

HELPING CHILDREN WITH UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE

Reasons for receptive language difficulties

Some children experience difficulties with understanding language as a direct result of another factor such as a hearing impairment, or general learning difficulty. Children for whom there is no identifiable direct cause are said to have a 'Developmental Language Disorder'.

Children with difficulties in understanding are to varying degrees unable to make sense of the words and sentences used by those around them. A child's difficulty may be with understanding one or all of the following:

- Vocabulary – the child may struggle to attach the correct meaning to the spoken words s/he hears and to understand the relationships between different words.
- Grammar – the order in which words are combined in a sentence can cause confusion to children with specific language difficulties. For example in the sentence "The boy is chasing the dog", they may have difficulty knowing who was chasing and who was being chased.

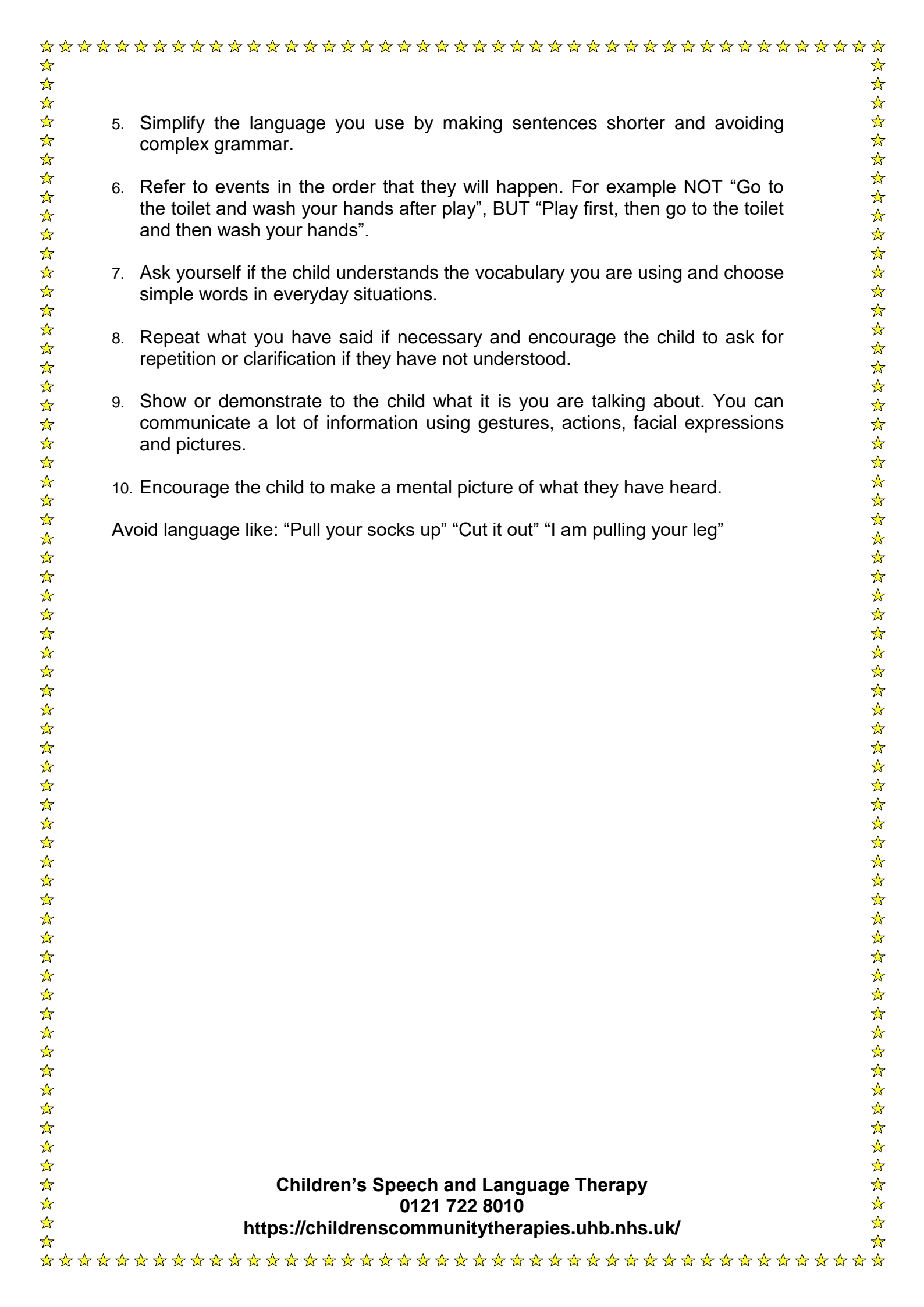
Another aspect of grammar that may be difficult for a child to understand is how changing the end of words changes the meaning. For example 'the black cat' vs. 'the black cats'.

- Sentence length – the language impaired child may have difficulty processing more than a small number of words that carry information. Usually this means that only one end of the sentence is picked up. For example "Go and hang up your coat, put your lunch box away and come and sit on the carpet!"

How can you help:

There are lots of things that will help whether the child is at school, home or elsewhere:

1. Keep the environment around the child as quiet and distraction-free as possible so that they can concentrate on what is being said.
2. Talk to the child individually or if they are in a group make sure you have their attention before you speak – face to face if possible.
3. Be aware of behaviour that may be used as a strategy. For example copying peers, avoiding situations, changing topic.
4. Use a slower rate of speech that allows the child additional time to process information.

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5. Simplify the language you use by making sentences shorter and avoiding complex grammar.
 6. Refer to events in the order that they will happen. For example NOT “Go to the toilet and wash your hands after play”, BUT “Play first, then go to the toilet and then wash your hands”.
 7. Ask yourself if the child understands the vocabulary you are using and choose simple words in everyday situations.
 8. Repeat what you have said if necessary and encourage the child to ask for repetition or clarification if they have not understood.
 9. Show or demonstrate to the child what it is you are talking about. You can communicate a lot of information using gestures, actions, facial expressions and pictures.
 10. Encourage the child to make a mental picture of what they have heard.

Avoid language like: “Pull your socks up” “Cut it out” “I am pulling your leg”