

Comprehension or receptive language difficulties

What are comprehension or receptive language difficulties?

Many children whose development of speech and language gives cause for concern have difficulties understanding what is said to them. That is, their understanding of spoken language falls below the level expected for their age. Difficulties with comprehension are sometimes known as “receptive language difficulties”. For these children it is important to consider listening and speaking skills separately, as the two will not be working together effectively. Unless and until they are, a child’s ability to learn will be seriously impaired, for understanding of language is fundamental to learning and to understanding the world.

Many skills are involved in language comprehension including:

- ability to hear. Some children have intermittent hearing loss which can affect understanding of language.
- ability to pay attention to speech sounds. Some children have difficulty in establishing and maintaining their attention in certain situations or the control of their attention may be less than expected of a child of their age.
- ability to distinguish between speech sounds
- ability to process language. Some children have difficulty in “taking in” language - it takes them longer to understand what is being said.
- memory for strings of speech sounds
- knowledge of word meanings
- knowledge of sentence structure
- ability to make sense of language in and out of context
- difficulties with sight

There can be difficulties with any one of these skills – this should be borne in mind during an assessment.

Identification of a child’s difficulties may not be straightforward as there are many ways in which a child can understand or even anticipate what is required of them without actually understanding what has been said. Gestures, facial expression, contextual clues can all supply vital information.

On the other hand, such children may show behaviour difficulties or apparent lack of interest. This is likely to be more so in situations which make explicit demands on understanding of spoken language.

Research has shown that difficulties in understanding are more widespread than was previously thought. Even children whose difficulties appear to be limited to expressive language may have subtle but significant receptive language difficulties.

Assessment

Because difficulties with understanding the spoken word are complex, assessment is not easy. Identification of impairments of hearing or sight is essential as these may influence the ability to take in information.

It is also crucial to assess a child’s ability to pay attention, for it may be this that is impaired rather than understanding. On the other hand, some children who do pay attention will not understand what is said to them. A child’s ability to process information may be impaired. Whether or not the giving of more time makes a difference should be assessed.

Because of all these factors, observation plays a critical part in any assessment, and it is important that the child is observed in a variety of contexts, with different people.

When a child whose first language is not English is being assessed particular care needs to be taken. Most tests are in English and do not give, therefore, an accurate picture because of cultural bias. Ideally the assessment should be done in the child’s mother tongue as well as English.

References

Bishop, D V M (1997), *Uncommon understanding: Development and disorders of language comprehension in children*. Hove: Psychology Press Ltd

Dockrell, J & Messer, D (1999), *Children's language and communication difficulties*. London: Cassell

Fleming, P, Miller, C & Wright, J (1997), *Speech and language difficulties in education*. Bicester: Winslow

Kersner, M & Wright, J A (Eds.) (1996), *How to manage communication problems in young children (2nd ed.)*. London: David Fulton

Latham, C & Miles, A (1997), *Assessing communication*. London: David Fulton

Martin, D, & Miller, C (1996), *Speech and language difficulties in the classroom*. London: David Fulton

Stackhouse, J & Wells, B (1997), *Children's speech and literacy difficulties: A psycholinguistic approach*. London: Whurr

Please note: Afasic does not hold copies of any referenced material. However, it may be obtained via academic libraries.

Other organisations which can help

I CAN
4 Dyer's Buildings
Holborn
London
EC1N 2QP
Tel: 0870 010 40 66

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)
2 White Hart Yard
London
SE1 1NX
Tel: 020 7378 1200

Written by Chris Donlan PhD, University College, London

© Afasic 2004

Afasic
1st Floor
20 Bowling Green Lane
London EC1R 0BD
Phone 020 7490 9410
Fax 020 7251 2834
Email info@afasic.org.uk
www.afasic.org.uk
Helpline 0845 3 55 55 77



Telephone
Helplines
Association

quality and confidence for callers to helplines

Registered charity no. 1045617