

Tackling child poverty: the contribution of speech, language, and communication November 2024

Tackling child poverty is at the heart of breaking down barriers to opportunity and improving the life chances for every child. For too many children, living in poverty robs them of the opportunity to learn and to prosper. Too many children, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, leave primary school with unresolved speech, language and communication needs that have a lasting impact on their life chances.

Baroness Smith of Malvern, Minister for Skills, August 2024

The centrality of speech, language, and communication

Speech, language, and communication skills are fundamental and foundational.¹ They are central to our education, home and domestic life, social life and friendships, physical health, hobbies and leisure, and employment. They are key to children having the opportunity to learn and to prosper. As such, they have an important role to play in tackling child poverty and its effects.

We welcome the Government's commitment to a [Child Poverty Strategy](#) to reduce and alleviate child poverty. We believe this is essential to improve children's lives and life chances now and address the root causes of child poverty in the long term. We also welcome the [Government's recognition](#) that unresolved speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) have a lasting impact on children's life chances.

As the Government works on its Child Poverty Strategy, we are calling on it to take a multi-pronged approach to speech, language, and communication by ensuring:

- the development of children and young people's speech, language, and communication skills is at the heart of the Child Poverty Strategy;
- services and support for children and young people's speech, language and communication are accessible to families living in poverty; and

¹ In this briefing, for ease we use 'speech, language, and communication skills' throughout. We take a broad and inclusive definition. We recognise and celebrate all the diverse ways in which communication takes place. This includes through language (spoken and sign) and alternative communication methods, such as the use of body language, sounds, symbols, voice output systems, text and signing systems. Our interest is in promoting communication effectiveness, not with the method by which the communication takes place. Similarly, we use 'communication disability, difference or difficulty' recognising that some people communicate differently to others while others have difficulties with communicating, including those with an identified speech, language, and communication need.

- services and policies to tackle child poverty are accessible to those with communication disability, difference and difficulty, including families.

This will support children and young people living in poverty to develop the best possible speech, language, and communication skills, including removing the barriers that many children and young people living in poverty and their families face in accessing support services, including speech and language therapy.

What needs to happen?

Tackling the effects of poverty now, and addressing its root causes in the long term, is everybody's business. While not sufficient to ensure the eradication of poverty, and its impacts, ensuring equal access to support for speech, language, and communication skills, is necessary.

It is also essential to delivering the [Child Poverty Taskforce's](#) objective 'to alleviate the negative experience of living in poverty, including through supporting families and the role of public services.'

To make that happen, the following is required:

1. **Early Intervention:** Increase investment in the early years workforce to support the development of early speech, language, and communication skills.
2. **Integrated Services:** Speech and language therapists as part of multi-disciplinary teams, embedded in settings which are welcoming and accessible to all families, providing high quality universal support, plus targeted interventions and outreach, and timely access to specialist support, for those families that need it.
3. **Training and Awareness:** Enhance training for the children's workforce across education, health, and social care sectors to ensure that everyone who works with children is equipped with the knowledge and skills to understand how to develop children's language and communication skills, identify children and young people who struggle with their speech, language and communication, and know what they can do to support them. This will also help reduce the risk of children and young people's speech, language and communication needs being misidentified as 'behavioural problems', if they have difficulties understanding and remembering what is said to them and explaining and expressing themselves.

4. **Parental Support:** Services should ensure that support for parents/carers is accessible to all families and remove any barriers which prevent low-income families from accessing support.
5. **Research and Data Collection:** Fund research to explore the barriers that prevent children and families living in poverty from accessing support for their speech, language and communication.
6. **Adjustments to services and policies:** Services and policies designed to tackle poverty must be adjusted so that they are accessible to those living in poverty who have communication disability, difference or difficulty.

It is also important to recognise that many older children, young people, and adults living in poverty may also have unidentified and unsupported communication disabilities, differences or difficulties which act as a barrier to accessing services. Therefore, as with younger children, services and policies designed to tackle poverty for older children and adults must also be adjusted so they are accessible.

Supporters

This statement is supported by the following organisations.

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