

# Securing good outcomes and advocating for children and young people with speech and language challenges

## About the Alliance

The Speech, Language and Communication Alliance has been formed to ensure that the UK Governments, and national and local policymakers are focused on the issue of speech, language and communication, and the potential impact of these on all babies, children and young people when developing or reviewing policy, legislation and services.

Working as an Alliance, we aim to have significant impact on important policy issues for children and young people with speech, language and communication challenges. We work with all stakeholders and decision makers, speaking with one sector voice, to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people.

As an Alliance we are committed to sharing good practice in supporting children's speech, language and communication skills and in working with children with speech and language challenges and their families.

## What we are calling for:

As a group of organisations, using our collective expertise and experience working with and supporting babies, children and young people, as well as their families; we have identified two key areas which require urgent attention and action from decision makers. To improve outcomes and opportunities for children across the UK we must work to improve **the identification of children with speech, language and communication challenges and training for the children's workforce in how to help them.**

We know there are problems spotting and helping children who struggle with talking and understanding words. Since the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, the problem has got even worse. Currently, 1.9 million children in the UK (that's 1 in 5) are struggling with talking and understanding words. The government has so far failed to do enough and as a result the numbers are going up and up every year.

A child with speech and language challenges is at risk of:

- **More mental health problems:** 81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have significant speech and language challenges, often unidentified and 45% of young people referred for mental health services
- **Worse literacy and numeracy:** 6x more likely to be behind in English, 11x more likely to be behind in Maths at 11 years with only 15% gaining a 9-5 pass at GCSE in English and Maths.
- **Increased risk of offending:** At least 60% of young offenders have language difficulties.
- **Less secure employment:** 2x more likely to experience insecure employment as adults.

## Identification

A workforce properly equipped to identify difficulties with talking and understanding words early, with resources at their disposal to intervene can prevent children and young

people's futures being jeopardised. The earlier the identification, the better the outcome for the child.

The Alliance recommends that the Government commissions the development of a measuring and tracking tool to enable Primary classroom teachers to track children's progress with spoken language at each Key Stage. The tool would be similar in format to those available for teachers to track literacy and numeracy progress but would be freely available and anonymised data would be collected nationally. This would help national and local Government, Ofsted, Integrated Care Boards and other bodies to understand the prevalence of difficulties with speech and language, to plan the right provision of support and to evaluate the success of different interventions. We have an example of how this might work in Wales, where the devolved government has commissioned the Wales SLC Identification, Intervention and Evaluation Package.

The outcomes of developing such a measure for schools would be:

- Identifying needs early would mean children get the support they need sooner, preventing more costly support later. Early language as measured by the EYFS profile can be predictive of scores in reading, writing and maths at the end of KS1 and into Year 3. Children who attained below the expected levels in reading at the end of KS1 typically had poor scores in Communication, Language and Literacy at the end of Reception<sup>2</sup>.
- Appropriate support for speech and language challenges can lead to improved academic outcomes for children, particularly in reading and maths
- Children's progress is tracked - schools can measure the effectiveness of interventions put in place
- Access to the data would allow mapping of need at a regional and national level. This would support planning of appropriate resources to meet the needs of children.

### Training and workforce

Children who struggle with talking and understanding words form the biggest group of children with a special educational need or disability in Primary School. Almost 300,000 children and young people were getting extra help in school because of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in 2020/21. Yet, in a YouGov survey of teachers that was commissioned in 2023, 64% said they had 'not very much' or 'not any' training in this area as part of Initial Teacher Training, 67% said the same of the training they had had in the early stages of their career and 68% said the same of ongoing training. Given how fundamental children's speech and language development is to unlock all learning, it is vital that every teacher is equipped to identify difficulties in this area, to know how to support children who are struggling and to know where to refer children who may need more specialist help.

To support children's learning, it is essential that teachers know about speech and language challenges, how to raise concerns and what strategies to use.

Training at Initial Teach Training (ITT), Early Career Framework and Continued Professional Development (CPD) levels should therefore include:

- How to use identification tools for speech and language challenges including the proposed new primary school tool outlined above
- Use of low cost group interventions in schools
- Teaching strategies to support children with longer-term speech and language challenges, particularly the 1 million children with (likely undiagnosed) Developmental Language Disorder.

Training and support for teachers and school leaders to address difficulties with talking and understanding words can also be enhanced through the National Professional Qualifications system (NPQs). The Leading Literacy NPQ has some content on Developing Language, and we would like to see this expanded and adapted for other NPQs such as the Executive Leadership NPQ, the Early Years Leadership NPQ, SENCo NPQ, and the Leading Behaviour and Culture NPQ.

