Advocating for access to professional interpreters

This information is aimed at speech and language therapists (SLTs) to help them feel empowered to advocate for professional interpreting support when they do not share a language with the service user or family. Access to professional interpreters is essential to ensure safe, equitable and person-centred speech and language therapy.

When SLTs and families do not share a common language, interpreters support accurate understanding of communication development, enable informed decision making, and ensure that individuals and families can participate meaningfully in care.

Without appropriate interpreting support, clinicians may be unable to gather reliable information about speech, language, communication or swallowing. This increases the risk of inaccurate assessment, inappropriate intervention, and reduced engagement with services.

Interpreter access is a clinical requirement

Restricting services to English-only communication creates barriers to equitable access and participation. Access to interpreting support is a core component of equitable service delivery, rather than an optional additional cost.

Language barriers affect the ability of individuals and families to access and participate in services. When language differences prevent meaningful communication, professional interpreters are necessary to ensure that services are delivered safely and effectively.

If an SLT is unable to assess a child's home language, they may confuse additional language learners with those children who have a true language disorder, developmental language disorder or speech sound disorder, affecting both or all languages the child speaks.

Speech and language therapists have a professional responsibility to advocate for conditions that allow them to provide appropriate care and practise safely.

Clinical and governance risks when interpreters are not provided

If interpreters are not available, speech and language therapists may be unable to carry out an accurate assessment or provide safe clinical advice, and the following risks may arise:

• inaccurate assessment of communication needs
• difficulty distinguishing language difference from disorder
• misunderstanding of advice or therapy recommendations
• safeguarding risks where concerns cannot be fully explored
• reduced engagement and poorer outcomes.

These risks may have implications for clinical governance, service quality, and organisational accountability.

Supporting the case for equitable service delivery

When discussing interpreter provision with managers or commissioners, it can be helpful to frame requests in terms of clinical quality, safety and equity, rather than cost alone.

You may wish to highlight that:

• interpreters enable accurate assessment and intervention planning
• equitable access improves engagement and outcomes
• failure to provide interpreters may create clinical and governance risks
• interpreter provision supports services to meet legal and professional duties.

When language differences affect clinical communication, interpreters should be considered an essential part of delivering safe and effective speech and language therapy.

Example language you can use

When advocating for interpreter support, speech and language therapists may find the following wording helpful:

‘In order to carry out an accurate assessment and ensure meaningful participation from the family, professional interpreting support is required for this appointment.

‘Without an interpreter there is a significant risk that the individual’s communication needs will not be accurately understood, which could affect assessment outcomes and intervention planning.

‘Providing interpreter support helps ensure equitable access to speech and language therapy and supports safe clinical decision making.’

If interpreter requests are declined

If interpreter support is refused, speech and language therapists may wish to:

- explain the clinical risks associated with proceeding without an interpreter
- request written clarification regarding how the service intends to address the language barrier
- discuss the issue with a clinical lead, service manager or safeguarding lead, where appropriate
- decline the referral due to the clinical risks of delivering an English-only service. This should only be considered if the referral is not an emergency or life-threatening and all options have been explored.

Speech and language therapists should feel able to advocate for the resources required to deliver safe, equitable and person-centred care.

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