Oral language – a foundation for learning

Oral language skills are the main medium through which learning takes place in school and at home. Subsequently they are a major contributor to school readiness, to the development of literacy, and to school achievement. Children with poor literacy skills almost always have poor oral language skills.

There is wide variation in children’s language abilities. Those with the most severe and persisting difficulties may be referred to as having a Developmental Language Disorder (DLD). The ability to communicate effectively, to tell a story, to explain what we mean, and to get our needs met, underpins most school activity whether that be in the playground or in accessing the curriculum. The importance of oral language skills is not restricted to the early years but plays out across childhood and remains an issue when children leave school.

Early language development and the home learning environment

Children’s oral language and communication development begins well before they begin to speak. From birth they learn to attend to carers’ voices. Next they learn to participate in turn-taking, and initiate ‘conversations’ using coos and babble before they have the words to express specific meanings and put words together. From as early as 18-months-old differences emerge between the language skills of those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, with a growing disparity between children by the time they arrive in early childhood education and care (ECEC) at two or three years. There is evidence that oral language skills in the early years are sensitive to the child’s Home Learning Environment (HLE) and affected by learning opportunities, playing, early book reading, TV watching, and parental mental health. At home and in school, children who speak more tend to attract more attention from educators, which leads to them receiving more stimulation.

How fast children acquire language varies considerably in the early years. For some children their language skills improve and they catch up with their peers, but this is not always the case and the skills of some children may drop further behind. It is important to acknowledge that considerable discrepancies in language performance for children from socially advantaged backgrounds are evident by the time children are 18-months-old and, for many, these discrepancies persist.

School readiness and the role of oral language

School readiness includes the child’s readiness for school, the school’s readiness to meet the child’s needs, and the family and community’s ability to support optimal early child development. When a child begins school, it is expected that they will be able to clearly express their needs and understand most of what is said to them. Therefore, language skills are key to how children fare when they begin school. Children with a DLD are at increased risk when it comes to being ready for school and may struggle to socialise with peers and follow classroom routines.

Language skills are also closely associated with social and emotional development. Children are more likely to develop good peer relationships and friendships when they are able to use language to regulate their emotions and behaviour. Children with underdeveloped oral language skills, especially social or ‘pragmatic’ language skills, are much more likely to have behaviour difficulties. The association between speech and language difficulties and the proportion of children at high risk of significant clinical behaviour and emotional wellbeing problems is evident in the 2015 Victorian School Health Entrant Questionnaire data (see Figure 1). Around 19 per cent of children starting school with speech and language difficulties also have problems of hyperactivity, while around 18 per cent have problems relating to their peers. Thus, it is important for teachers to be aware that language difficulties often co-occur with behaviour difficulties.

Figure 1: Proportion of children at high risk of significant clinical problems related to behaviour and emotional wellbeing, by whether or not they also have speech and language difficulties, 2015

Source: 2015 Victorian School Health Entrant Questionnaire
Language and literacy in the classroom

Language development underpins the development of phonological awareness, early literacy development and print awareness.24,25,26,27 Phonological awareness is also closely associated with the development of awareness of grammatical morphology – changing word meanings with small changes to word endings (e.g., –s and –ing); knowledge which supports both reading comprehension and spelling. When children are no longer learning to read but rather are expected to read to learn, the ability to comprehend the meaning of text is vital. To comprehend challenging texts children must draw on their knowledge of parts of words, the structures of complex sentences and advanced vocabulary. As children move through school they must be able to create their own stories and write texts which can discuss and persuade. These skills of narrative and expository discourse, which are critical for contributing to the complex language of the classroom, require knowledge of a rich and varied vocabulary and of complex sentence structures.28

Social language or ‘pragmatic skills’ allow the child to interact effectively with teachers, peers and family. This involves learning to attend to the viewpoint of others, responding appropriately and sustaining conversations. Social language is closely linked to children’s capacity to make friends, but also to engage in group and project work – a key element of learning in school.29,30,31

Underpinning these expressive language skills is the child’s capacity to understand what is said to them. When formally assessed, many children do not understand what they are being asked to do, even when it is in their own language. Understanding, in this context, means both understanding what has been said but also inferring what someone meant by what they said – their intended meaning – whether in spoken conversation or written texts. In a busy classroom it can be difficult for teachers to monitor children’s comprehension because children learn to conceal their lack of understanding by watching other children for cues and copying others in their class.

Although more attention is commonly paid to the development of language and communication skills in the early years, these skills remain significant throughout school and into the workplace, affecting skills such as memory, planning, problem solving and symbolic thought.32,33 Difficulties in some of these areas may only emerge during adolescence due to the increased demands of the high school curriculum.34 Subsequently, young people’s language and communication skills should remain a priority for education professionals.35

What should be done to help develop children’s language skills?

Creating a rich classroom environment can optimise language development. For example, labelling learning areas, the use of interactive book reading, providing opportunities for structured conversations with teachers and peers, and the use of extending and scripting have all been shown to enhance language development. Recent evidence has suggested that classrooms vary considerably as to how communication-friendly they are and this can depend on the age of the child, the year groups, the structure of the classroom and subject being taught.36 The pursuit of the curriculum can detract from, rather than enhance, the fostering of oral language and narrative skills. In a recent review of an observational measures designed to tap into communication opportunities in the classroom, the most commonly identified attributes were using children’s names, using natural gestures and confirming oral language initiations. The least commonly observed were supporting listening skills, encouraging turn-taking and the oral scripting of activities. Clearly there are many opportunities to enhance classroom communication to give children the best start.

Professional development (PD) is used to enhance educators’ knowledge and skills for providing quality language and literacy environments in the classroom. A recent Australian study looking at the level of knowledge of language constructs of teachers and comparing this to their self-rated ability and confidence of that knowledge found a gap in teachers’ self-perception of their knowledge and the knowledge that is theoretically required.37 Evidence suggests that PD for early childhood educators can result in improved preliteracy skills for children, but the picture regarding language skills is mixed.38,39,40,41 For children with more marked difficulties it will be necessary to draw on the skills of specialist practitioners such as speech/language pathologists: there is evidence that targeted and specialist language interventions can be valuable to some children.42

Effective collaboration to promote language development

Language development is determined by a complex interplay between child, family, community and societal factors, each of which have changing effects and significance over the developmental course.43 Furthermore, language learning takes place in all aspects of a child’s daily life, from infancy to adulthood. To support robust language development for all children, services should be able to ‘cut-across’ contextual and age-related boundaries. Such a complex picture cannot be tackled by professionals working in isolation. Children’s services have been urged in numerous policy documents to be ‘joined up’ in their efforts to promote better outcomes for all children. This ‘joining’ is necessary across transitions between services as children age (e.g. linking maternal and
Recent evidence suggests that schools’ capacity to manage the needs of children with oral language difficulties is dramatically enhanced when care is taken to foster social capital across different professional groups. For example, building robust trusting relationships between teachers, teaching support staff and specialists such as speech/language pathologists at an institutional rather than individual level.

**Considerations for policy and practice**

Early years services and schools have an important role to play in promoting children’s oral language skills. This is especially relevant where there are concerns about the HLE, parental mental health or where there are identified communication needs. Subsequently there are a number of key considerations for educators and professionals working with children.

- Communication opportunities within the classroom need to be maximised for all children but especially those with poorly developed language skills.
- It is essential that educators recognise the importance of promoting child language and literacy skills – especially oral language and reading comprehension. Continuing professional development related to children’s communication needs should be available to all staff.
- Oral language skills need to be explicitly woven through the curriculum. Literacy is clearly important but the ability to express yourself verbally with confidence is an essential life skill and needs to be a key output from schooling.
- Just as communication is central for children, it is also critically important between professionals who work with children, especially when they come from different professional backgrounds (e.g. education, speech and language pathology, psychology, social work), and work across school boundaries. Professional social capital underpins the development of effective collaboration.
- Children’s communication skills need to be formally monitored across childhood – in the early years by health services and then by education services. Those with identified communication needs should be supported within the classroom and, where necessary, referred to appropriate support services such as speech/language pathology.

**References**

Language Delay or Disorder. Language Therapy Interventions for Children with Primary Speech and Language Impairment in Cooperative Work Groups: A Pilot Study.


Suggested citation