we first launched Secondary Language Link, early identification of needs and engaging, motivating and impactful intervention is still at the heart of what we do.



A personal experience of education after stroke



By Katherine Buckeridge, specialist speech and language therapist in paediatric neurology and Jessica Cannons, childhood stroke survivor

When you hear the word stroke, it is likely that the image of an older person will come to mind. There is much less awareness of childhood stroke and how this can affect a child's development, yet the Stroke Association estimates that 400 children per year in the UK are affected. A stroke occurs when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off resulting in difficulties with motor and cognitive functions. A child may have issues with mobility, communication, emotions, behaviour and fatigue, making school and social life challenging.

Damage to the part of the brain responsible for language affecting spoken, written and nonverbal language is broadly referred to as aphasia. Aphasia may affect a child's receptive language, expressive language or both. The severity and nature of the aphasia differs greatly and can change over time; some children may not be able to speak at all whilst others may experience only occasional word finding difficulties. Initially, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) such as photo or symbol charts, communication books and technology including voice output communication aids (VOCAs) can be used. A few children will need AAC in the long-term.

Jessica had a stroke when she was ten years old due to damage to her heart caused by high doses of chemotherapy. After a period of rehabilitation, she returned to school. Here, she describes how aphasia affected her education.

"I was home schooled for eight months after my stroke before transferring back to mainstream school where my then NHS speech and language therapist (SaLT), Katherine and I gave a presentation to staff on how to support a child with aphasia to return to school.

Initially, I attended school occasionally, for a maximum of two hours, with my local council tutor. Afterwards, I was mentally exhausted and went back home to rest. At first, I could only say a simple sentence slowly; word finding was extremely hard especially at school. Before my stroke I loved reading, but my skills were really





"I always had the support of a learning support assistant in class..."

affected by aphasia. I wasn't going to let that stop me, so I started with baby books and my reading improved over time. Writing was very hard, even simple sentences - it was difficult to get the words in my head onto paper. Friendships were not an option for me as I experienced overwhelming fatigue, and my aphasia was a big challenge. All of this gave me the strength and the determination to overcome my aphasia.

In secondary school, my aphasia improved a lot. I could verbally communicate much more without stopping, write simple, short paragraphs and participate in conversations. I attended for up to four hours if I had the energy. I always had the support of a learning support assistant in class who would write down everything for me and one-to-one support with homework and catching up. My SENCo reduced the number of subjects I did to English, maths, and science. English and group work was extremely hard, but I always loved a challenge. My reading skills improved dramatically, and five years after my stroke I could slowly read age-appropriate books. I still struggled with friendships, most teenage girls like to be in groups, and I found it difficult to keep up with a fast-paced conversation, however, I had a few friends.

During exams, I was allowed extra time, help with reading and writing, and breaks. When I got my GCSE results, I was astonished to achieve A for English, B for science and C+ for maths. All of the work with my SaLT and at school, home and hospital, gave me the grades to go to college. There, I did three BTECs and made a friend. My SaLT stayed involved and although my aphasia had improved significantly, I still struggled with mental fatigue. I was so proud of myself when I got my BTEC results - distinction stars on all of them! Now, most people would not know that I have aphasia but if I'm tired or anxious it does show and it is still a challenge."

OUR TOP TIPS

-  Aphasia is an acquired language disorder. It can be very frustrating when a child or young person is not able to understand language and/or express themselves as easily as before, leading to reduced self-confidence. Allow them plenty of time to process and share information, providing Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) if recommended by a SaLT.
-  Reading, writing and numerical skills may also be affected, and children may need additional support and personalised strategies to enable access to lessons and homework.
-  Fatigue can make schoolwork, homework and social activities exhausting. Work with the child, family and health professionals to develop a return-to-school plan and review this at regular intervals.
-  A child may not always recover their language skills completely. However, by not assuming there is an intellectual disability and supporting children with aphasia effectively, they can lead successful and fulfilling lives.

USEFUL LINKS

- **Stroke Association's information on childhood stroke:** www.stroke.org.uk/childhood-stroke
- **Educating Children and Young People with Acquired Brain Injury** by Walker and Wicks, second edition, 2018.
- **ABI mini guide for schools from the Child Brain Injury Trust:** childbraininjurytrust.org.uk.
- **Communication Access UK:** <https://communication-access.co.uk>



Read the full length version at our Blog here

One TA to another

By our resident former HLTA and speech and language therapy assistant



How many of your new Y7s are in mourning?

Not exclusive to the death of a loved one, mourning the loss of what has gone before (in this instance - primary education) is hugely significant for many of your new students.

The loss of some, or all of their friends, their teachers and the familiarity (built from attending up to 7 years in the same school) is immense. To be plucked from the ethos, routines and expectations that are well-known and dropped into a secondary environment where they must learn new ones is overwhelming. For your students with SLCN (speech, language and communication needs) new routines, meeting new people and getting to grips with a whole new world is that much more challenging. I imagine that you can think of several or even many students who are still struggling to fit in.

So how do we, as TAs/LSAs, help them and how can we work better with subject teachers to ensure their classroom experiences are as positive and inclusive as they can be while meeting their individual and, in some cases, significant needs?

Having worked in a secondary school for 8 years supporting hundreds of students with SLCN, I have been part of many successes, but yes, I have seen some things that were, shall we say, less effective. Being a TA can be tricky and it is not always easy to talk to subject teachers about the students with SLCN without seeming critical, or to appear that we are more knowledgeable.

But when it comes to supporting students with SLCN, sometimes we are – this is where our expertise lies. We owe it to our students to stick our heads above the parapet now and again to ensure their needs are met.

At the very least we need to make sure:

- ✓ That teachers are fully aware of the specific needs of individual students and particularly the implications that SLCN has on attainment and behaviour – **The Link magazine** is a great starting point
- ✓ We know the short and medium-term lesson plans so we can prepare resources to support those who need it
- ✓ That we talk regularly with teachers to provide feedback and suggestions that may help make their classroom more inclusive

OK here's the sticking your head above the parapet bit:

- ✓ Suggest to the teacher that they swap with you for part of the lesson, so that they support the students with SLCN, whilst you support the more able
- ✓ Disruptive students misbehave for a reason and that reason is often rooted in underlying SLCN. If the teacher is frequently excluding a student from class, suggest to them (and the SENCo) that the student be referred for a speech and language assessment and as a team, talk to the student about what they find difficult and how they think they can be better supported to engage.

We would love your ideas for supporting students with SLCN.

Please send them to:
claire.chambers@speechlink.co.uk

Have a really good term.

LinkLive

SESSIONS

***FREE**
tickets for Secondary
Language Link subscribers
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homepage for more details



DATE

Thursday 30th November '23

VENUE

Online (and available on-demand)

TIME

15:30-17:00

PRESENTERS

Kate Freeman, consultant – speech and language in education

Juliet Leonard, specialist SaLT, for Speech and Language Link

TOPIC

Between Brains: Supporting SLCN in Tweens and Teens

SUITABLE FOR

SENCOs, teachers, support staff and all who support students with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

Tickets
cost
£25+vat

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FOR THE LINK
MAGAZINE
READERS*

*Use code TLLS1123TLM



Kate Freeman

Consultant – speech and language in education

Having chaired **The Link Live** conferences for the last three years, I know that online events mean reductions in time and costs of travelling while still offering a chance to share and plan together.

However, we appreciate that not everyone is able to give up a full day to participate in events, such as **The Link Live** conference, and have decided to change the format from a full-day event to termly, twilight sessions.

We kick off this autumn term by welcoming one of our very own specialist speech and language therapists, **Juliet Leonard**, who will provide a lively workshop-style presentation exploring the brain changes that occur from the age of 10 years onwards, the challenges staff face when supporting teens with SLCN, along with solutions and practical activities.

There will also be an opportunity to develop your knowledge about SLCN as a whole and to identify tools for SENCOs, as well as useful strategies for all staff in secondary schools to use. I hope to see you there.



Juliet Leonard,

Specialist SaLT, for Speech and Language Link

Supporting adolescents with SLCN as they move into KS3 is crucial, to ensure progress continues, but this is not without its challenges: adolescence is a time of significant physical and emotional change, prompting sizeable shifts in communication and interaction. A teenager's brain is still 'under construction' and remodels itself by 'pruning back' areas that it no longer needs. SLCN activities previously used may no longer feel relevant and the tone of activities will need to match students' age rather than stage.

Join me on Thursday 30th November and we will:

- Look at the importance of providing and continuing intervention in KS3
- Consider the challenges of the content of interventions with adolescents with SLCN
- Explore strategies to motivate and support adolescents with SLCN

A live Q&A session will follow where we can take questions and share ideas.



BOOK NOW: speechandlanguage.info/linklive

How classroom practitioners can support pupils with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)



By **Sue Marr** (specialist teacher) and **Hilary Nicoll** (highly specialist speech & language therapist)





What is Developmental Language Disorder?

- Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is when a child or adult has difficulties talking, and/or understanding language
- These difficulties can impact education and/or social interactions
- For a diagnosis of DLD, these difficulties exist without another biomedical condition such as autism, or intellectual disability. (A child with a language disorder and comorbid condition would instead be diagnosed with a "language disorder associated with X")

How common is it?

- According to research¹, "7.58% of children begin school with DLD"
- "Research also shows that children who start school with low language levels remain behind their peers even into secondary school²"
- This means that in an average secondary class of 30, two pupils may have DLD severe enough to affect academic progress
- DLD is more common than autism yet remains a 'hidden condition' that is often missed, misdiagnosed or misinterpreted as poor behaviour, or inattention, dyslexia or autism
- DLD often co-occurs with other neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD, developmental coordination disorder (dyslexia) and dyscalculia

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING PUPILS WITH DLD

Appropriate support from classroom practitioners can make a real difference to pupils with DLD. They can provide this by making very simple adaptations to their teaching practice, using these ten key strategies:

1 TIME – Allow pupils with DLD more time to process information and instructions and to formulate their answers.



2 VISUAL SUPPORT – Using visual prompting can help to signpost activities for pupils with DLD and trigger memory. Make use of interactive whiteboards, iPads, apps and videos from the internet. Provide visual timetables, language rich displays and clear/simple signage around the school.



3 SIGN IT – Signing supports the development of expressive language and helps with understanding as pupils are given an additional 'visual clue.' Most teachers are not trained signers, but what they do well is to use gestures, facial expressions and body language, so try to ensure that you use these skills more overtly.



4 DO IT – Pupils with DLD respond well when provided with a multi-sensory teaching approach. Try to provide plenty of opportunities for kinaesthetic (physical) learning, especially in topics that have a heavy language load. Start with the pupils' first-hand experience, focus on life skills and creative tasks where possible. Throughout practical activities, model the language you want the pupils to use. This will then support any subsequent spoken or written tasks.



5 MODIFY YOUR LANGUAGE – Slow your rate of speech! Give one instruction at a time and build the task up. Keep your sentences short and concise, pause in between sentences so pupils can process the information more easily. Be prepared to re-phrase what you say more than once. Try to use word order that follows time, for example, "Finish your graph before you write the conclusion." is easier for a pupil with DLD to understand than "Before you write the conclusion, finish your graph." When necessary, simplify vocabulary: e.g., using the word 'allow' instead of 'permit'.



6 CHUNK INFORMATION – To support understanding of everyday instructions, chunk the information by using pauses, e.g., “Put the equipment away collect your planner..... then go to your house meeting.” It is often useful to repeat the instruction! Be explicit, use literal language. Pupils with DLD struggle to understand inference and language forms such as idioms and metaphors.



7 WORDS – Pupils with DLD will know fewer words than their typically developing peers. They require explicit teaching of Tier 2 vocabulary as well as subject specific words. Tier 2 words are high frequency, cross-curricular words such as ‘explain’, ‘summarise’ and ‘discuss’. Also try to plan vocabulary activities that target the most important subject specific words, as pupils with DLD will not ‘pick up’ new vocabulary like their peers. Set aside 5 minutes at the start of lessons for vocabulary instruction. The whole class will benefit, particularly in subjects such as maths and science, where the concepts used can be abstract and include complex temporal or spatial language.



8 SMALL STEPS – Break down longer tasks into smaller and more manageable parts. Provide a framework so pupils know what to do and can see their progress.



9 REPEAT IT – Try to recap previous learning at the beginning of each lesson. Many pupils with DLD have difficulties with working memory and so benefit from prompting. Throughout the lesson, repeat what you want the pupils to learn and model the use of targeted vocabulary. Do the same activity more than once but make small changes each time to extend learning. Ask the pupils to repeat back to you what they have been asked to do so that you can assess their understanding.

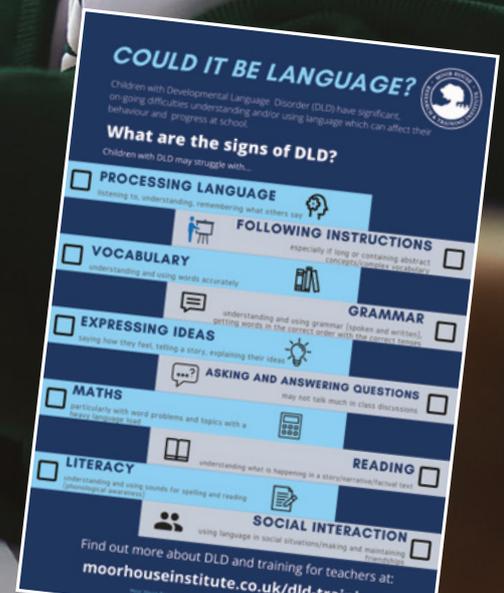


10 MODEL IT – Whether spoken or written, always model the language you want these pupils to use. Provide them with a toolkit of phrases/sentence structures that they can use to answer specific question forms.



1. Norbury, C.F., Gooch, D., Wray, C., Baird, G., Charman, T., Simonoff, E., ... & Pickles, A. (2016). The impact of nonverbal ability on prevalence and clinical presentation of language disorder
2. Conti-Ramsden, G., St Clair, M.C., Pickles, A., & Durkin, K. (2012). Developmental Trajectories of Verbal and Nonverbal Skills in Individuals with a History of Specific Language Impairment

These ten strategies create no extra work for classroom practitioners. Supporting pupils with Developmental Language Disorder is really about providing high-quality teaching for all.



Moor House has created a series of webinars for mainstream schools, including 2 sessions about teaching vocabulary to children with DLD.
www.moorhouseschool.co.uk/dld-webinar-series

moorhouseinstitute.co.uk/dld-training

✉ @MHResTrain

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SECONDARY LanguageLink

10% discount on first year's
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Use code: SLLTLM1*

*Offer ends 31 December 2023

Terms & Conditions apply

Secondary Language Link is an online standardised assessment and interactive intervention package created by speech and language therapists in 2012. It is used by schools, in the UK and overseas, to assess and develop the receptive language and functional communication skills of students in KS3.

Research studies on the impact of Secondary Language Link demonstrate that students' functional language and communication skills significantly improved following intervention. Teachers reported a generalisation of these acquired skills in the classroom and students' perceptions of their communication skills significantly improved.

Schools purchase Secondary Language Link via an annual subscription.

KEY FEATURES INCLUDE:

- 👍 A standardised language assessment for all students in KS3
- 👍 Individual student analysis of language & communication skills
- 👍 Video guides created by our speech and language therapists (SaLTs) for delivering communication & language intervention groups
- 👍 Engaging, interactive, video-based interventions
- 👍 High quality resources including teaching strategies and lesson plans
- 👍 Progress measures
- 👍 Reports per pupil, class, year and Key Stage
- 👍 Online staff training, offering comprehensive classroom strategies and high-quality teaching resources to help teachers promote an inclusive, communication-friendly classroom environment
- 👍 Materials to help families support their young people at home



Read the Secondary Language Link impact report.

“It is estimated that a third of children with speech and language difficulties later develop mental health problems” (Clegg, 1999), and that “60% of young people who pass through young offender institutions have a communication disability” (Bryan, 2004)

Behavioural
problems are
often rooted in
SLCN



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Take a **FREE two-week trial** and see for yourself how Secondary Language Link can help develop students' language and communication skills and make a positive impact to their wellbeing, attendance and education outcomes.

First edition special offer: We are giving schools, new to Secondary Language Link, 10% off their first year's subscription

Contact our friendly Help Desk: helpdesk@speechlink.co.uk quoting code: SLLTLM1

The relationship between SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION NEEDS (SLCN) AND BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES



By **Claire Lidyard**, education consultant

In 2012 the DfE published a research report which examined 'The relationship between speech, language, communication needs and behavioural difficulties' (DFE: 2012) and findings showed that, "Pupils with SLCN were more likely to have significant peer problems and emotional difficulties and less developed prosocial behaviour (than the general population of the same age)".

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists published 'Understanding the links between communication and behaviour' (RCSLT: 2019), which gave some startling statistics about that relationship. It asserts that "81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have significant unidentified communication needs" and "more than 60% of young people who are accessing youth justice services present with SLCN which are largely unrecognised" (RCSLT: 2019).

I've been lucky enough to have worked in primary and secondary schools, a special provision and as 'Lead Adviser for SEND and Inclusion' in Kent. In the county, supporting SLCN is at the forefront of the help students with SEND are offered. It is also recognised that an evidence-based system for schools to

identify and support receptive language and difficulties with functional, communicational skills is important. This enables over-stretched local speech and language therapy services to focus on students with more severe needs.

The research clearly demonstrates the significance of the link between SLCN and challenging behaviours - but what does that mean for schools?

60%
of young people who are accessing youth justice services present with SLCN which are largely unrecognised.

Early identification is well cited as fundamental for supporting speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and it is why the standardised screening and interactive interventions that the Secondary Language Link programme offers has been such an important part of the process for me.

I worked alongside a secondary school in East Kent who were new to Secondary Language Link. The school had screened their Y7 cohort with the online standardised assessment, and we had begun examining the data from the individual reports generated and considering groupings of identified students for interventions.

The SENCo and I looked at behaviour data for some of the identified students and cross referenced them to the areas of receptive language that were identified through the

81%

of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have significant unidentified communication needs

Secondary Language Link screener. As we explored this further, many examples of links between behaviours and academic progress were demonstrated (in and out of class) that could be linked to the Secondary Language Link assessment results.

As a result of this, the decision was made to deliver whole staff training on the link that we had discovered between speech, language and communication, academic progress and behaviour.

The training was presented in the following way:

- Anonymised Secondary Language Link profiles were presented to staff who were then asked to consider who those pupils might be.
- Staff then discussed some of the behaviours seen in class from key students who were not engaging.
- The final part of the session revealed the identities of the pupils and asked the staff to map the behaviours they had identified to those students.

They were able to see the correlation between the challenging behaviour exhibited by these key students and, their Secondary Language Link profile.

Staff reported that it was an interesting insight into why particular behaviours or responses might be demonstrated in the classroom and around school.

The impact of the training was evidenced over the next few months through learning walks, which identified the use of appropriate strategies and behaviour data, and the results were that, for some key pupils, there was a reduction in negative behaviours.

Quality First teaching and training on SLCN has had a demonstrably positive impact.

In the wake of the pandemic, it has been even more of a priority to ensure that there is widespread knowledge and understanding of how to identify, recognise and support SLCN, particularly when the research demonstrates the significant relationship between SLCN and behaviour and the negative long-term impact those needs can have on an individual's ability to thrive in life. Secondary Language Link's in-package training module provides school staff with the knowledge and skills to make a real difference to the lives of young people.

Q. Which staff are responsible for developing students' communication skills?

A.

In the dynamic ecosystem of a school, fostering students' effective communication skills is paramount to their holistic development: language and communication form the bedrock of learning, social interaction, and emotional growth.

Identifying and supporting pupils with speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) is a collective responsibility involving teachers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), teaching assistants (TAs) and school leaders.

Every role is crucial, so what can each of you do to ensure that every student receives the necessary support to thrive academically and emotionally?

The Teacher's Role

At the forefront of the educational journey, teachers are indispensable in recognising and addressing pupils' SLCN. Their daily interactions with students place teachers in a unique position to observe and assess communication patterns and difficulties. By staying vigilant and sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues, teachers can identify early potential language challenges.

Through Quality First teaching, teachers adapt their teaching styles and materials to accommodate students with diverse needs, including SLCN. Providing accessible resources, visual aids, ensuring vocabulary and instructions are understood and enabling the full range of expression can empower students to participate fully in their learning.

Building a safe and inclusive classroom environment is essential for fostering effective communication: encouraging open dialogue, active listening, and peer support can bolster students' confidence in expressing themselves. By creating a positive atmosphere and celebrating individuality, teachers can help students feel valued and heard, nurturing their communication skills.



By **Kate Freeman**,
consultant - speech and language
in education





The SENCo's Role

SENcos play a pivotal role in identification and supporting pupils with SLCN. They possess specialist knowledge in special educational needs, access to specific identification and intervention programmes and are well-equipped to collaborate with teachers and parents to address individual needs effectively.

Often the SENCo leads in ensuring comprehensive assessments/screenings to identify students with speech, language, or communication difficulties. These assessments may involve the Secondary

Language Link assessment tool that can be delivered in-school by SENcos, TAs or teachers. The assessments then identify key areas of need and suggest which of Secondary Language Link's fully-resourced group and individual intervention plans to follow.

Collaboration is another vital aspect of the SENCo's role. By fostering strong relationships between teachers, parents, and external specialists, the SENCo can create a unified support network for the student. Regular meetings and communication channels enable the exchange of information and strategies to best serve the student's needs.

Additionally, SENcos can enable invaluable training and professional development opportunities for teachers. Equipping teachers with a deeper understanding of SLCN empowers them to identify and address mild communication difficulties early on, creating a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

The TA's Role

Teaching assistants play a vital role in supporting pupils' speech, language, and communication needs alongside teachers. Their close interaction with students one-to-one or in small groups allows them to provide targeted assistance and reinforcement for language development.

Working collaboratively, teachers and teaching assistants can share valuable insights into students' progress and challenges. This information sharing supports recognition of progress and adaptation of strategies according to need.

Teaching assistants can also be instrumental in implementing speech and language therapy strategies recommended by professionals or packages that the school subscribes to. Whether it's conducting structured language exercises, using visual supports, or encouraging peer

interactions, their support complements the efforts of teachers and SENcos in addressing individual communication goals.

The School Leader's Role

School leaders are instrumental in driving a school-wide culture of support for pupils with SLCN. Their role in creating a positive and inclusive school ethos cannot be underestimated. By prioritising SLCN support within policy and practice, leaders set the tone for the entire school.

Investing in resources, access to screening and individualised programmes and training is crucial for schools to effectively identify and support pupils with communication needs. Assessment and intervention tools delivered in school with school staff also enable precious resources, such as access to speech and language therapy services, to be targeted at those students who have the most severe and complex needs.

By encouraging collaboration and communication between all stakeholders, leaders can ensure that a consistent, integrated support system is in place for every student. Regular data tracking and analysis, such as through the progress monitoring available as part of the Secondary Language Link package, also helps leaders to measure the impact of interventions, adapt strategies as needed and report on the positive impacts to Governors and to Ofsted.

In conclusion, identifying and supporting pupils with SLCN requires a collaborative effort involving teachers, SENcos, teaching assistants, and school leaders. Each stakeholder plays a unique and vital role in creating a nurturing environment where every student's communication needs are addressed.

Teachers' daily interactions and teaching strategies enable early identification and inclusive learning. Teaching assistants provide personalised support, reinforcing communication skills targets. SENcos' expertise ensures comprehensive assessments and coordinated support plans, while school leaders drive the whole school approach to communication skills development.

By working together, these educational professionals create a powerful network of support that empowers students with SLCN to reach their full potential academically and socially, fostering a positive and inclusive school community.

By working together these educational professionals create a powerful network of support that empowers students with SLCN to reach their full potential...

SELECTIVE MUTISM in teens



By Natalie Strong,
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Selective Mutism (SM) is an anxiety disorder and phobia: the fear of others hearing your voice. My son was diagnosed when he was four years old. Fortunately, by the time he was eight, he had SM largely conquered. Now in his mid-teens, he's not the chattiest in public, but few would ever suspect that he was unable to utter a single word outside of the home for five years.

Sadly, many of the students with diagnoses of SM who I have supported in speech and

language therapy, have been older teens. They have continued their lives literally frozen in fear at the prospect of others hearing them speak and as is often the case with SM, even in fear of others *seeing* them move: be it walking out of a room, eating lunch or playing sports.

Selective Mutism can be debilitating and especially mortifying for teenagers at a time when they are establishing their identity and trying to fit in with their peers. For SM is in no way 'selective' – there's a campaign to change its name to Situational Mutism – for

TIPS ON HOW TO SUPPORT A STUDENT WITH SM



- 👍 Try not to rescue them by speaking *for* them – this can reinforce their fear. Instead suggest that they write their answer or gesture
- 👍 Ask closed questions that can be answered with a nod/shake, thumbs-up/down
- 👍 Write 2-3 choices, so that they can point to the answer
- 👍 Always offer them the chance to participate – even if the situation/activity requires speech. Count to five slowly (in your head) and if they don't answer, subtly move on
- 👍 Don't draw any attention to them in front of the class, praise can particularly cause anxiety
- 👍 Provide opportunities for them to work with the staff and peers they feel most comfortable with - to reduce anxiety
- 👍 Never ask direct questions – instead use 'commentary-style' talking (i.e., "I like the way you have written that..."), with the odd rhetorical question thrown in i.e., "I wonder whether you have proofread your work?" Leave gaps between comments to allow them space to try to answer.

the person is NOT choosing to be silent, in fact often, they desperately want to join in, but their fear physically stops them.

SM should be called 'situational' because most people are able to speak in at least one setting – usually at home. In fact, families report that at home, some don't stop talking and like my son, can be quite the extrovert. Usually the child will have no additional speech or language difficulties, though an estimated 40% of autistic people have comorbid anxiety disorders including SM (Muris & Ollendick, 2021), so they might need extra support to develop social communication skills.

There is also the lesser known 'low-profile SM' whereby people speak just enough to deflect attention, knowing that not speaking at all – ironically - attracts the attention they are desperate to avoid. For SM creates a cycle which is difficult to break – as soon as a child is known as 'the one who doesn't speak', others stop trying to include them, often out of the kindness of not wanting to make them feel uncomfortable.

Sadly this can do more harm than good. The most beneficial thing others can do is to identify and reduce the factors that are helping to maintain the young person's SM. The more a child continues to avoid speaking, or isn't given the opportunities by others to speak (including when others speak for them), the stronger their fear of speaking becomes.

An 17-year-old I supported moved to a new school to make a fresh start; where no one would know them as 'the person who doesn't speak'. Eventually as they built up trust with me, they shared that they were

desperate to join in – socially, in sports, and in lessons and were desperate to make friends. However out of respect for this student, other students reported not wanting to make them feel uncomfortable by talking to her or asking her to join in. Some teachers too would avoid giving her a chance to answer questions and engage in discussions, again in an attempt to protect her. So, with her consent, I shared advice with staff, not only with teachers but to

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anyone she might encounter at school, to encourage them to give her opportunities to talk – even just to say 'hello' or 'goodbye'. She knew she'd largely not be able to respond, but at least she'd have a chance to try. By responding 'hello', even just one small word per week, she could help desensitise her fear of speaking in small-steps: which is the essence of SM therapy.

If you have a student who hardly or never speaks, you can help them by providing subtle opportunities to join in. This is very different to putting someone on the spot and expecting an answer, but the distinction is not an easy one to make and will take practice.

MORE INFO

USEFUL LINKS:

For further information, please visit the 'SMIRA' website: www.selectivemutism.org.uk

For very interesting statistics and tips from teens with SM, read -

Small Talk SLT's Teen Survey:

<https://shorturl.at/ERT23>

OTHER ADJUSTMENTS AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

- 👍 Provide alternative forms of testing and participation where speaking is required such as a presentation i.e., written answers, non-verbal communication, audio or videotaping at home
- 👍 Give clear, specific instructions about classroom tasks and the plan for the day – being prepared reduces anxiety
- 👍 Check regularly that they have understood and don't need anything – they can write, gesture or point to their answer
- 👍 Let them choose to sit where they feel most comfortable
- 👍 Give them the option to get changed for PE in private
- 👍 Unstructured times can be the most difficult – ensure that someone they are comfortable with is on break at the same time, invite them to sit with suitable peers and offer non-verbal activities such as board games
- 👍 Offer them the chance to write/email questions/thoughts with teachers during/ after lessons

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