

Speech & language
therapy

Comprehension or receptive language difficulties

What are comprehension or receptive language difficulties?

Many children whose development of speech and language gives cause for concern have difficulties understanding what is said to them. That is, their understanding of spoken language falls below the level expected for their age. Difficulties with comprehension are sometimes known as 'receptive language difficulties'. For these children it is important to consider listening and speaking skills separately, as the two will not be working together effectively. Until they are, a child's ability to learn will be seriously impaired, for understanding of language is fundamental to learning and to understanding the world.

Many skills are involved in language comprehension including:

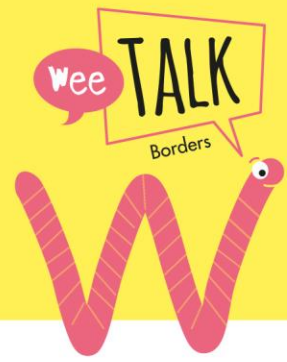
- Ability to hear. Some children have intermittent hearing loss which can affect understanding of language.
- Ability to pay attention to speech sounds. Some children have difficulty in establishing and maintaining their attention in certain situations or the control of their attention may be less than expected of a child their age.
- Ability to distinguish between speech sounds.
- Ability to process language. Some children have difficulty in 'taking in' language – it takes them longer to understand what is being said.
- Memory for number of words used.
- Knowledge of word meanings.
- Knowledge of sentence structure (grammar)
- Ability to make sense of language in and out of context.
- Difficulties with sight.

There can be difficulties with any one of these skills – this should be borne in mind during an assessment.

Identification of a child's difficulties may not be straightforward as there are many ways in which a child can understand or even anticipate what is required of them without actually understanding what has been said. In fact, what they may be responding to is your **tone of voice**, your **non-verbal** cues (gestures, points etc) or just the familiar routine. That is they may understand what they **see** more than what you **say**.

To test your child's level of understanding, he/she must be able to do what you ask when you give **no clues** and when there is a **choice of possibilities** available. For example, if I hold out a child's coat and say "put on your coat" he/she needs to only understand my **actions** to be able to follow my request. If however, his/her coat and shoes were next to each other nearby and I did not approach them myself but said "put on your coat" then it would test if they understood the word "coat" more accurately.

Do you give overly helpful clues when you ask your child to do something? Of course this is actually a helpful thing to do when we are **teaching** but not when **testing**.



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On the other hand, such children may show behaviour difficulties or apparent lack of interest. This is likely to be more so in situations which make explicit demands on understanding of spoken language.

Research has shown that difficulties in understanding are more widespread than was previously thought. Even children whose difficulties appear to be limited to expressive language may have subtle but significant receptive language difficulties.

Recognising a child with problems of comprehension

The child may:

- Not do as he/she is told
- Be very active
- Take significant time completing tasks and not ask for help
- Be quiet or withdrawn
- Have poor attention skills
- Rely on situations/routine/gesture/watching others, i.e. non verbal cues to know what to do
- Copy what others do
- Not be aware or make sense of what is going on around him/her
- Echo what has been said to him/her
- Find it hard to retain new vocabulary and be rigid in the use of existing vocabulary
- Give inappropriate answers or not answer at all
- Be very verbal, but the actual information he/she says may be limited and/or irrelevant
- Have difficulty generalising information and concepts
- Have sequencing difficulties resulting in organisation problems.

For more information on the Speech and Language Therapy Service (including how to request support from us) please see: <http://www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/slt>

[Check out our Wee Talk Borders Facebook page or you can call us on 01896 826710](#)