



Integrated Therapeutic Curriculum
Deep Dive

Language and Communication

Intent

Being able to communicate with others is a fundamental human capability: it enables pupils to share their needs, preferences and identity, build relationships, and participate meaningfully in their community. Communication supports every area of development. It is central to how pupils make sense of themselves, regulate with others, and access the cultures and environments around them.

In a 2020 report, Public Health England (PHE, 2020) identified that 81% of children with 'emotional and behavioural disorders' had unidentified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). This has significant implications across childhood and into adulthood. Children with vocabulary difficulties at age 5 are three times more likely to experience poor mental health and twice as likely to be unemployed in adulthood (PHE, 2020). National concern about this trend underpins recent investment in the Early Language Support for Every Child programme (DfE, 2025).

As a specialist autism setting supporting pupils with complex SEMH needs, we recognise that most of our pupils present with some level of SLCN. Within our Capabilities Curriculum, communication is understood not only as a skill but as an expression of autonomy, emotional wellbeing, affiliation and participation. This shapes the intent of our Language and Communication strand.

In line with best practice, we take a graduated approach and draw on the RCSLT *Five Good Communication Standards* to inform the design of our curriculum and therapeutic provision.

Through this, we aim to support pupils to:

- Build attention control for learning, interaction and shared experiences.
- Develop comprehension of verbal and non-verbal communication to support integration across contexts.
- Develop language that supports cognitive growth, self-regulation and an emerging sense of identity.
- Express wants, needs, feelings and opinions in ways that are recognised, purposeful and safe.
- Develop social cognition so that they can reduce anxiety, understand social situations, and make informed decisions that support autonomy and safe relationships.
- Achieve communication proficiency that enables meaningful access to the next stage of their education.

We aim to work in partnership with families and carers so that they understand their child's communication profile and feel confident using strategies that support generalisation of skills across settings. This shared approach strengthens pupils' capability for voice, belonging and participation beyond the classroom.

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 (Firth et al., 2010) 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 (Blanc et al., 2023).

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.

We support our Gestalt Language Processor (GLP) pupils at Mountfield Heath school via the following protocol:

1. Parental consultation
2. Class team, SaLT team and parents maintain a Gestalt log.
3. The Speech and Language Therapist completes an assessment by:
 - Collecting a language sample
 - Analysing the sample for level and functions of communication
4. Identify and agree the Gestalts to be offered/ targets.
5. Ongoing updates of Gestalt log.
6. Language sample to be taken and analysed every term to measure progress.

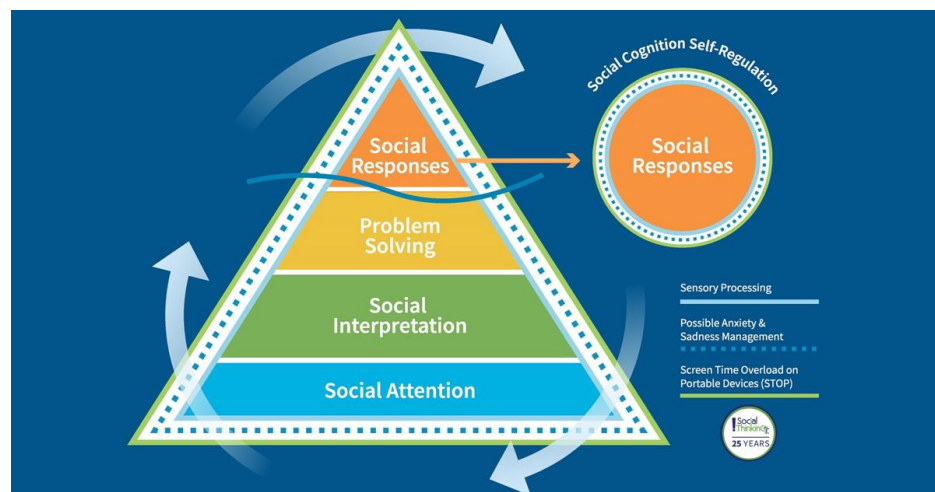
Whilst the evidence base for use of GLP approaches is not yet well understood in research (Bryant et al., 2024), the protocol above ensures that the school's practice is focused on measurable outcomes for our pupils.

Through child-led therapy and close home-school working, we help develop the range of functions that pupils use their Gestalt language for:

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|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Commenting | • Joint action routines |
| • To seek help | • Sensory motor experiences |
| • Transitions | • New situations |
| • Protests | • Self-advocacy |
| • Initiating play/ interactions | • reoccurrence |
| • Shared joy | |

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.

We support pupils' social cognition development in a neuro-affirming and choice-based way by targeting intervention and teaching at each level of the Social Competency Model (Garcia Winner and Crooke, 2023) individualized by each pupil's starting point. This takes place through weekly therapy-led interventions and generalized throughout the wider school curriculum and practices.



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.

Inclusive (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. We take a multi-modal approach that includes, but are not limited to, Signed Supported English, visual symbols, written communication, drawings, Comic Strip Conversations and a communication visuals system.

It is a human right to have access to different modes of communication, as this facilitates connection with others which is a core principle throughout both OFG's AAD Neurodiversity and TIP strategies. The multi-modal approach is holistic and values all forms of communication. The approach involves using, accepting, respecting and supporting all forms of communication in all situations. Studies evidence that when individuals have access to multiple modes of communication it reduces communication breakdowns.

We recognise there is a need for staff to understand the different modes of communication, how to adapt their communication style to meet the needs of every pupil, how to use visual resources / support tools, and how to apply approaches and strategies. In short, we adapt both the environment and the way we communicate with pupils to promote accessibility for all.

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 Evidence for Learning and clinical notes/reporting. 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, clinical observations, and ongoing dialogue with the team around the child, and close working with families and external agencies.

We recognise through our Person-Centred Neurodiversity 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 skills to communicate 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 and autonomy. 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 to their flourishing.

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