

# Understanding language

In order to understand what is said to them children and young people need to be able to listen and remember what they hear (auditory memory). They also need to be able to understand concepts, meaning of words and how word order in a sentence can change the meaning. Understanding is sometimes referred to as receptive language or verbal comprehension.

Children and young people who have difficulty understanding language may:

- Find it hard to listen
- Not reply or respond to the person who is speaking
- Look blank when spoken to
- Give inappropriate answers/ responses to questions or in conversations
- Watch carefully to see what other children are doing and copy them
- Be slow to start a task, looking to an adult for support
- Show poor or inappropriate behaviour, e.g. distracting others, acting the fool, being aggressive towards other children
- Read with little understanding of what they have read.
- Have difficulty making and keeping friends
- Be isolated, alone or withdrawn

## Everyday strategies

- Make sure you have the child/young person's attention before you speak to them. It may help to use their name at the beginning of the sentence to make sure they are listening
- Make sure you keep your language as simple as possible. Keep sentences short, break up instructions and information into small steps
- When you use non-literal language, e.g. sarcasm, idioms, make sure you explain the meaning clearly
- Where possible support what you say with visual clues. This can be photos, symbols, pictures, signs/gestures etc. Older children may find concept maps, vocabulary books or mind maps helpful
- Always check that the child/young person has understood. You can do this by asking them to tell you what they need to do
- Teach active listening skills
- Pre-teach new vocabulary so the child/young person has an understanding of the words before they are introduced. Again use visual support to support their learning.
- Reinforce key concepts and understanding by repeating frequently in different ways.
- Make sure the work you are asking the child /young person to do is at a level they can understand.

# Vocabulary

Children need to understand ideas and words before they can use them.

## **Vocabulary includes:**

- Names for objects (nouns) e.g. dog, tree, table, apple.
- Action words (verbs) e.g. drink, eat, walk, push.
- Concepts:
  - Colours - red, blue, green...
  - Directions - through, around...
  - Quantities - few, many...
  - Time Sequences - first, last, next...
  - Time - late, early...
  - Shapes - round, square...
  - Size - big, little...
  - Feelings - happy, sad...
  - Textures - rough, smooth...
  - Positions - behind, in, on, under, top, bottom...

When a child/young person has difficulty understanding and using words they may:

- Over use non specific words, such as, it, thing, there
- Point or use gesture a lot
- Have difficulty naming pictures or objects that they are familiar with
- Only talk about a few topics.
- Use a lot of inappropriate words, mispronounced words or repetitions in their speech
- Have difficulty remembering new vocabulary
- Talk well but fail to make their meaning clear to the listener

## **Everyday strategies**

- Provide the child/young person with new experiences, providing the vocabulary to go with them
- Display key vocabulary in the classroom using a Total Communication Approach
- Encourage the use of gesture, pointing, drawing when they are unable to remember the word they need
- Make a personal vocabulary book to be used in the classroom as well as for practice at home. This can be divided into topic areas.
- Always recap on new vocabulary at the end of lessons and then revise it at regular intervals
- Pre-teach new vocabulary so the child / young person has an understanding of the words before they are introduced
- When teaching vocabulary use the following:
  - Simple definitions
  - The name of the category, e.g. animals, transport
  - Link new words to those the child already knows, tying it in with their life experiences
  - Talk about similarities and differences, e.g. how are an apple and a banana the same/different?
  - Use spot the odd word out games / activities
  - Use mind maps
  - Link to how the word sounds, number of syllables, starting sound, rhymes etc.
  - Practice putting the word in a sentence using a meaningful context