

Early years and speech, language, and communication

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Key issues

- Speech, language and communication (SLC) skills are the foundation for children's development. They underpin learning, literacy, relationships, mental health, positive relationships, and future employment.
- They are a core component of school readiness. In 2024/25, more than 1 in 5 children did not reach the expected level of development in communication and language at the end of their reception year (age 4-5).ⁱ
- Children and families living in poverty experience barriers to accessing support which puts them at increased risk of language difficulties.
- Children who struggle with their language skills at age five are:
 - six times less likely to reach expected standards in reading/writing at 11;ⁱⁱ
 - twice as likely to be unemployed in adulthood;ⁱⁱⁱ and
 - three times as likely to experience mental health problems in adulthood.^{iv}
- Early identification and support for speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) is cost effective – contributing to improved school readiness, reduced exclusions, and decreased long-term costs to health, justice, and welfare.

Why early years communication matters

- The first 1,000 days are critical for language acquisition, but development continues rapidly through to age five.
- Exposure to talking, listening, and responsive communication shapes brain development and later educational attainment.
- Failure to address early language difficulties risks entrenching disadvantage, affecting literacy, behaviour, and life chances.

Current challenges

Unequal access

- Provision varies across local areas. For example, while some Family Hubs have embedded speech and language therapists, others lack specialist input.

Workforce pressures

- Recruitment and retention challenges in both early years educators and speech and language therapists limit capacity to support language-rich environments and provide targeted interventions.
- High staff turnover means training must be repeated frequently, straining resources.

Sustainability

- Many effective programmes have been short-term and not sustained, creating instability and missed opportunities for long-term impact.

Best Practice

- **Family Hubs & Community Embedding:** Where speech and language therapists are based in settings such as Family Hubs, parents can access earlier support, practitioners are upskilled, and multi-agency working flourishes.

Recommendations

Embed speech and language therapists in early years settings

- Ensure all families have easy access to advice and support by embedding speech and language therapists in settings such as Family Hubs, children's centres and nurseries.

Invest in workforce development

- Train early years practitioners to provide language-rich environments for all babies and children, and identify and support children who need additional help.
- Address speech and language therapy recruitment and retention challenges.

Sustainable, long-term funding

- Move away from short-term pilots; provide local services with long term funding to deliver integrated, holistic support to families.

Strategic leadership

- Appoint a national lead for speech, language and communication within government.
- Require every Integrated Care System to have a strategic SLCN lead.

Target inequalities

- The resource allocated to deprived areas should be increased in relation to more affluent areas where it is easier for families to access services.
- Ensure services are co-designed with local communities, delivered in accessible settings, and provide support for multilingual families.

Why this matters

- Early language is the foundation of school readiness, attainment, and lifelong opportunity.
- Investment in speech and language therapy in the early years is cost-effective, improves social mobility, and reduces pressure on later health, education and justice services.
- Ensuring every child starts school able to communicate effectively is essential to breaking cycles of disadvantage and removing barriers to opportunity.

For more information

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ⁱ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2024-2>

ⁱⁱ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/early_language_development_briefing_paper.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19951922/>

^{iv} Ibid.