

## **Fosterline Wales Factsheet: Speech, Language and Communication Needs**

### **Introduction**

Communication is fundamental to our everyday lives, but some children struggle to develop communication skills. It is thought that many children who are looked after in the care system may have unidentified communication needs.

It is important that foster carers are aware that the children and young people in their care may have underlying and undetected communication difficulties, in addition to their emotional needs. Foster carers are best placed and have an importance role in supporting and intervening early to help young children develop language.

Foster carers need to work hand-in-hand with health and school professionals to identify and address delays early, rather than waiting to see if they subside.

This factsheet will help you be aware of the signs to look out for and offers a few simple strategies that can be used to support the child in your care.

### **About the issue**

#### **What is communication?**

At the heart of communication is language. Human language is a complex multi-layered skill that uses words which are combined into sentences to convey meaning in conversations and stories. The listening and understanding part of this two-way process is fundamentally important.

Language helps children to organise, ask questions, problem-solve, make friends, collaborate, reflect on their feelings and resolve conflict.

We may understand and use language in many different ways for example: by talking, signing, writing or using symbols. We can communicate face to face, in a group, by telephone, through a report, on a post-it note or via a text message or e-mail.

#### **The development of language and communication**

Language and communication skills typically develop from birth in the context of early attachment relationships and continue to develop into adolescence.

There are strong links between language and emotional development. Children who are securely attached have better language skills and good language skills help develop and maintain attachment, with more words for emotional terms and the development of narrative (storytelling) skills.

Children and young people with communication needs may be less likely to join in conversations and have fewer positive interactions. They may find it difficult to make and maintain friendships, be unable to share their feelings, finding it difficult to resolve problems and negotiate.

Communication problems are associated with anxiety and frustration. Children with unsuspected language disorders have been found more likely to show oppositional behaviour, hyperactivity and aggression.

### **What causes speech, language and communication difficulties?**

Language and communication difficulties that are typical of children who are looked after include:

- social communication skills
- naming and managing emotions (including self-control)
- self-awareness
- vocabulary
- concepts related to time
- working memory
- the ability to retain, process, recall and sequence information<sup>5</sup>.

It's not always clear what causes speech, language and communication difficulties but physical, developmental and/or environmental factors may be identified and are likely to interact.

Speech, language and communication difficulties can be linked to a delay in a child's general development. This may be associated with their environment. The majority of children in care experience conditions of poverty and social disadvantage.

Any attachment difficulties and any previous abuse, neglect and subsequent trauma may also have had an impact on the communication skill of a child who is looked after.

However, speech, language and communication difficulties may also be the result of developmental language disorder (previously termed specific language impairment) or associated with other conditions such as hearing loss, autism or learning difficulties.

### **Why do communication difficulties go undetected?**

- *Communication difficulties may be subtle and change over time.*  
Children and young people who have speech that is unclear are relatively easy to spot. However, children and young people who speak clearly but find it difficult to understand what others say and/or find it difficult to use words and sentences to express themselves, may be less easy to identify.
- *Communication difficulties may be viewed as behaviour problems.*
  - Children who may appear to not listen or pay attention (because the language used is too complex).
  - Children who don't do as they are told (because they don't understand or can't remember what they have been told to do).
  - Children who take a long time to answer or don't explain why they did something (because they can't think of the right words, and easily construct sentences or narratives).
  - Children who interrupt or speak in an inappropriate way (because they're not good at 'reading' social situations or using appropriate social communication skills)
- *Behaviour difficulties may be more obvious than communication problems.*  
Interventions for behaviour may be prioritise.. However, children with underlying communication difficulties may not be able to benefit from the intervention if support is offered through talking. Addressing the underlying communication needs may support access to supportive interventions.

### **Identifying and supporting speech, language and communication**

However, even though children entering foster care are at high risk for having developmental problems, not all children will have a developmental or behavioral challenge. Some children in foster care are meeting all their developmental milestones on time.

Other children may have only mild difficulties. These mild problems may improve by simply being placed in a sensitive, caring, and developmentally stimulating environment. As a result, there is a lot a foster carer can do help a child in foster care develop their full potential.

It is important to be aware of these speech, language and communication milestones. Share any concerns that you may have about a child or young person's speech, language or communication skills. For foster carers, the delegated responsibility is in respect of day-to-day care but the part 6 care and support plan should provide clearer guidance. The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (Wales) Regulations 2015 require that the placement plan sets out any circumstances in which the foster carer must obtain the prior approval of the local authority or a parent before making decisions in relation to the child or the child's care and support. Foster carers need to be clear about taking any action that has not been agreed in their delegated authority agreement and in the care and support plan.

Problems in learning to speak and understand language occur far more frequently among babies and toddlers in foster care than among others, researchers have found. But if the child gets help while they are still very young, there is a good probability that can overcome their challenges.

Prompt referral to a speech and language therapist and appropriate assessment and support is critical and is likely to improve outcomes for the child or young person. Speech and language therapy may help looked after children to express their views, wishes and feelings. It also helps those supporting children to communicate effectively with them.

### **Practical tips for foster carers**

- Create a listening friendly environment in your home.
- Talk to the child/young person's speech and language therapist about appropriate strategies that you can try at home.
- Look at the online resources that are available for further information and support. Visit <http://www.afasicymru.org.uk/>, [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk), [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk) and <http://www.rcslt.org/>
- Attend speech and language awareness training to develop your SLCN skills.

### **Creating a listening friendly environment:**

- Reduce background noise and minimise distractions when you are having a conversation. Turn off the TV, for example.
- Model good listening! Give your undivided attention.
- Modify the way that you speak to the child or young person:
  - focus attention by using the child's name before giving an instruction
  - match your instructions to the child's language age (not chronological age)
  - use short, simple sentences and slow down your speech slightly
  - reduce the number of questions that you ask.
- Provide visual support when you are talking. Use body language, pointing, demonstration, symbols and pictures.
- Allow time. Pause for between five to ten seconds between sentences to help your foster child take in and work out what you are saying.

- Check understanding. Avoid asking: 'Did you understand?' as the child or young person may just say: 'Yes!' even if they didn't understand. Instead observe if the child/young person has understood your instruction. For an older child or young person ask if they can explain to you what you have said in their own words?
- Praise good listening!

## References

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Cross, M. (2011) *Children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties and Communication Problems. There is always a reason*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London.

## How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up to date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

### Advice

Fosterline Wales

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday. If you call outside this time please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us or write to us at:

[Fosterlinewales@fostering.net](mailto:Fosterlinewales@fostering.net)

The Fostering Network Wales

1 Caspian Point, Pierhead Street

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### Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together [thefosteringnetwork.org.uk](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk)

### Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs. For more information, contact our Learning and Development Manager, Sarah Mobedji at

<http://sarah.mobedji@fostering.net>.

## **About The Fostering Network**

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

### **Contact us**

To find out more about our work in Wales, please contact:

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