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Speech & Language Difficulties – Kathleen Paintin

WHAT ARE SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES?

Any child whose speech and language skills have not developed to a level expected for their chronological age may be described as having a speech and language difficulty.

Speech and language difficulties affect children's social, emotional and educational development.

Speech and language difficulties are often associated with a range of other developmental conditions i.e.

- learning difficulties
- hearing impairment
- physical difficulties e.g. cerebral palsy
- structural abnormalities e.g. cleft palate
- autistic spectrum difficulties
- limited language experience

Children whose speech and language skills are at a developmentally earlier stage than would be expected, but are following normal patterns of development are often described as having a **Speech and Language Delay**. In the case of learning difficulties, a child's communication skills may be at an earlier stage than their age but in line with other areas of development.

If a child's speech and language skills are developing in an unusual way they are often described as having a **Speech and Language Disorder**. Some aspects may appear age appropriate, and others may be behind or not following normal patterns of development.

A child who has a language disorder but demonstrates normal development in other areas of learning is described as having a **Specific Language Impairment**. There is no known single cause of specific language impairment but studies suggest that there may be a genetic predisposition in some families. This is a life-long difficulty that is managed by helping the child to develop strategies to optimise their use of language for communication and learning.

Areas of speech and language difficulty:

- **Receptive language /comprehension** – difficulty understanding the spoken word
- **Expressive language**- difficulty learning and using vocabulary, using grammar or putting words into a sentence
- **Speech** – the child may not use, or make errors with certain sounds which affects their intelligibility
- **Fluency** – difficulty producing smooth fluent speech
- **Voice** – the presence of a persistent hoarse or husky voice
- **Auditory memory** – difficulty remembering and processing spoken language
- **Pragmatics** – social use of language i.e. the way we use language to interact with other people

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Get information from a speech and language therapist about the child's particular difficulties.

Ensure that all key people understand the nature and implications of the child's difficulties and as far as possible are aware of the specific strategies that help the child to communicate at home and access the school curriculum.

Provide visual clues (e.g. picture, written words signing) to support the child's understanding and to provide them with alternative ways of expressing themselves.

Be aware that the child is likely to need careful monitoring and specific help across all areas of the curriculum but particularly with literacy and numeracy.

Strategies to help expressive difficulties

- Accept any answer e.g. sign, gesture, vocalization, word or picture
- Always praise any attempt to use language even if it is just single words
- Reduce the number of questions you ask the child. Comment on things to provide a model of appropriate language
- Use yes/no questions or forced alternatives e.g. 'Is it a cat or a dog?' or closed questions i.e. those that require a single word answer
- Allow extra time for the child to respond
- Don't correct mistakes, model back the correct production e.g. when a child say 'tat' say 'yes, there is a cat'
- When a child is unable to pronounce a word or a letter sound, ask them to demonstrate their knowledge by asking them to point to the target rather than say it e.g. 'find me a 'p' or 'find me a picture that begins with a 't' etc.

Strategies to help understanding

- Use the child's name before giving instructions in order to gain their attention before speaking
- Speak slowly but with your usual intonation
- Keep instructions short and try not to use complicated sentences e.g. 'walk back to class' is better than 'I don't want to see anybody running'
- Give the child time to process what you have said
- If the child does not respond, repeat the instruction and wait. If there is still no response try rephrasing it e.g. 'play out now' instead of 'It is time to go out now and play'
- Use gestures and pictures to support the language you are using
- Avoid sarcasm
- Be aware that a child with language difficulties will find non-literal language difficult
- Allow the child to observe others in activities before they take a turn so that they have opportunities to fully understand what is expected
- Keep checking that the child has understood and knows what to do

Useful websites; www.ican.org.uk including Talking point and Parent point
www.afasic.org.uk

Useful publications: Supporting Children with Speech and Language Difficulties
David Fulton ISBN 1-84312-225-1

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A parent's view on speech & language difficulties

About 12 years ago our son was given the diagnosis of semantic-pragmatic language disorder. This turned out to be related to Asperger's Syndrome and meant that he had struggles with the meanings of words that referred to abstract concepts such as feelings, interpreted certain words and phrases too literally and found following the storyline of a film very difficult. When using language socially it was difficult for him to know when to take turns in conversation leading to interruptions. His conversation was deemed to be at least 50% non-relevant and very strongly biased towards his favourite themes such as mathematics. Coupled with this was a lack of awareness of others that he talked to and their interests.

In response to this we gave him conversation practice both at home and at the MK school, as the school recognised the issues and were very co-operative. He was also given rules of conversation which he learned quickly, although their application is still an ongoing process! The school worked through the "Social Use of Language Programme" (SULP) twice and this helped considerably. These measures have made a positive difference and helped him through school and he is now in higher education – and still learning. In some ways the recognition of the problem and his own recognised need to do something about it have made him more sensitive to others than some without special educational needs. We are firm believers in supportive partnerships between the school & professionals on the one hand and parents on the other. Our own son's progress has shown what can be done with determination all round.

(Names withheld to maintain the privacy of the family concerned)

Other speech & language resources

Childhood Speech, Language and Listening problems; Patricia McAleer Hamaguchi; John Wiley & Sons Inc. ISBN 0 471 387533

How to Identify and Support Children with Speech & Language Difficulties; Jane Speake; LDA publishers*; ISBN 1 85503 3615

* We have consistently recommended this series from LDA as they have books that cover all the main special educational needs. They also supply a range of other resources – it is worth checking their website at www.ldalearning.com

Websites www.afasic.org.uk

www.speechville.com (Canada)

www.comeunity.com (USA)

www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au

www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/sed/makaton (Australia, but also explains the Makaton system of training children with serious communication difficulties to use sign language)

www.shas.org.sg (Singapore)

General special needs advice

Although we have recommended a number of websites and books, we would maintain that the same advice for all special needs families holds good. If you, as parents or workers in a school or organisation suspect that there are special needs, then you should look for further advice and the only place to get a full diagnosis is from experts who are experienced in working with children with speech and language disorders. It would be very easy to read books and websites and fall into the "cyberchondria" trap – i.e. untrained diagnosis of major problems that aren't

there. The other extreme would be to deny or ignore problems and hope that they will just work out somehow in the end. Get the advice, and only get the diagnosis and recommended treatments and teaching strategies from experts who know what they are talking about.

One Family's experience of Dyspraxia

Calvin* was 4 3/4 when he started at an international school. He had already been diagnosed dyspraxic and with a motor skills delay of eighteen months. He was seeing an occupational therapist for gross and fine motor work.

He was to be the youngest child in the whole school, but we were dissuaded from holding him back because he was already much taller than most of the other pupils. He is also very bright, so we were hesitant to insist that he wait another year before starting. The school was sympathetic about the issues Calvin faced with writing and playing physical games. He was sent to a special class twice a week to work on his fine motor skills, but we were warned by the OT and the school that his handwriting was unlikely to catch up with that of the other children. The school expected that he would have to use a keyboard full time by the age of ten.

The school was enormous, with five classes in each year. Calvin was quite isolated: he couldn't join in well with the playground games and found the stairs between classrooms exhausting to climb. He began to wet himself, whether from stress or as a side effect of his dyspraxia - dyspraxic children often find potty training hard.

After a year we transferred him to a Montessori school. The atmosphere was much more forgiving, but there were no special classes and his handwriting did not improve. For him, Montessori was not a good method, as he learns by hearing or reading, not by using his hands. He would concentrate so hard on making his hands move the manipulatives correctly, that he did not have any mental attention left to understand what the manipulative was intended to teach him.

After a year, we reduced his time at the Montessori school to 2 1/2 days a week. During this time he could enjoy the social interaction and the variety of lessons on offer. During the other 2 1/2 days, I taught him at home, concentrating on writing and maths. He was still attending occupational therapy twice a week so we were very busy. More and more, we started to resent the commute to school, when the time spent at home was so much more productive and enjoyable.

The following year, we moved away and decided to home school full time. This has been an enormous success: Calvin can move ahead in those topics where he is talented, and get extra help where he needs it. I can design lessons which work on his weak areas without overwhelming him with impossible demands. Although we moved away from our occupational therapist, Calvin now has a lot more time for general fitness. He runs, does push ups, sit ups and pull ups every day; once a week he plays tennis; twice a week he practises Tae kwon do. He is so much more at ease in his body - partly, I am sure, due to simple maturity, but his increased exercise regime has probably helped. He has made friends within the home schooling community, which is much more accepting of his talents and difficulties than was his original international school.

Calvin is now nine. His handwriting is legible - though not beautiful - and he writes fluently. He is still working on speed but will now happily produce fifteen page reports. Last year, his fine motor skills had come on so far that he was ready to start learning to write in Chinese. He found that he could do it well, and even enjoyed it. This is such a contrast to the tears we both shed when he was learning to write English. I am left wondering if we could have avoided a lot of anguish by home schooling him from the first and not expecting him to write English until he was more physically mature. From the evidence of his Chinese writing, he would have caught up very fast.

Our experience of dealing with dyspraxia in international schools was not terrible. There was a lot of understanding and good will. We did not find a good fit, however, until we were forced to consider home schooling. It was the best decision we ever made.

Laura – November 2006 (given name changed & family name withheld to maintain privacy)

Studying at national schools

An Enhanced Perspective

I have recently completed my degree course at a university in the USA. Since I was a computer science major in college, most of my classes were quite technical. However, some of the classes I enjoyed most were non-major classes that challenged my worldview in some way. A changed and expanded worldview was also one of the primary benefits of attending Russian schools in Central Asia all the way through high school.

I completed kindergarten and my first three years of school in Austria. Then, as we were traveling, I took a correspondence course based in Germany for a year. By the time I finished we had been in Central Asia for several months, during which I had had private Russian lessons, as well as some language practice from playing with kids in our yard.

So, at age 10 I started attending a public school in Russian. My first period was math, which was my favorite subject (besides physical education). However, the new terminologies, as well as different methods of solving problems, made me feel like my brain was smoking by the end of class. Yet before too long I was solving math problems with ease and enjoying it greatly. Literature, on the other, being focused on language and not being my forte, was not so easy. For the first few weeks or months I had to get help with my homework from teammates and local friends.

While I felt comfortable with the language and the academics after a year, it was different with the local worldview. Right from the beginning, I noticed thought and value patterns that seemed “un-Christian” and otherwise wrong to me. For example, helping fellow classmates, and even one’s pupils, cheat, was not only socially acceptable and pervasive, but even socially encouraged. There was, of course, some Soviet propaganda as well. For example, in one classroom there was a big sign that read either “Russian is the language of the world” (which was the only meaning I had thought of, until recently) or “Russian is the language of peace” (the intended meaning is linguistically ambiguous). Similarly, textbooks often mentioned that the Soviet Union had

something that was the largest, most powerful, etc. of its kind. Yet, to my surprise, the textbooks also included impressive statistics about the U.S. My classmates also tended to take a somewhat pro-Soviet and anti-American stance, at least in my presence. The attitudes of teachers varied, as far as I can tell. One of the history teachers taught us about World War II and the Soviet Union from an inside, though not pro-Soviet, perspective, which was fascinating. Gradually, through my seven years at Russian schools (three years at a public school and then four at a private one), I started valuing certain aspects of the Soviet worldview (taken in moderation), e.g. a focus on community instead of on individuals. This was a good balance and complement to ways of looking at the world that I had picked up from other cultures.

While being among people with a different worldview was edifying in certain ways, it also had its drawbacks. One of the main ones was that, largely as a result of big differences of faith and worldview (in conjunction with my strong J (Judging) personality trait and a lack of humility), I never identified strongly with the locals. Consequently, I didn't spend much of my leisure time with them and chose other MKs as my close friends. Having no siblings, I spent most of my social time, primarily weekends, with a few MKs who were younger than me. As a result, my social development was significantly delayed. Furthermore, I didn't share my faith nearly as often as I otherwise would have. Nevertheless, I did make a fairly close Russian friend my first day in school. He came to the Lord largely through interaction with me, and is now strong in the faith. Also, being somewhat isolated from my local peers protected me from negative influences during my teen years.

How did the Russian schools prepare me for college in the U.S.? Overall, quite well. Math and theoretical science were on a higher level than in the U.S., and most of my other classes were probably on par. Yet there was a lack of emphasis on creative writing and independent or critical thinking. I learned to speak Russian fluently (like a native speaker, but with fewer grammatical mistakes). However, my dad had to supplement my English vocabulary and reading/writing skills through extensive preparation for the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) and some other exercises. I waited until entering (a Christian) college to open up socially. There I welcomed being surrounded by Christian peers with a worldview more similar to mine, as well as being engaged in exciting classes and extracurricular activities of various kinds. As a result, I immediately fell in love with the college and almost completely avoided initial culture shock.

In conclusion, I generally recommend attending a local school for at least two years or so to learn the language, culture, and worldview. It might even be beneficial to continue attending such a school. I recommend completing the last two or three years at an MK or boarding school where the MKs can be, or become, comfortable in the parents' culture and brush up on any linguistic or academic skills they need. In any case, it is important to remember that each person and situation is unique and requires a properly adapted strategy.

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