

The Communication Chain

In this download you can find out more about the key skills needed for listening, understanding and talking as represented on the communication chain. Please note, the information below does not detail the development of these skills. For additional information and advice, please get in touch with the [Afasic Helpline](#).

If you are concerned about any of the areas of the communication chain in relation to your child, please seek advice from your Health Visitor, GP or a qualified speech and language therapist.

Taking information in

Look

Looking at the speaker is important because it helps us to focus our attention and gives us information about what is being communicated and how it is being communicated.

Interpret facial expression, tone of voice and body language

Looking helps us to notice and interpret the parts of communication that does not include words or talking, such as, facial expression, gestures, body language and tone of voice. This extra information is very useful and helps us understand and respond appropriately.

Some children are poor at understanding what others say, but watch what goes on and are good at getting things right from the visual clues in a situation. If these children over-rely on the visual clues in a situation, their understanding may be over-estimated.

Listen/hear

Hearing is the ability to detect and analyse sound and make sense of information that enters the ear. The listener needs to concentrate on the speaker and focus on what is being said and filter out other sounds and distractions. Listening is a skill that we have to learn.

Children may find it difficult to listen in a busy or noisy environment. It may be difficult to filter out distractions and a child may find it hard to keep listening for long enough and may 'switch off' their listening. Hearing should routinely be checked, particularly if a child is experiencing difficulties with listening, understanding and talking. Talk to your Health Visitor or GP if you are concerned about your child's hearing.

Remember

This refers to the short-term storage of the incoming message while it is being analysed and the links to existing knowledge stored in the long term memory that help with understanding.

If a message is too long, information may be lost as the child cannot 'hold on' to it for long enough to analyse it. If a child has difficulties linking the message to information learnt previously, he/she may find it difficult to make connections and remember how to do things.

Understand words

This refers to the understanding of the vocabulary used. Difficulties in this area can affect understanding of spoken and written information.

Understand sentences

This refers to the understanding of combinations of words, structured into sentences by the grammar used. The grammar is the rules that help us to structure and combine words to convey meaning. This could include the order of the words used and the parts of words used. For example: "I'll phone Dave" or "I phoned Dave" or Dave received a phone call from me."

Children with difficulties in this area may find it confusing if others say long sentences, because they can't follow what is being said.

Understand the meaning

This includes words, sentences and information from the situation. The emphasis is on what is meant, rather than just what is stated. It includes non-literal expressions eg: "'hold on" to mean 'stop', "hit the roof" to mean furious, and sarcasm eg: "I'm fine!" said with a cross face.

Have ideas

Having ideas of what to communicate prepares the way to convey an appropriate message, and includes understanding what the listener needs to know and organising information effectively.

Some children find it difficult to generate ideas and may copy others during play or classroom activities.

Talking and responding

Decide what to say

It's important to select and organise what to communicate so that the message is easy to follow.

Choose words

This refers to thinking of and 'finding' the correct word from the store of words in your memory.

Difficulties with choosing words despite understanding them, may mean that a child has an idea but might not be able to express it, instead perhaps using a made up word or non-specific words eg: "I like eating that thing".

Put words together

This refers to linking words together to form increasingly longer utterances that sound more grown up and grammatical. This involves using word order, word endings and combining words in a more complex way.

Difficulties in this area can make a child sound muddled and disorganised so their talking is difficult to follow.

Communicate and join in a conversation appropriately

Saying the right thing in the right way, at the right time and managing or repairing a conversation involves many complex sets of skills that develop over time. It includes how we speak to others, for example: a child needs to learn that the way he/she speaks to a friend is different to how they might speak to a head teacher. Finding this area difficult may lead to others thinking that a child is being rude, the child experiencing difficulties with joining in and making friends or avoiding talking to others.

Select speech sounds to assemble into words

The right sounds that make up a word need to be selected and put in the right order then these messages sent from the brain to the mouth.

Articulate sounds

Instructions from the brain are received and the muscles and parts of the mouth move with accuracy and speed to produce clear speech.

Speak smoothly or fluently

A speaker needs to speak as clearly as possible with speech flowing forwards without too many stops in the middle of sentences, breaking up the flow of words.

Self monitoring

This refers to a subconscious checking system that continuously checks the appropriateness of what and how something is being said, prompting the speaker to correct him/herself when necessary.

A child may find it difficult to monitor his/her talking and not realise if someone hasn't understood or perhaps isn't aware of not understanding what others say and so not ask for help.

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References

*McLachlan & Elks, 2012, Language Builders. Published by ELKLAN
The SLI Handbook*