I CAN Talk Series – Issue 10

Speech, Language and Communication in Secondary Aged Pupils

I CAN is the children’s communication charity.
# Speech, Language and Communication in Secondary Aged Pupils

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Introduction

Good communication skills continue to be the foundations of learning, emotional development and socialising throughout a young person’s schooling and onward into the workplace. Young people need effective speech, language and communication skills in order to have a wide range of life choices.

For most young people, language continues to develop throughout the school years and into adulthood. They develop the skills they need to problem solve, build effective relationships, negotiate and tell jokes. However, a significant group of young people find this difficult: those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

Despite the importance of communication, and the number of young people with SLCN, there is often limited opportunity in secondary schools for pupils to develop spoken communication skills. There is also limited understanding of, and support for, those with SLCN. Without support, poor communication can impact on a young person’s academic success as well as their social and emotional development.

This paper outlines the main issues in young people’s language and communication during the secondary phase of education. It discusses key influences and issues, and suggests ways forwards.
Speech, Language and Communication in Secondary Aged Pupils

Speech, language and communication continue to develop in adolescence

Speech, language and communication underpin cognitive, emotional and social development and are crucial skills for learning and life. It is still generally assumed that most development of speech and language happens in the early years. However development continues for all children and young people throughout school, adolescence and into adulthood. Certain aspects of language develop during secondary school years: complex verbal reasoning, understanding and using figurative language, telling more involved stories and using increasingly sophisticated social communication skills (see figure 1).

The teenage years are also a time of massive brain development and restructuring, when some nerve connections that are not needed during adulthood are ‘pruned’. During this time, certain language related tasks develop, such as selective attention control, working memory and problem solving. However, as well as this, because of the ‘pruning’, adolescents can misinterpret emotions such as fear, and find logical explanations and reasoning difficult.

All of these skills are needed to access both the academic and social curriculum of school, to cope with the demands of adolescence and to ensure a successful onward transition to the workplace.

Figure 1: Language Development in the secondary years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General trends through secondary school</th>
<th>Understanding and reasoning</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Sentence structure and narration</th>
<th>Social interaction</th>
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<td>Students develop the ability to reflect on and analyse their language skills e.g. “I’m good at working in groups but I can go on a bit.”</td>
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</tbody>
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A more detailed summary of later language development can be found on I CAN’s website, ‘What’s typical talk at secondary?’

A key characteristic of adolescent language development is that much of it happens through wide and vociferous reading as well as educational exposure and social experiences. Young people who experience difficulties with language often have associated literacy and social difficulties. They will therefore find it hard to develop more sophisticated language without support.
The need for good communication skills in adolescence

In the secondary classroom, language is a fundamental skill for participation in, and access to, most aspects of the educational curriculum. Many aspects of written language, such as producing a narrative, or understanding text, can be limited by weak oral language skills; by secondary age there is an increasing amount of figurative language in textbooks. The same is also true of 'teacher talk': 37% of teacher instructions in secondary schools contain multiple meanings, 20% with at least one idiom. As learning becomes more reliant on independent study, language enables pupils to make contact with others; to organise, manage and evaluate experiences; to influence and inform.

Socially, interactions become more complex and sophisticated. Despite mounting concern about the sedentary and technology-dependent 21st century social life of young people, adolescent interaction actually becomes increasingly reliant on competent verbal skills. Being able to hold a conversation and to put together sentences into a story or report (narrative) is integral to creating and maintaining social relationships right through to adulthood.

Language is integral to a range of everyday personal skills such as telephoning, texting friends and organising independent travel. It also plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of social groups, in negotiating norms, status and trust. While they are often criticised for their seemingly limited or repetitive language skills, adolescents actually spend more time talking to others than do younger children, becoming adept at switching between styles or 'registers' of language. The informal style they use with friends, which includes slang and jargon, is based on figurative language; the ability to use this has been linked to peer acceptance.

In the workplace, employers value good communication skills in their employees, seeing them as crucial for work in an increasingly service-driven world. Yet they also recognise that these are the skills most frequently lacking in new recruits. ‘Influencing skills’, underpinned by speech and language, are specifically identified as being crucial to the success of business and enterprise. Critically, in the current recession, a recent report from the Institute of Directors found that 80% of employers believed this skills gap affected their ability to capitalise on economic recovery.

A focus on speech, language, and communication is seen by some as the key for young people to fit into society, making a case for it to be central to raising attainment – identified as crucial to social mobility and increased life chances. Interestingly, language difficulties are identified as a risk factor in becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training).
Good communication skills are needed, therefore, in order for all young people to have a positive and successful experience of secondary school, and to have a wide range of life choices on leaving. However, there are a significant number of young people who do not have these communication skills: those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN)
Young people with SLCN may have problems with producing or understanding spoken language – or with using language in social contexts. SLCN in adolescence fall broadly into two groups:

Some young people have SLCN which are likely to be long term. Some of these have specific and primary speech and language impairments. Others may have difficulties as part of more generalised learning difficulties or another condition such as hearing impairment or Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

In adolescence, with increasing demands made on communication skills, they are most likely to have difficulty with understanding and using more technical and abstract vocabulary, with taking part in conversations, producing longer stretches of spoken language and using appropriate social interaction.

Approximately 10% of young people will have potentially long term SLCN.

Some young people have poor or limited language which is often associated with social disadvantage.

Secondary aged pupils with limited language may have a poor vocabulary, may find it difficult to put their thoughts into words for explanations or to change the style of talking to suit the situation.

Up to 75% of pupils of secondary schools in certain areas of the UK may have limited language.
I CAN estimates that around 10% of children and young people have SLCN which are likely to be long term or persistent and due to a difficulty learning language. This 10% includes young people who have specific, or primary, language impairment (SLI), a review of prevalence studies showed no decline over the 0-16 age range. This is likely to be an underestimate as statistics on prevalence of older students with this type of SLCN are scattered and often dependent on numbers referred to specialist speech and language services.

This identified group of young people does not remain consistent in its make-up over time. While some young people's SLCN resolve, there is also a group of pupils whose SLCN may only come to light in secondary school due to increasing social and academic demands. In a further group ‘illusory recovery’ has been described, where language difficulties seem to resolve during the primary phase of schooling only to re-emerge during the secondary phase.

The nature of more persistent language difficulties in older children and young people depends on the severity and type of SLCN which can be difficult to define, and is very varied. However young people continue to have difficulty with both understanding and producing language.

Figure 2: Characteristics of persistent language difficulties in older children and young people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of Difficulty</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Young people may be able to produce long stories but there are still lots of errors, particularly when asked to give specific information e.g. in an explanation, recounting an event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Understanding vocabulary seems to worsen over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social communication</td>
<td>Difficulty joining in and keeping up with conversations or tuning into other’s verbally expressed interests – symptoms often characteristic of an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Generally, in older children, difficulties with the meaning and use of language are more pronounced than grammatical aspects – inappropriate interaction stands out.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding figurative, non-literal language</td>
<td>Difficulty understanding complex sentences such as reversible sentences which means that using language for a wider range of purposes such as negotiating, compromise and problem solving can be hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information processing</td>
<td>Working memory capacity and speed of processing are affected which means that coping with large amounts of frequently new and complex spoken information will be difficult.</td>
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Speech, Language and Communication in Secondary Aged Pupils

Young people with Speech, Language and Communication Needs

There is growing awareness of the second larger group of pupils who may have poor, or limited language skills which are not due to a difficulty learning language but will still significantly impact on a young person’s experience of school. SLCN of this type are often associated with social disadvantage.

In one secondary school in an inner city area 75% of pupils had communication difficulties that hampered relationships, behaviour and learning. In another area, there were twice as many unidentified language difficulties in a secondary school in a disadvantaged area than neighbouring schools in less deprived areas.

Aspects of the poor language more associated with social deprivation are:

**Figure 3: Aspects of the poor language more associated with social deprivation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language difficulty</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Restricted vocabulary</td>
<td>Limited use of complex words, though young people may often be aware of the importance of ‘long words’, linking them with intelligence and not ‘fitting in’ socially.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor narrative skills</td>
<td>Problems with longer stretches of spoken language such as explanations, even when simple sentence structure is adequate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate register</td>
<td>Difficulty moving from one style of language to another leading to appearing rude or inappropriate by, e.g. using an overly casual style of talking.</td>
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</table>
Although there is a great deal of variation in adolescence, young people with SLCN have been shown to be at a greater risk of developing emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, mental health issues, lower academic achievement, and school performance failure. Without support this can potentially lead to unemployment and relationship difficulties and in some cases anti-social and even criminal behaviour.

The scale of the impact of poor communication in adolescence has been found to depend on a range of factors: the type and severity of SLCN, non-verbal IQ, early literacy and language skills and social/economic factors.

SLCN during this time significantly impact on literacy – the main vehicle for teaching, learning and testing. These associated literacy difficulties themselves increasingly limit educational outcomes. Although recent surveys show a shift towards young people having more opportunity to stay in education and take more external exams than they did in the 1990s, their peers continue to outperform them, gaining twice as many qualifications at the end of compulsory education.

Some young people with SLCN manage the academic demands of schools, but struggle socially. Despite a desire for social interaction, adolescents with SLCN are found to be significantly more shy, and have poorer quality of friendships. Coping with the speed and topic change in conversations can be difficult, leading to low self-esteem.

Although there is uncertainty around the exact relationship, there is a strong correlation between SLCN and emotional/behavioural difficulties. This is so with both internalising (e.g. anxiety, depression) and externalising (e.g. anti-social behaviours) behaviour difficulties in adolescence. Consensus to date is that it is not a straightforward causal relationship, but that it may indeed be more complex during adolescence, particularly if language difficulties were previously unidentified.

Poor educational and social attainments can both contribute towards limiting the life chances of young people. Adolescents with SLCN are found to be less independent than their peers – particularly in self-organisational tasks, while 88% of unemployed young men in one study were found to have language difficulties. The resultant cost to the nation in terms of increased take-up in services and loss of earnings highlights communication as crucial and yet often forgotten skills.
Speech, Language and Communication in Secondary Aged Pupils

The issues

With communication identified as being crucial in adolescence, and knowing the potential risks associated with SLCN – a focus on communication in secondary schools with good support for those with SLCN seems obvious.

There are many reasons why this is often not the case. Understanding why there is such limited provision given the prevalence of young people with poor communication is important particularly at a time when more not less support is needed to make sense of lessons.72 The challenges for young people with SLCN in secondary schools have been described as a ‘cycle of neglect’73, many of these are interrelated and impact on each other. Based on this cycle, figure 4 summarises the issues in this section.

Figure 4: Vicious circle of support for speech, language and communication needs at secondary
SLCN in adolescents are often described as ‘hidden’. The profile of SLCN changes over time; social communication difficulties becoming more prominent\(^7^5\) and the nature of difficulties becoming more complex. Associated behaviour, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) or literacy difficulties may be most visible and be identified as priorities. Language difficulties can be misinterpreted – a pause for processing can appear as sullenness.\(^7^6\) Good ‘surface’ language skills\(^7^7\) or clear speech\(^7^8\) may make everyday conversation manageable, effectively masking underlying SLCN. Interestingly, studies based on young people self-report suggest that as they get older they are more likely to purposefully hide their difficulties.\(^7^9\)

**Additionally, the lack of specialists\(^8^0\) such as speech and language therapists in secondary schools coupled with lack of confidence of school staff\(^8^1\) and limited knowledge of typical language development in adolescence, mean that it is hard to identify when students fall behind.\(^8^2\)**

For these reasons, identifying SLCN at this age can be difficult for school staff; even for the specialist, accurate ‘diagnosis’ can be a challenge.\(^8^3\) Difficulty in finding appropriate assessment tools\(^8^4\) for the complex nature of SLCN at this age can result in either under\(^8^5\) or over\(^8^6\) identification.

**Secondary schools**

The move from primary to secondary school means different vocabulary, subjects, curriculum, teachers, teaching style and organisation. This can be challenging for all pupils. Shifting from one teacher style to the next, understanding technical terminology, making links between different subject areas and managing less structured social ‘free’ time are all dependent on pupils having effective, flexible language and communication skills.\(^8^7\)
Speech, Language and Communication in Secondary Aged Pupils

The issues

For young people with SLCN, most of whom are in mainstream schools, secondary school can be particularly demanding. Young people themselves identify secondary as being more difficult than their subsequent college experience. Parents of pupils with SLCN express concern about the academic focus in secondary schools as well as quality of life issues such as friendships, social skills and choice. Despite a growing number of effective packages that prepare children for the transition between the two, there is evidence that continued support and resources are needed.

Speaking and listening is not a priority in secondary schools

Secondary aged young people themselves recognise the importance of effective communication and can see that they encounter communication difficulties at school. To develop these skills pupils need opportunities to interact. Yet one survey of secondary schools in an inner city identified in some lessons that adults talked for up to 90% of the time. With raising attainment continuing to be a key driver for schools, and the move to a knowledge-based curriculum seen by the Government as key to achieving this, the importance of a focus on speaking and listening will need to be positioned as a priority.

Initiatives over the years such as the National Oracy Project, dialogic teaching and the most recent speaking and listening resources have resulted in increased emphasis on talk as a tool for learning. However in many schools there continues to be a focus on written language, with lessons often dominated by teacher talk which is rarely used to help improve spoken language. Many adults prefer a directive style of teaching and learning.

21st century communication world

The adolescent world is rich in communication; texting, social networking and mobile phones – but little of this involves face-to-face interaction. A recent report highlighted the fact that on average, 5-16 year olds spend 6 hours in front of a screen. While benefits in knowledge and skills development, including communication, have been identified, there are also concerns. This expanding use of technology changes the way the brain processes information, potentially making us less adept at face-to-face social skills, such as reading facial expressions or grasping the emotional context of a subtle gesture.

Technological advances also bring huge communication opportunities, expressing viewpoints through online lobbying, for example, has increased political involvement of adolescents. But however effective virtual communication becomes, the message from employers is that young people will always need effective face-to-face communication skills in order to succeed in the world of work. In addition to this, the kind of skills we use when surfing the internet or searching for information are not necessarily the ones we need for work and life – the ability to quickly read, digest and analyse large quantities of written language depend on complex language.

The lack of support for SLCN at secondary school

A national survey of provision for children with SLCN carried out in 2000 reported there to be a lack of support for young people with SLCN in secondary schools. While there is evidence of some service development, the recent Bercow Review of Services for Children and Young People...
with SLCN (2008) shows little change. In some areas, for example, there is no funded speech and language therapy service for adolescents with SLCN.\textsuperscript{111}

There is frequent reference to the ‘window of opportunity’ for language learning in the early years, along with a school of thought that sees the secondary years as ‘too late’ to make a difference.\textsuperscript{112} Early intervention is a concept often misinterpreted because it is almost exclusively applied to the early years. It is more usefully understood as intervening promptly before SLCN has an impact, whatever the age.\textsuperscript{113} The focus of services in the early and primary years is clearly important, but for those who work with older children it is frustrating. Given what is known about the potential impact of SLCN, some feel that the predictable burden on the taxpayer described on page 9 could be lessened through providing support in secondary schools.\textsuperscript{114} And yet support is often viewed as inappropriate or a luxurious ‘extra’ to what should be happening anyway through the existing English curriculum.\textsuperscript{115}

**Involvement of parents**

Parental involvement in education has a significant effect on educational achievement well into adolescence and adulthood.\textsuperscript{116} For young people with SLCN this is even more important; parents continue to be a vital source of support socially and emotionally as well as academically.\textsuperscript{117} Parents often have different views of young people’s communication strengths and needs because of their knowledge of them over time\textsuperscript{118}, so maintaining an effective relationship between home and school is important. However this is often difficult when, typically, contact with school becomes less as pupils move through secondary school.\textsuperscript{119}
Speech, Language and Communication in Secondary Aged Pupils

Supporting speech, language and communication at secondary – what works

With such a complex picture of interrelated issues, breaking the vicious circle described in figure 4 can be a challenge. What is important to know is that for all young people's speech language and communication\textsuperscript{120}, as well as for those with SLCN,\textsuperscript{121} support is improving, however the picture is not consistent across the UK.

**For all children and young people**, the developmental ‘surge’ which happens during adolescence can be a further ‘window of opportunity’ in which young people can shape the way they communicate through the activities in which they engage.\textsuperscript{122} Providing them with the right activities, such as learning to order their thoughts or understand abstract concepts, can use this opportunity to ‘hard wire’ the brain.

The complex profile of **young people with SLCN** that this paper describes can mean that it can be difficult to know where to start in planning intervention.\textsuperscript{123} However, despite evidence of the persistent nature of language impairment, it is also recognised that with the right support young people with complex SLCN can make good progress – and this is a crucial factor.

An emerging evidence base, together with practice-sharing through special interest groups and websites shows that there is no one ‘right way’. However, it is not *where* support happens that is important\textsuperscript{124}, but the quality of that support which is most crucial.\textsuperscript{125} This begs the question, **what is high quality support for young people’s speech, language and communication in secondary schools?** This section draws on evidence to explore key features of effective practice in secondary schools, for **all children and young people and also for those with SLCN**.

**Ensuring communication is embedded at a universal level**

**For all children and young people**, there is increasing evidence to show that a focus on pupils’ spoken language in secondary schools can have an impact on achievement. Using speaking and listening activities to help pupils think for themselves has been highlighted as an indicator of an effective school.\textsuperscript{126} In one project, introducing whole school level activities such as a consistent approach to reinforcing good listening in class, led to improved results in English.\textsuperscript{127}

A number of initiatives including I CAN’s Secondary Talk Programme\textsuperscript{128} and Afasic’s practical resource\textsuperscript{129} offer support to develop communication-friendly environments in secondary schools. Coupling this with consultant support and classroom-based activities, as in I CAN’s Secondary Talk Programme can have an impact on practice in secondary schools.\textsuperscript{130}

**For children and young people with SLCN**, this whole school approach is seen as essential in establishing a change in how schools think about communication difficulties.\textsuperscript{131}

**Skilled and confident staff**

**For all children and young people including those with SLCN**, what adults do can impact hugely on pupils’ communication and classroom performance. Simple strategies such as allowing more processing time\textsuperscript{132} or directing positive feedback towards social as well as academic behaviours\textsuperscript{133} have been shown to increase engagement and classroom performance.\textsuperscript{134}

There is an increase in the number of materials which support school staff in working with all
young people’s language and communication (e.g. the Inclusion Development Programme\textsuperscript{135}, undergraduate SEN training modules\textsuperscript{136}, I CAN Secondary Talk\textsuperscript{137} and with those with SLCN (Elklan\textsuperscript{138}, Language for Learning\textsuperscript{139}, I CAN Secondary Talk\textsuperscript{140}). These initiatives have been effective in raising awareness of speech, language and communication as whole school priorities\textsuperscript{141}, but are yet to be considered mandatory training. Initiatives using guided learning through portfolio work\textsuperscript{142}, the use of Action Learning Sets\textsuperscript{143}, or concept maps\textsuperscript{144} have been successful in supporting the transfer of learning into practice – often a challenge in secondary schools. One project which trained teaching assistants and provided ongoing mentoring showed an impact on pupil’s language, social and educational outcomes.\textsuperscript{145}

Crucial to the support for young people with SLCN is the need to recognise the changing role of specialist support such as speech and language therapists (SLTs): a role, which is more flexible and varied involving team teaching\textsuperscript{146} or taking on the role of ‘counsellor’.\textsuperscript{147} This has been described as a shift in the way speech and language therapy is perceived, a move from ‘case load’ to ‘workload’.\textsuperscript{148}

Close links with the curriculum

**For all children and young people**, despite concerns about how it aligns with the content needed for exams\textsuperscript{149}, building skills-teaching into the curriculum has been shown to have an impact both on the quality of teaching and on social and academic outcomes for pupils.\textsuperscript{150}

**For children and young people with SLCN**, working closely with the curriculum is particularly important given its language demands. This represents a significant shift in approach – away from remediating language impairment, to supporting access to learning\textsuperscript{151} thereby making language intervention relevant to the older pupil.\textsuperscript{152}

Although uncommon in secondary schools\textsuperscript{153}, an approach where specialists work closely together on aspects of the curriculum has reported benefits for both teacher and pupil.\textsuperscript{154} Working through narratives is a way of doing this, through scaffolding story or report writing\textsuperscript{155}, but also through creating a communication-based curriculum\textsuperscript{156} or through focused vocabulary teaching.\textsuperscript{157}

A functional approach

Adolescents can continue to need support with aspects of language such as vocabulary and grammar.\textsuperscript{158} However, it is also important to focus on associated emotional and social aspects such as friendship or independence\textsuperscript{159}, prioritised by young people themselves.\textsuperscript{160}

A focus on these functional aspects of communication is useful for all young people’s development; the increasing number of resources, such as BT communication skills DVD’s\textsuperscript{161} which support children’s social communication, reflect this. A whole school approach, for example through the SEAL programme (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning)\textsuperscript{162} or circle time\textsuperscript{163} can develop communication skills such as group skills, teamwork, empathy and emotional literacy.

**For young people with SLCN** with good ‘surface’ language skills, there is a danger that they will not get the support they need with longer term emotional and social impacts\textsuperscript{164} if a holistic approach is not taken. Successful programmes include training young people as ‘buddies’ to
positively resolve familiar school scenarios\textsuperscript{165}, social skills training\textsuperscript{166} or specific teaching of social skills through class-based circle time\textsuperscript{167}.

**A strategy-focused approach**

Successful learning occurs when pupils reflect on their strengths and difficulties and know what they are aiming for\textsuperscript{168}. The same applies to language learning. Metalinguistic skills, being able to reflect on and analyse language, is central to developing language in adolescence\textsuperscript{169}. Pupils need to know how rather than just what to learn; strategies rather than skills.

**For all young people** reflecting, planning and goal setting underpin the ‘Assessment for Learning Strategy’\textsuperscript{170} which has impacted positively on pupil engagement and rates of progression\textsuperscript{171}. Language plays an important role in this for problem solving\textsuperscript{172} and in classroom dialogue which enables pupils to develop their thinking and to learn from each other\textsuperscript{173}.

**Young people with SLCN** can find the skills needed to set goals and to plan difficult\textsuperscript{174} and so also need have the purpose and impact of what they are asked to do made explicit\textsuperscript{175}. Strategies such as listening to parents as models, practising words and asking for help have been identified as useful by young people\textsuperscript{176}. In one study, teaching strategies such as the use of visual organisers, ‘pause time’ for planning, and ways of recognising feedback to support self monitoring resulted in positive outcomes in both written and spoken language\textsuperscript{177}.

**Support at transition times**

The transition from primary to secondary school can be a potentially difficult time for **all children and young people** academically, organisationally and socially. The amount of support given by the secondary school in skills such as note taking and ‘how to write an essay’ is crucial to ensuring a successful experience\textsuperscript{178}.

Not surprisingly, because of their difficulties in all of these areas, **both children and their families with SLCN** can find this a particularly stressful time\textsuperscript{179}. Groups held during the summer holidays before making the transition to secondary schools are useful in lowering anxiety and preparing for both social and academic changes\textsuperscript{180}. Successful elements have been the use of pupil passports, practising using a timetable and exploring new and different vocabulary\textsuperscript{181}.

**Involving young people**

Listening to the voices of **all children and young people** has been shown to have an impact on policy and practice, on learning, confidence – and also on communication skills\textsuperscript{182}. Young people value a focus on communication in school, and are very able to say what adults can do to support this\textsuperscript{183}.

**Children and young people** with SLCN can reflect on their language strengths and difficulties\textsuperscript{184} and develop good insight and awareness of the outcomes they want\textsuperscript{185}. Involving young people in assessment\textsuperscript{186} or activities\textsuperscript{187} shows that they very often have different perspectives and priorities than adults\textsuperscript{188}, which can be valuable in planning intervention.
While some young people may feel support is unnecessary, others give insight into what is most helpful such as explicit teaching of vocabulary and visual support or use of colour coding. Without this involvement, there is a risk of getting the intervention focus wrong. With it, there is evidence that it can contribute to improved engagement and behaviour.

Opportunities for specialist intervention where difficulties are severe and complex

For children and young people with significant and often specific SLCN there is a growing body of evidence to show the benefit of focused, specialist intervention. Young people with significant SLCN continue to need to be explicitly taught language skills but this needs to be planned within the context of a secondary environment. This can be challenging; often ‘off the shelf’ programmes may not be appropriate due to the diverse nature of language impairment. However, it is both possible and effective. The involvement of specialists such as speech and language therapists is crucial – either through direct intervention or training others. Groups run by trained teaching assistants, focusing on developing narrative or vocabulary skills and planned into a mainstream timetable schedule, showed improved language skills. Likewise, specialised and differentiated speech and language therapy programmes, such as visual support for learning grammar integrated into the curriculum in specialist settings can support young people to achieve a full range of academic and social outcomes.

Continuing beyond the end of statutory education

Communication continues to play an important role post-secondary school and onward into the world of work. For all young people integrating communication skills into vocational studies can enhance self-confidence, allay anxiety and extend opportunity. Very few colleges offer specialist support for young people with SLCN. However, evidence of the positive impact this can have on psycho-social outcomes and on successful transitions to employment or further training suggests there is a need for this continued support. Despite continuing academic and literacy difficulties, students themselves are generally more positive about post-16 provision than their secondary school; good social networks being a key factor in this. The growing number of resources available to support the transition into the workplace with a focus on communication skills (BT Personal Skills Journey, National Literacy Trust Words for Work, I CAN Secondary Talk) is positive.
A model for supporting Speech, Language and Communication Needs in secondary schools

Knowing where to start breaking the ‘vicious circle’ described on page 10 as well as how to organise support in a complex secondary school environment is very hard. Because of the heterogeneity and complexity of young people’s needs, an impairment-focused or individual intervention approach on its own is often considered inappropriate with this age group.\textsuperscript{208} Many favour a model which focuses on life-long learning, functional outcomes, and a greater emphasis on a whole school approach to language support.\textsuperscript{209}

The key features identified on pages 14-17 can form underpinning, evidenced principles. However, currently, in the UK there is no cohesive, integrated system for supporting SLCN in secondary aged students\textsuperscript{210} and little is known about how models should develop.\textsuperscript{211} The need for an overarching model of speech, language and communication which is meaningful to secondary schools has been identified, together with information for school managers which sets out a business case for support.\textsuperscript{212} A recent publication from The Communication Trust aims to do this.\textsuperscript{213}

The experience of those who have developed successful models in secondary schools emphasise the need for flexibility using a mixture of approaches.\textsuperscript{214} One service planned a combination of staff development, environmental modifications and both direct and indirect intervention in and beyond the classroom in response to an initial audit.\textsuperscript{215} I CAN’s Secondary Talk works with schools to link language and communication to their own identified priorities, and offers a menu of activity-based packages addressing different aspects of language and communication. This has been shown to be effective in initiating whole school change.\textsuperscript{216} A project in Edinburgh found joint working between SLT and teacher in the classroom to be the most successful way of effective sustainable change in secondary schools.\textsuperscript{217} What all of these initiatives share is a whole school approach with close collaboration between education and specialist colleagues.
Conclusion

There is increasing evidence to suggest a direct link between good communication skills and improved outcomes for adolescents in terms of attainment, social and emotional well being and behaviour – as well as improved life chances. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true. With poor communication skills, young people’s outcomes and opportunities are limited. And yet increasingly we are aware of the large number of students in secondary schools who have poor language or more long-term SLCN.

It can be difficult to see why there is not more of an emphasis on communication skills in secondary schools, nor why support for young people’s SLCN is piecemeal rather than consistent across the UK.

We know that SLCN is persistent – during adolescence it changes, is often not identified and that there is often not enough support. We do not know enough about the numbers of young people with SLCN, nor about what works for this group of young people. So it’s not surprising that professionals feel inadequately prepared to work with them during adolescence. There is a pressing need for more evidence to help us understand the needs of adolescents with SLCN and what works to support them.

This paper summarises key features of high quality support for young people’s communication. We continue to need an evidenced, whole school approach to supporting this essential life skill in all children and young people.
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Author: Mary Hartshorne
Reviewed by: Dr Judy Clegg, University of Sheffield
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