

Safeguarding children and young people



Speech and language therapists (SLTs) have a key role to play in supporting interagency responses to child abuse and neglect. Speech and language therapists work in partnership with local agencies, including education, health and social services, to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people.

Language and communication skills as a predictor of neglect

Research indicates a link between communication problems and neglect (the absence of provision for a child's basic physical or psychological needs).^{1,2} Neglected children may experience a lack of stimulation in childhood, impacting on their speech, language and communication development.³ Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) can therefore be an important indicator of neglect. However, neglect can often prove difficult to identify because it involves acts of omission.

Speech, language and communication needs and attachment

Children and young people who experience abuse and neglect are more likely to have SLCN difficulties⁴ and this relates to the quality of interaction⁵ with and attachment to their care givers. The effects can be long term.⁶

Children in abusive or neglectful situations are likely to develop insecure attachment to their care givers which can lead to difficulties in social communication,⁷ reduced language skills,⁸ an impaired ability to feel and express emotions,⁹ and a limited vocabulary for thoughts and feelings.¹⁰

Therefore it is important that professionals consider whether any child who has experienced abuse and neglect may have unidentified SLCN. Limited communication skills may also be an indicator of safeguarding issues.



SLCN needs and domestic violence

Research conducted by domestic violence charity Refuge, has found that pre-school children exposed to domestic violence are likely to be at significant risk of developing significant speech and language problems:

- ▶ **50%** of children involved in their study met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The most frequently reported PTSD symptoms for pre-schoolers in the study included language regression and separation anxiety.
- ▶ Comparisons between children's achievement in the Refuge play-centre and in the community showed a significant difference in hearing and speech development. Children at Refuge were assessed as achieving significantly less within the area of hearing and speech (M=64%) than those in other community play settings (M=91%).

Source: Refuge (2005). Refuge assessment and intervention for pre-school children exposed to domestic violence.

Children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities can face additional safeguarding challenges. Governing bodies and proprietors should ensure their child protection policy reflects the fact that additional barriers can exist when recognising abuse and neglect in this group of children. These can include:

- ▶ assumptions that indicators of possible abuse such as behaviour, mood and injury relate to the child's disability without further exploration;
- ▶ being more prone to peer group isolation than other children;
- ▶ the potential for children with SEN and disabilities being disproportionately impacted by behaviours such as bullying, without outwardly showing any signs; and
- ▶ communication barriers and difficulties in overcoming these barriers.

*Department for Education (2019)
Keeping children safe in education*

SLCN and risk of abuse

The link between safeguarding and communication difficulties also works in the opposite direction: children and young people who have complex needs are at greater risk of abuse and this is in part because of their communication difficulties. Studies suggest:

- Disabled children are more likely to experience abuse than their peers and that children with communication difficulties could be at greater risk of abuse than other disabled children.^{11, 12, 13}
- Some of the most vulnerable children are those whose impairments prevent them from communicating what has happened to them (and who may therefore be deliberately targeted by some perpetrators of abuse).¹⁴
- One study followed up five year olds with language disorder to adulthood and found them to be nearly three times more likely to report child sexual abuse than their peers.¹⁵

As a consequence, SLTs can provide a vital support for enabling alternative or augmentative communication (AAC) with abused children whose impairments prevent them from communicating verbally.¹⁶

Anti-social behaviour and involvement in gangs

Studies also indicate a strong link between SLCN and anti-social behaviour.¹⁷ Poor language ability in the early years increases the risk of antisocial behaviour at 14 years of age.¹⁸ As such, overcoming language difficulties in the early years should provide a key focus of prevention and early intervention strategies aimed at reducing the prevalence of antisocial behaviour. Speech and language therapy was the intervention most raised in the research for the Children's Commissioner for England's report, Keeping kids safe.¹⁹

[Speech and language therapy] has been the intervention most often raised with us in the course of this research.

**Children's Commissioner for England (2019)
Keeping kids safe: Improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation**

How SLTs support vulnerable children

- **SLTs play an important role in the detection of abuse and neglect:** Department for Education guidance, Keeping Children Safe in Education, highlights that communication difficulties can be an additional barrier to recognising abuse and neglect, and recommends that schools and college should consider extra support to address these challenges.²⁰ Where SLCN needs are believed to be an indicator of underlying concerns regarding the

safety and welfare of a child or young person, SLTs can establish communication strategies and can contact and work in partnership with relevant local agencies in assisting victims of abuse to disclose harm.

- **SLTs support other professionals who work with children and young people with SLCN:** This can often involve training social work teams in how to identify and support children with SLCN and helping police officers to determine whether a child's communication difficulties may have prevented him or her from reporting injuries inflicted through abuse.
- **SLTs help to develop the speech, language and communication skills of children and young people who have experienced abuse, and assist them in expressing their views and recounting their experiences:** This can involve helping them to express themselves in interviews and modifying the level of the questions being put to them.
- **SLTs can help to protect children and young people by contributing to risk assessments if they have SLCN.** This is in line with Government guidance, Working Together to Safeguard Children, which states that 'Special provision should be put in place to support dialogue with children who have communication difficulties.'²¹

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**HM Government (2018)
Working together to safeguard children**





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► For further information, please contact info@rcslt.org

► Also see our factsheets on **'Looked after children'** and **'Social, emotional and mental health'**

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