

How to help children with comprehension difficulties in primary school

Children with difficulties understanding language may:

- not follow instructions correctly
- appear to ignore you
- repeat all / parts of questions and instructions rather than responding to them
- repeat words or phrases rather than generating their own
- follow the classroom routine by watching what other children are doing
- find activities which rely on listening to language difficult to cope with
- have good mechanical reading but lack true understanding e., can read a book by rote but cannot answer questions about what they have read
- have difficulty remembering information
- use strategies to cover up difficulties understanding eg, changing the subject or watching the speaker's face to guess the answer

Prepare environment

- decrease all environmental noises and distractions as much as possible
- consider where positioning children to provide optimum support, eg, are they close to the whiteboard? And you? Are they away from distractions?

Cue them in

Always gain the child's attention before speaking to them by

- gaining eye contact – make sure you are looking at each other so the child can get extra information from your face
- saying their name (verbal prompt)
- touching their arm (physical prompt)

Total communication

Try to use any additional cues you can to help children understand, including:

- non-verbal cues – actions, pointing, gestures, facial expressions
- visual cues – diagrams, pictures, photos, symbols, objects
- gestures/signing
- write key parts of the lesson in brief on the whiteboard

Structure

- use different coloured pens and visually orientated tools eg, spider diagrams to help the child visualise, understand and remember things more thoroughly
- be clear about your expectations and tell the child exactly what you want them to do
- if possible demonstrate what you want the child to do
- visual timetables can be helpful to structure the day
- try and incorporate learning breaks into lesson

Say less

- be aware of the child's level of understanding
- simplify what you are saying – where possible keep instructions short and clear
- where you need to give longer instructions avoid overloading by breaking them down into simpler steps, keeping the order of instructions the same as the order of mention
- OR try to do one thing at a time
- say things in a straightforward way eg, "X, come and line up" rather than "I'm still waiting for someone" as some children will find inferring or deducing meaning very difficult
- children may interpret your language literally so be aware of using sayings such as 'Jump to it'
- explain and reinforce vocabulary

Go slow

- go slow but be natural – they will need longer to process information
- give the child plenty of time to understand by inserting pauses

Stress

- emphasise and repeat important words or information
- give the child enough time to understand
- relate new concepts to child's own experience before trying to generalise
- review past information before you introduce new information

Monitor

- check to see if the child has understood – look at their expression and ask them to say what they are going to do
- be prepared to repeat what you have said and/or change it
- build on whatever they have understood
- where possible encourage the child to monitor whether they are understanding a lesson and seek appropriate clarification eg, "Can you tell me again?", "I don't know what..... means?" or using non verbal signals such as using a traffic light system on the table
- ensure plenty of opportunities for small group discussion and work

Remember that it is important to consider how we communicate and to adapt our language and methods of delivery in lessons to enable students with speech, language and communication difficulties to fully participate. Over time you will learn which specific strategies are most effective for each individual child.

For further advice and information, please contact:
Speech and Language Therapy on 0151 514 2334.

If you would like this information in another format, please contact the Your Experience Team on freephone 0800 694 5530. Alternatively you can email wcnt.yourexp@nhs.net

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July 2019 V2