

Auditory sequential memory

Practical suggestions for parents compiled at Gap House School.

Many children with a history of late-speaking and early speech and language difficulties approach secondary school age with adequate levels of speech and understanding but residual problems which perhaps only they, their parents and teachers can detect. It is not uncommon for reading and writing difficulties to persist after speech problems have; alongside general difficulties with memory and recall.

By this stage, memory span is unfortunately unlikely to improve significantly. But if the children and those around them understand and attempt to work, much can be done to minimise the impact of a poor memory on day to day life.

Following instructions

- Say things more than once, and ask for instructions to be repeated back to you to make sure that the child has got them. This will also show you exactly how much s/he can retain at once, and make you aware of how much to expect.
- Minimise the number of key points that have to be remembered by the child.
- Sequence the items clearly and avoid any excess language which will only confuse the issue.
- Encourage the child to repeat the keypoints to him/herself while carrying out an instruction.
- Use visual imagery to aid recall. For example, if asking the child to buy washing-up liquid and toothpaste, feed the gerbils and get the washing in while you're out – make it clear there are four things to remember, then get them to imagine a scene where the gerbils are running up and down the washing line, squirting each other with Fairy Liquid and toothpaste!

This sounds plain daft, but the effects of visual imagery are very strong and have been proved to aid recall after considerable periods of time.

Mnemonics

Similarly, mnemonics can be used in a variety of ways:

- Telephone numbers: “31265” 3 – my age – my door number.
- A difficult spelling: “ought” – **Oswald Usually Grinds His Teeth.**

Useful Aids

- Visual reminders and memory joggers
- Digital watch with date
- Keeping a diary of ‘things to remember’ which serves as a home-school link. Children cannot rely on their listening memory for homework/invitations, etc. At first they will benefit from routinely going through the diary with an adult before they leave school/home. These checks may never become second nature but can be built into an established routine via a reminder system.
- Carrying a notebook and pencil to jot things down as they crop up. The ‘Reminder’ menu on most mobile phones serves the purpose well and has street credibility!
- The older child might benefit from a pocket dictaphone, particularly if handwriting is a problem.
- Encourage the child to keep a list of vital information handy – personal addresses, phone numbers, dates of birth. It’s amazing how one can go blank on these things just at the wrong moment.
- Use maps/diagrams/lists to explain things, rather than giving instructions verbally.
- Whenever possible, get children to make out lists themselves, either by writing or drawing items. Try to turn a blind-eye to spelling mistakes. What’s important is training children to be self-reliant, and of course the extra effort put in is a further aid to memory. The end product may look messy to you, but will be more meaningful to the child.

General

- Help the child to understand and accept his/her problem. Encourage him/her to say to others, "I'm not very good with words. Could you write it down for me please?"
- Make sure that everyone involved with the child is aware of their limitations and doesn't dismiss a poor memory as laziness or inattention (though obviously these factors can play their part too!).
- Be aware that it is always easier to remember arrangements/items when personally motivated. This is a natural facet of memory that ensures that individual priorities require the least effort. It is hardly surprising that children's and adults priorities rarely overlap!
- Encourage the child to ask questions if they are not sure of anything. Check that teaching staff are prepared for this: if the child has plucked up courage to ask for repetition or clarification, then it is extremely important that this effort is rewarded by a patient answer. Similarly, the child will need to understand that the teacher may be busy and cannot always drop everything to give an immediate answer. With will and understanding on both sides, a compromise can be reached.

Written by Maggie Johnson, Gap House School

Gap House School in Broadstairs is specifically for children with speech and language impairments. It is run by Kent Education Authority for children between 5 - 11 years.

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