

Question: What elements of poverty and disadvantage are not being talked about enough?

The links between speech, language and communication needs (of children, young people and adults) and poverty and disadvantage are not being talked about enough, including the potential speech, language and communication needs of adults experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

We know there is an intergenerational cycle of speech, language and communication outcomes and risks. See:

<https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/rcslt-communication-capacity-factsheet.pdf>

We know there are links between speech, language and communication needs and social disadvantage. See:

<https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/rcslt-communication-capacity-factsheet.pdf>

<https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/rcslt-social-disadvantage-factsheet.pdf>

We know there are links between speech, language and communications and the most disadvantaged families:

<https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/supporting-the-most-disadvantaged-families-briefing-march-2019.pdf>

Although under-researched, the studies that there are indicate a high-level of speech, language and communication needs among disadvantaged and/or vulnerable adults. For example:

- among unemployed young men:
<https://pure.southwales.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/an-investigation-into-the-communication-skills-of-unemployed-young-men>
- juvenile offenders:
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13682820601053977>

In addition to addressing issues around the speech, language and communication of children and young people, from the early years, through school, and on into post-16 settings, more attention needs to be paid to the potential links between speech, language and communication needs and adults who are experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

It is only in this way that the intergenerational cycle of communication disadvantage will be able to be addressed.

Research shows that there is a strong correlation between socioeconomic disadvantage and speech, language and communication needs:

Communication 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.

The Centre for Social Justice's 'Cracks in our foundations' report highlighted the impact of language skills on educational attainment, as well as employment, mental health and risk of involvement in the justice system.

Poor spoken language and communication skills are closely linked with social disadvantage. 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. As a group, children from disadvantaged backgrounds more commonly have reduced developmental opportunities that can limit their learning of language.

Studies of whole populations reveal a clear social gradient for language development, with children from the most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups twice as likely to experience language delay as their less disadvantaged peers.

Children who are entitled to free school meals and live in more deprived neighbourhoods are more than twice as likely to have identified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

Over 50% of children in socially deprived areas may start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills.

Research shows that SLCN are particularly prevalent amongst children and young people in touch with social care services:

58% of young people screened as part of the No Wrong Door project, which provides an integrated service to young people in care or on the edge of care, were identified as SLCN.

In a recent study, 90% of care leavers had below average language ability, and 60% met criteria for having Developmental Language Disorder – a condition where children have problems understanding and/or using spoken language. None of these young people had previously been diagnosed with SLCN.

People with SLCN can have difficulty accessing the information they need to use services and are more likely to experience negative communication in education, health and criminal justice services. Identification and support for SLCN should therefore be considered as part of the solution when developing responses to disadvantaged pupils.

Speech, language and communication needs and poverty:

There are many different reasons why those living in poverty are at a higher risk of having speech, language and communication needs.

These can include parents not being at home as often to respond to a child's developing language or a person having fewer opportunities to practice and learn a language, such as in social places with other children.

Impoverished families may also have to take jobs with dangerous working conditions with a high risk of work accidents, including brain injuries.

Poverty also plays a significant barrier to accessing treatment. Disadvantaged families may have fewer chances to treat a communication disorder early because they have fewer opportunities to recognize a problem.

Children from low-income families are also more likely than their peers to be born with inherited SEND and are more likely to develop some forms of SEND in childhood.

At the same time, children with SEND are more likely than their peers to be born into poverty, and more likely to experience poverty as they grow up.

Intergenerational disability plays a role in the link between poverty and SEND. Research found a high prevalence of disabled children living with disabled parents. There is also strong evidence that parental disability is a driver of poverty as certain disabilities lead to a decline in income and employment rates.

Furthermore, inheriting a disorder is also likely to impact a child's future employment and earning potential.

Other factors associated with poverty – for example, smoking and consuming alcohol during pregnancy, parental stress and family breakdown – can also contribute to the likelihood of a child developing certain types of SEND.

It may also be that adults experiencing poverty and/or disadvantage themselves have SLCN which are unidentified and/or unsupported. The intergenerational cycle illustrates this: <https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/rcslt-communication-capacity-factsheet.pdf>

The role of SLCN in exacerbating poverty:

SLCN also play a role in causing or aggravating poverty. Where parents need more time away from work to provide care for their child with SLCN, this can decrease family income.

Additionally, care often comes at a high cost and having a child with SLCN can also lead to family stress and breakdown.

Children with SLCN from low-income families have also poorer educational outcomes – whether in terms of academic achievement, wellbeing or exclusion rates – and these outcomes have a direct effect on their earning potential later in life.

This is partly because their parents are less likely to be successful in seeking help. They are also less likely to receive help from their schools, and more likely to end up excluded from school or drop out of education. As such, children with SLCN from low-income families face multiple disadvantages and increased vulnerability from the very start of their lives.

Why speech, language and communication matters:

Oral language development is central to a child's ability to access the school curriculum and develop literacy skills.

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. As many as 60% of young offenders are believed to have SLCN.

Communication in early childhood is key to boosting life chances. If left unaddressed, speech, language and communication difficulties can adversely affect children in adult life, for example, poor communication skills affect employability. 88% of long-term unemployed young men have been found to have SLCN.

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 on the child's life outcomes.

What needs to happen:

For children and young people:

- 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 spoken language and communication 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.

For tackling the intergenerational cycle:

- Support for current and future parents to develop their language and communication skills, and to understand the crucial role they can play in their child's communication development.

For adults:

- More research is needed on the prevalence of speech, language and communication needs amongst adults experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and the role of speech and language therapy in supporting them.

About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists:

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists is the professional body for speech and language therapists working across the United Kingdom. The RCSLT currently has around 20,000 members. We promote excellence in practice, provide leadership, set professional standards and influence health, education and justice policies.