

RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE (COMPREHENSION)



“Receptive language means the ability to understand information. It involves understanding the words, sentences and meaning of what others say or what is read.” (Afasic.org)

Understanding language enables children to **communicate successfully, follow instructions** in their personal and educational environments and **access the curriculum**

When a child has difficulty understanding, it will be evident both at home and at school. For example, he/she may:

- be unable to follow instructions correctly that others the same age can follow
- need instructions to be simplified and/or repeated. This may not be consistent
- have trouble listening to a story, or difficulty recalling a story
- respond to questions by repeating what you say instead of giving an answer
- copy other children’s responses or give unusual or inappropriate answers to questions or instructions
- seem ‘bored’, disinterested, easily distracted or disruptive
- become easily frustrated or display behaviour outbursts
- appear ‘blank’, when addressed or give no response at all.
- display poor listening and attention
- watch other children for cues
- seek a lot of reassurance from adults and *maybe* follow adults around rather than play with peers
- show difficulty answering questions relating to something he/she has read e.g. within comprehension activities



Why do some children have difficulty understanding language?

- They may not understand the meaning of words. This could include nouns, verbs, pronouns, prepositions, negatives etc.
- They may not be developing the symbolic representation needed to form concepts about the world around them. Internalised language and reasoning skills are dependent on this.
- They may not have the auditory memory to cope with a long sentence or instruction.
- They may not understand implications, inference and underlying meaning.

How can adults help?

- Make full use of **visual clues** such as pictures, photographs, props, demonstration, facial expression and gesture to reinforce spoken information
- **Allow extra time** for the child to process information before responding
- **Modify your own language** in terms of complexity, vocabulary and grammar to suit the individual child
- Adjust the **pace** of your own language
- Give instructions in **small chunks / parts** and in sequential order
- Use the child's name before giving each instruction
- Encourage the child to look at the speaker (if he/she feels comfortable doing so)
- Try using the concept of **'first and then'** to help the child know the order in which to complete an instruction e.g. "first get book and then you
- Demonstrate or **show the child what to do** when giving them an instruction
- **Emphasise** the key words
- During everyday activities **describe** to the child what he/she is doing in instruction form e.g. if the child is taking their coat off the peg – the adult would say "take your coat off your peg"/ if the child is putting their shoes on the adult would say "put your shoes on".
- **Reduce any background noise** where possible when giving the child an instruction.

Remember to:

- reinforce good listening skills
- emphasise key concepts, vocabulary and grammar
- repeat activities in a different way to where possible to ensure the child understands
- encourage the child to seek clarification. Let him/her know that it is ok to ask the adult to repeat an instruction
- always check that the child has understood

In the classroom, teachers could additionally:

- ask the child repeat instructions back to demonstrate they have heard and been able to remember what was said.
- encourage the child to write any key words they hear within a verbal instruction. This was he/she has something to refer to.
- encourage the child to repeat key words silently to help them remember.

Comprehension Monitoring

When a child finds it difficult to understand in class (when spoken to), it could be because he/she has missed information - maybe because they were not looking at the speaker or were not fully listening. It might be that he/she cannot process the spoken information.

Although communication can break down when a child is unable to understand or process verbal information, it can also break down due to the speaker or the environment for example, if there is too much background noise or if the language used by the speaker is too complex for the child. Without realising, speakers sometimes give too much information or simply talk too fast or with a quiet volume.

For school aged children who have difficulty understanding, it is helpful to encourage them to monitor their own comprehension. By doing so, there is no pressure on the child to understand, but rather to **recognise** when they don't understand and learn to **do something about it**.

How can adults help?

- 1) Support your child to identify times when communication breaks down**
- 2) Encourage your child to seek support when needed**

(McCarthy, 2006)

Ideas could include:

- Discussing the importance of listening. You could make 'good listening' posters or word webs which could include – 'why listening is important' / 'how to be a good listener'.
- Try role play where you model good and listening behaviours as opposed to not so good. From this, you could ask the child to identify which listening behaviours were good or not so good. For older children you might ask questions such as "how do you know the person (in role play) was not listening?".
- Talk to your child about the consequences of listening and not listening.
- Introduce the idea of 'speaker problems'. Again, role play could help. The adult could give a spoken message whilst music is playing in the background. They could speak quickly or use unfamiliar vocabulary. Following this, talk about what the speaker could change to make it easier for the listener.

Once your child is more aware of how communication can break down between a speaker and listener, they will start to identify this within their own communication. From this, you can encourage the child to do something about it.

Strategies / ideas to try when a child does not understand in class

- Be clear with the child that it is not their fault – This will build his/her confidence over time to which he/she is more likely to let an adult know when they need support.
- Give the child ways of saying that they have not understood. You could suggest using set phrases that could be used like 'Can you repeat that?' / 'Can you say that slowly please?' / Could you tell me what that means? / Could you say that a little bit at a time please?
- Try practising with your child ways to tell people that he/she has not understood.
- Make sure the child knows it is 'OK' to use these phrases in the classroom as this may be unnerving for him/her at first.
- Praise the child for asking for clarification or repetition as this will encourage him/her to do it again next time.
- Switch your language e.g. instead of saying "you didn't listen", replace it with something like "oh dear...what happened there?". This will encourage the child to continue taking responsibility and monitoring their own comprehension.

