

## Stuck at home: Helping your child understand

Many children with learning disabilities and autism find language difficult. It can be quite easy to spot that a child has difficulties expressing themselves – but they may be quite good at hiding the fact that they *also* have difficulties understanding others. Here are a few things to look out for that might give you an indication that your child is having difficulties with their receptive (understanding) language:

- They can't always follow instructions accurately – sometimes even simple ones
- Their responses to questions are sometimes unusual – (e.g. if you ask when something happened – they might respond by saying what happened)
- They appear 'not to be listening' some of the time
- They ask lots of questions – sometimes the same question again and again They often look confused / worried / in need of reassurance
- Their behaviour becomes difficult when there doesn't always seem to be an obvious 'trigger' (a clear 'reason')

If your child presents with any of these behaviours, it is worth considering if they are having difficulties with understanding the language they hear.

### Jargon buster - What's the difference between 'expressive language' and 'receptive language'?

**Expressive language is the means we use to communicate with others.** In many cases we use speech. But we also communicate through the use of gesture, sign, tone of voice, eye contact, body language, written words, etc.

**Receptive language is what we understand.**

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For successful communication to take place, we have to both understand what has been said to us - and also be able to express ourselves in return. If there is a breakdown in our ability to understand others - or express ourselves - communication becomes far more difficult.

**It can be quite easy to tell if your child has difficulties with their expressive language.** You can usually observe it. Your child might not speak at all; they might only have a very limited number of words; they might repeat the same thing again and again; their speech might be unclear; they might try to communicate with sounds; they might pull you towards what they want; they might shout or hit out; etc.

**It can be a lot harder to tell if your child has difficulties with their receptive language.** Children are often able to give the impression that they have understood what someone has said. Frequently however - on further investigation - we find out that they do not understand as much language as they appear to. Your child may give the impression of understanding what others have said because:

- They are familiar with a routine (e.g. getting ready for school) and they know what things to do next
- They are following your other non-verbal cues (e.g. we often 'eye point' (look at) the thing we are talking about)
- They 'read' your tone of voice / facial expressions / body language / gesture etc. to work out the general meaning
- They watch to see what others are doing and 'follow their lead' - e.g. helping to put the shopping away with siblings
- They have understood one or two words in the sentence you have said to them - and can work out some of the meaning from these little pieces of information

## **What are the benefits of helping to improve my child's understanding?**

Improving your child's understanding of language can have many positive knock-on effects on a whole range of areas including:

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- Reducing their anxiety levels
- Reducing difficult behaviours
- Helping them learn more easily
- Helping them to improve their expressive language
- Building their confidence and self esteem
- Being able to build relationships more effectively
- Improving their ability to understand - and cope with - different social situations

## How do I help improve my child's understanding?

There are many strategies, approaches and techniques that have been successfully used and any of these are very simple and easy to implement in your everyday communication with your child. e.g.:

- **Ensuring you have your child's attention** before talking to them. Removing distractors. We cannot listen properly if we are not attending/distracted.
- **Using simple words; speaking in short, clear sentences;** not speaking too quickly; pausing often; repeating if necessary. All of these will help your child understand you better.
- **Allowing your child time to process what you have said;** do not rush them or bombard them with lots of language as this can make understanding / processing more difficult.
- **Using visual support** (such as key word signing / pictures / symbols / visual timetables / 'now and next' boards) to reinforce what you are saying

### Top Tips!

- **Be aware of your own language.** Are you speaking in short and simple sentences? Are you using simple words that your child will understand? Are you ensuring that you give your child enough time to process what you have said? If your own language becomes clearer and more simple - your child will understand you better and will be able to do what you ask more easily.
- **Learn some key word signs** to support your simple spoken communication. You do not have to learn hundreds of them but signing is a proven way to improving understanding and to help your child follow instructions. (There is a good YouTube channel which demonstrates some simple signs: search for "Singing Hands" on YouTube and learn a few signs!)
- **Use photographs and symbols** to support your simple spoken communication. These are especially useful if you are talking about when things are due to happen. Time words (like

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'later', 'in a while', 'not yet', 'after school') are notoriously difficult to understand for many children. Visually showing when things will happen (e.g. on a visual timetable) can really help with this.

*Adapted from an original leaflet by the the Speech and Language Therapy Team at Whitefield Schools. Our thanks to them*

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