

# The links between speech, language and communication needs and social disadvantage

**C**ommunication provides the foundation for children's development. Early language skills provide the building blocks upon which children's reading skills develop and are a key indicator of educational success and influence life prospects. However, in areas of high social deprivation in the UK, between 40% and 56% of children start school with language delay.<sup>1,2</sup>

## Understanding the links

Poor communication skills are closely linked with social disadvantage.<sup>3</sup> Research shows children living in poverty in the UK suffer disproportionately from language delay.<sup>4</sup> Poverty can strongly reduce parents' ability to respond to their child's early language needs and offer a home learning environment that enhances language skills in the early years.<sup>5</sup> As a group, children from disadvantaged backgrounds more commonly have reduced developmental opportunities that can limit their learning of language.<sup>6</sup>

## Why this issue matters

Speech, language and communication difficulties have a direct impact on children's developmental and educational outcomes, health and wellbeing:

- **Educational achievement:** oral language development is central to a child's ability to access the school curriculum and develop literacy skills.<sup>7</sup> Vocabulary difficulties at age five are associated with poor literacy in adulthood, and children who obtain below the nationally expected level in reading are typically characterised by poor communication, language and literacy scores.<sup>8</sup>
- **Emotional wellbeing and behaviour:** children with primary language difficulties are at higher risk of developing behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, which can increase the risk of their exclusion from school and, in the most extreme cases, can lead to young people entering the criminal justice system.<sup>9</sup> As many as 60% of young offenders are believed to have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).<sup>10</sup>



## Communication in early childhood is key to boosting life chances<sup>11</sup>

- **Employability:** if left unaddressed, speech, language and communication difficulties can adversely affect children in adult life, for example, poor communication skills affect employability.<sup>12,13</sup> 88% of long-term unemployed young men have been found to have SLCN.<sup>14</sup>
- **Social inequality:** gaps in language development between children from affluent and disadvantaged families open up as early as three years of age.<sup>15</sup> Improving language development in the early years is an important tool through which educational and social inequality between social classes can be tackled.<sup>16</sup>
- **Cycle of communication deprivation:** failure to address SLCN can encourage an intergenerational cycle of communication deprivation and poor communication skills passed down from parent to child, which can have a detrimental impact upon the child's life outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

## Spotlight on social disadvantage

According to the latest child poverty statistics for 2012-2013:

- ▶ **Across the UK:** **17%** of children (2.3 million) live in relative poverty and **19%** of children (2.6 million) live in absolute poverty.<sup>18</sup>
- ▶ **In Scotland:** **19%** of children (180,000) live in relative poverty and **20%** of children (200,000) live in absolute poverty.<sup>19</sup>
- ▶ **In Wales:** **22%** of children (100,000) live in relative poverty and **24%** of children live in absolute poverty.<sup>20</sup>
- ▶ **In Northern Ireland:** **20%** of children (approximately 89,000) live in relative poverty (before housing costs) and **22%** of children (96,000) live in absolute poverty (before housing costs).<sup>21</sup>
- ▶ **In England:** child poverty rates vary significantly according to region: in the South East **13%** of children live in poverty before housing costs and **22%** after housing costs. In the North West, **21%** of children are in poverty before housing costs and **30%** after housing costs.<sup>22</sup>



## Policy solutions

In line with the recommendations of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Speech and Language Difficulties report regarding the links between social disadvantage and SLCN, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists is calling upon national and local decision makers to:

- ▶ Provide support in the early years to ensure children from disadvantaged backgrounds have a secure foundation for language and literacy development.
- ▶ Support identification and referral of children with SLCN by:
  - commissioning education and training about children's oral language as part of core speech and language therapy services.
  - ensuring the early years and education workforce has the requisite skills, knowledge, confidence and attitudes to promote language development, and identify and support children with SLCN – through initial training and continuing professional development.
- ▶ Support speech and language therapy services.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

1 Locke A, Ginsborg J, Peers I (2002). Development and disadvantage: Implications for the early years and beyond, *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 37(1), pp. 3-15.

2 Law J, McBean K, Rush R (2011). Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage, *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 46(6), pp. 657-64.

3 All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Speech and Language Difficulties (2013). *The links between speech, language and communication needs and social disadvantage*. [http://www.rcslt.org/governments/docs/appg\\_report\\_feb\\_2013](http://www.rcslt.org/governments/docs/appg_report_feb_2013)

4 Locke A, Ginsborg J, Peers I (2002), op. cit.

5 Law J, et al (2013). *Early language delays in the UK*, Save the Children: London. <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/news/documents/Lawetal2013EarlyLanguageDelaysintheUK.pdf>

6 APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties (2013), op. cit.

7 Snowling M, C Hulme (2012). Interventions for children's language and literacy difficulties. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 47(1): 27-34.

8 Johnson, et al (2010). Twenty-year follow-up of children with and without speech-language impairments: family, educational, occupational, and quality of life outcomes. *Am J Speech Lang Pathol*. 19(1):51-65. doi: 10.1044/1058-0360(2009/08-0083). Epub 2009 Jul 30.

9 Ibid.

10 Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C. Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Language and Communication Difficulties*, 2007; 42, 505-520.

11 Law, op. cit.

12 Law, op. cit.

13 The Communication Trust (2013). *A generation adrift*. [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/31961/tct\\_genadrift.pdf](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/31961/tct_genadrift.pdf)

14 Elliott N (2011). *An investigation into the communication skills of long-term unemployed young men*. <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.553779>

15 Save the Children (2014). *Read On Get On: how reading can help children escape poverty*, London: Save the Children [www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Read\\_On\\_Get\\_On.pdf](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Read_On_Get_On.pdf)

16 Centre for Social Justice (2014). *Closing the divide: Tackling educational inequality in England*. [www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/UserStorage/pdf/Pdf%20reports/Closing-the-Divide.pdf](http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/UserStorage/pdf/Pdf%20reports/Closing-the-Divide.pdf)

17 Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (2014). *RCSLT response to Scottish Parliament Health and Sports Committee Early Years and Health Inequalities Inquiry*, March 2014. Document available upon request.

18 Department for Work and Pensions (2014). *Households below average income*.

19 Scottish Government (2014). *Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland: 2012-2013*.

20 Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014). *State of the Nation 2014: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in England report summary*. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/367461/State\\_of\\_the\\_Nation\\_-\\_summary\\_document.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/367461/State_of_the_Nation_-_summary_document.pdf)

21 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2013). *Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin 2012-2013*. [http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/ni\\_poverty\\_bulletin\\_201213.pdf](http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/ni_poverty_bulletin_201213.pdf)

22 Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, op. cit.

For further information about The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists please visit: [www.rcslt.org](http://www.rcslt.org)