

# **Professor Karen Bryan OBE speech**

## **Key Issues in Language Health**

Speech, language and communication skills are very complex, cognitive skills involving many parts of the brain and central nervous system. Factors such as the task, the context, and the person's emotional state will determine what parts of the brain and central nervous system are involved.

All of us would find our lives and our work very hard to sustain without sophisticated language and communication skills. Language development continues throughout our lifespan with new vocabulary and changes to how we communicate being assimilated throughout our lives.

Speech, language and communication develop initially from birth to the early 20's, with the fastest development taking place between 3 and 6 years. These early foundations are critical for later development and for educational outcomes. However, 11% of 3 to 6 year olds experience difficulty in acquiring language.

Such difficulties with speech, language and communication are common.

In 2013, well respected academic studies showed that 6% of children in the UK have Speech, language and communication disorders in the absence of other developmental problems, (now called Developmental language disorders) with around 31% reported in areas of lower socio-economic status.

Figures from Speech and Language UK in 2023 show that at least 1.9 million of primary and secondary aged children have developmental language disorders This equates to 1 in 5 school aged children and is the highest number ever recorded. So around 6 in every class of 30 children.

There is strong evidence that Covid lock-down coupled with school and nursery closures have contributed to this decline.

Within the same study:

- 80% of teachers surveyed think children in their classroom are behind with their talking and/or understanding of words.

- 73% of teachers think that children's speech and language is not prioritised by the Government.
- 53% of teachers don't believe they have sufficient training to support pupils' speech and language in the classroom.

Added to 7.6% with developmental language disorder, 2.4% of children in school have speech, language and communication difficulties as part of another condition such as autism, deafness, learning difficulties, and many other developmental conditions.

Overall, in the UK 1 child in 10 of School age experiences some form of speech, language and communication difficulties.

Speech, language and communication disorders have considerable impact on children's education and life outcomes:

- Affecting the ability to interact with others and to make friends
- Affecting school and reading readiness
- Affecting engagement with all aspects of the curriculum in primary and senior school, and,
- Can lead to emotional and behaviour problems.

A further study showed that one in four children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school, compared with one in 25 of children who had good language skills at age five.

### **What is going wrong here?**

In England, in common with many other countries, there is no systematic screening for language difficulties linked to provision of support. Countries such as Denmark do have this. There is a measure of language and communication ability as part of the 2 to 2 and a half year health check, and then another at the end of the reception year as part of the Early Years Foundation Stage profile. There are no checks after that. SATS only assess written language and language readiness for senior school is not assessed.

So it is not surprising that speech, language and communication difficulties continue to impact on young people. It is a myth that children grow out of communication difficulties.

Once a young person enters senior school, language difficulties are labelled as behaviour problems, failing to recognise underlying language difficulties.

As children get older the impact of communication difficulties increases:

- 81% of children with social, emotional and mental health needs have significant unidentified language deficits.
- Adolescents with Developmental language disorders are more likely to have depression and anxiety than their peers.
- 63% of children living in care have language difficulties and for the majority of those the difficulties are severe, pervasive and previously unidentified.
- During the school years, loneliness and peer rejection may contribute to adverse mental health outcomes for young people with compromised language skills.
- Children and young people with Speech, language and communication difficulties are at increased risk of developing mental health problems.
- Over 60% of children facing school exclusion had SLCN.
- My own research showed that at least 60% of young offenders have speech, language and communication disorders. Researchers have used the phrase 'school to prison pipeline' referring to children with insufficient language skills whose problems compound throughout adolescence with one risk factor leading to another.

### **So what do we need?**

All children and young people presenting with emotional and behaviour difficulties should have a full speech, language and communication assessment.

Adolescents coming into contact with mental health or criminal justice services should have their speech, language and communication skills assessed.

Systematic communication support should be hard-wired into all services for children and young people including education, health and mental health and youth justice services. Too often access to communication support is patchy, inconsistent and not joined up.

Hence our manifesto is called 'Think Language First'.

I will now hand over to Professor Maria Arche who will tell you more about the manifesto.