

Safeguarding children with communication needs



Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and physical and emotional abuse

Children who experience abuse and neglect are more likely to have communication and interaction difficulties⁴ and this relates to the quality of interaction⁵ with and attachment to their care givers. The effects can be long term.⁶

Children in abusive or neglectful situations are likely to develop insecure attachment to their care givers which can lead to difficulties in social communication,⁷ reduced language skills,⁸ an impaired ability to feel and express emotions,⁹ and a limited vocabulary for thoughts and feelings.¹⁰

Therefore it is important that any child who has experienced abuse and neglect should be screened for communication and interaction difficulties. Limited communication skills may also be an indicator of safeguarding issues.

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) have a key role to play in supporting interagency responses to child abuse and neglect. Speech and language therapists work in partnership with local agencies, including education, health and social services, to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Language and communication skills as a predictor of neglect

Research indicates a link between communication problems and child abuse and neglect (the absence of provision for a child's basic physical or psychological needs).^{1,2} Neglected children may experience a lack of stimulation in childhood, resulting in communication and interaction needs.³ Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are one of the most obvious indicators of abuse and neglect. However, neglect can often prove difficult to identify because it involves acts of omission.

SLCN needs and domestic violence

Research conducted by domestic violence charity Refuge, has found that pre-school children exposed to domestic violence are likely to be at significant risk of developing significant speech and language problems:

- ▶ **50%** of children involved in their study met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The most frequently reported PTSD symptoms for pre-schoolers in the study included language regression and separation anxiety.
- ▶ Comparisons between children's achievement in the Refuge play-centre and in the community showed a significant difference in hearing and speech development. Children at Refuge were assessed as achieving significantly less within the area of hearing and speech (M=64%) than those in other community play settings (M=91%).

Source: Refuge (2005). Refuge assessment and intervention for pre-school children exposed to domestic violence.

SLCN and risk of abuse

The link between safeguarding and communication difficulties also works in the opposite direction: children who have complex needs are at greater risk of abuse and this is in part because of their communication difficulties. Studies suggest:

- Disabled children are more likely to experience abuse than their peers and that children with communication difficulties could be at greater risk of abuse than other disabled children.^{11, 12, 13}
- Some of the most vulnerable children are those whose impairments prevent them from communicating what has happened to them (and who may therefore be deliberately targeted by some perpetrators of abuse).¹⁴

As a consequence, SLTs can provide a vital support for enabling alternative or augmentative communication (AAC) with abused children whose impairments prevent them from communicating verbally.¹⁵

Anti-social behaviour as a consequence of SLCN

Studies also indicate a strong link between SLCN and anti-social behaviour.¹⁶ Poor language ability in the early years increases the risk of antisocial behaviour at 14 years of age.¹⁷ As such, overcoming language difficulties in the early years should provide a key focus of prevention and early intervention strategies aimed at reducing the prevalence of antisocial behaviour.

How SLTs support vulnerable children

- **SLTs play an important role in the detection of abuse and neglect:** Where communication and interaction needs are believed to be an indicator of underlying concerns regarding the safety and welfare of a child, SLTs can establish communication strategies and can contact and work in partnership with relevant local agencies in assisting victims of abuse to disclose harm.



- **SLTs support other professionals who work with children with SLCN:** This can often involve training social work teams in how to identify and support children with SLCN and helping police officers to determine whether a child's communication difficulties may have prevented him or her from reporting injuries inflicted through abuse.
- **SLTs help to develop the speech, language and communication skills of children who have experienced abuse, and assist them in expressing their views and recounting their experiences:** This can involve helping them to express themselves in interviews and modifying the level of the questions being put to them.

► For more information, contact: info@rcslt.org

► Also see our factsheets on **'Looked after children'** and **'Social, emotional and mental health'**

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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