

Integrated Therapeutic Curriculum
Deep Dive

Language and Communication

Intent

Being able to communicate with others is the foundation from which progress in all other areas of development can be built. It is central to how we understand ourselves, have our needs met, engage in social interactions and access the cultures we live in.

In a 2020 report, Public Health England (PHE) identified 81% of children with 'emotional and behavioural disorders' as having unidentified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). This matters in both the immediate and longer term: children with vocabulary difficulties at age 5 are 3 times more likely to have mental health problems in adulthood and twice as likely to be unemployed when they reach adulthood (PHE). As a specialist autism setting supporting pupils with complex SEMH needs, we recognise that most of our pupils present as having some level of SLCN.

Given this context, the importance of supporting speech and language development is essential to our bespoke curriculum so that we maximise the progress of our pupils with autism, ADHD, and developmental language disorder. We recognise that taking a graduated approach is considered best practice, and have drawn on both the AET Progression Framework and the RCSLT five good communication standards for supporting pupils with SEMH when designing our Language and Communication curriculum strand.

Through this, we aim to support pupils to:

- Develop their attention control for learning and interaction.
- Develop comprehension of verbal and non-verbal communication to promote integration across settings.
- Develop sufficient language to support cognitive skills for regulation and building sense of self.
- Be able to express their wants, needs, feelings and opinions in appropriate and recognisable ways.
- Develop social cognition in order to reduce anxiety, be empowered to make informed social decisions, and build meaningful and safe relationships.
- Achieve a level of language and communication proficiency to enable access to the next stage of their education

We aim to enable families/carers to understand their child's communication needs, providing supportive strategies and techniques to generalise new skills from school to home so that progress can continue across settings.

Implementation

Our Language and Communication curriculum consists of five strands:

Attending and interacting – this strand focusses on a pupil’s progression from internally driven desires and processes, through to joint attention with adults and peers, resulting in integrated divided attention. Pupils at an early stage of language and communication development are supported through Intensive Interaction and Attention Autism approaches to promote increased joint attention. This strand support pupils through the Developmental Stages of Attention Control (Cooper et al., 1978)

Language development – this strand is based on the pupil’s pathway and levels of language acquisition. We recognise that children can develop language via one of two routes:

- Analytical Language Acquisition - where words are learned first and then gradually combined to form increasingly more complex sentences.
- Gestalt Language Acquisition - where children initially process and store language as whole chunks, and use these to communicate (delayed echolalia). These chunks are then gradually broken down and combined with other chunks to form functional sentences/ phrases. Eventually children may get to the stage where single words are ‘released’ and recombined to form novel sentences.

The work we do to help develop language and communication skills is dependent upon each pupil’s individual communication profile. We take a functional approach to ensuring that progress will positively impact social integration and is of practical utility to the pupil.

Social cognition - Social thinking is the process by which we interpret the thoughts, beliefs, intentions, emotions, knowledge and actions of another person along with the context of the situation to understand that person’s experience. If we are engaging or sharing space with another person, we use this information to determine how to respond to affect the thoughts that person has about us to achieve our social goals. Pupils are taught social concepts that enable them to understand others’ intentions and unwritten social rules. This promotes individual choice; each pupil is enabled to decide how to respond to a given social situation based on knowledge of how others may react.

Collaborative play – drawing on the Socially Thinking programme (2022), this strand promotes the ability to use language and communication skills to engage in shared, collaborative play. Pupils are supported to develop a group plan, engage in regulated and appropriate problem solving and negotiation, with the aim of incorporate the social groups’ ideas into shared play.

Total communication – the school environment ensures that pupils are supported to understand communication and express themselves using the best methods for their stage of development. Strategies used include, and are not limited to, Signed Supported English, visual symbols, written communication, drawings, Comic Strip Conversations and a communication visuals system.

Impact

Teachers, therapists and senior leaders directly monitor and evaluate the impact of our curriculum and all pupils' language and communication progress throughout the academic year via our curriculum tool, SOLAR. Our language and communication strand is intentionally designed to meet pupils' communication and interaction outcomes on their EHCPs and Individual Therapeutic Education Plans (ITEPs).

Our approach to therapy follows a graduated 'all', 'group', and 'individual' model – ranging from class-based support through to individual therapy work with the school's therapist. By incorporating therapy centrally into our curriculum, we are able to ensure time and space for therapy support is woven throughout the school day. The level of therapy support is decided on an individual pupil basis through formal and informal assessments and ongoing dialogue with the team around the child.

We recognise through our Person-Centred Neurodivergence Affirming Behaviour Policy that all behaviour is a form of communication. Through accessing our integrated curriculum, pupils are taught how use a variety of tools to express their communication needs. In practice, this means that we see a significant reduction in negative behaviour incidents over time. Because pupils are equipped to communicate in multiple ways, e.g. use of tailored visuals, signing, improved sound formation, we see marked improvements in emotional regulation and self-help strategies. These are the building blocks of good mental health and wellbeing.

Our curriculum fosters increased independence. Pupils gain success in communicating for themselves; not only does this improve their self-esteem, but encourages pupils to recognise their own agency and strategies to communicate with the world around them. Language and communication development is essential to developing a secure sense of self – a cornerstone of all further development.

Our pupils gain the language to name their emotions. This not only supports improved emotional regulation, but positively impacts on social relations inside and outside of school. Through their improved language and communication skills, we support our pupils to express fears, concerns, anxieties and expect to have these acknowledged – this makes our curriculum a vital feature of our efforts to safeguard our pupils. Our curriculum has enabled some of our most vulnerable pupils to gain access to much needed help and support from external agencies.

Fundamentally, our language and communication curriculum fosters choice. We value and celebrate neurodiversity, so equipping our pupils with the tools and skills to decide, for themselves, how to navigate the social world is essential.

References

Autism Education Trust (2019) *Progression Framework: Accompanying Documents*. Available at: <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources/progression-framework> (Accessed: 20/07/2022)

Cooper, J., Moodley, M., Reynell, J. (1979) *The Developmental Language Programme. Results from a Five Year Study*. British Journal of Disorders of Communication, 14:1, 57-69, DOI: 10.3109/13682827909011346

Social Thinking (2022) *Social Thinking Methodology*. Available at: <https://www.socialthinking.com/social-thinking-methodology> (Accessed 10/05/2022)

Public Health England (2020) *Best start in speech, language and communication: Guidance to support local commissioners and service leads*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/931310/BSSLC_Guidance.pdf (Accessed: 01/09/2022)

RCSLT (2019) *Supporting children and young people with SEMH: the five good communication standards*. Available at: <https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/RCSLT-supporting-SEMH-5-good-communication-standards.pdf> (Accessed: 6/7/2022)

Document version: 3.0
Date reviewed: January 2025
Date of next review: January 2026
Owner: SLT / Speech and Language Therapist