Are we focusing too much on the behaviour of children when we should be looking at intervention aimed at supporting language and communication ability?

Educational psychologist Dr Zoe Owen discusses the links between language ability and unwanted behaviour – and possible interventions

"Speech, language and communication are crucial to our children at all stages of development. In early intervention, there are multiple risks which may become evidenced over a period of years – of low literacy attainment, of behavioural problems, of emotional and personal development problems, of poor career and employment prospects, of challenges to mental health and in some cases, of a descent into criminality."

The Bercow Report: A multi-agency service for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (Department for Children and Families, 2008).

The links between undervdeveloped speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and negative life outcomes are well-documented and indeed provided the impetus for the governmental review of services for children with SLCN. This led people with speech, language and communication needs to the Bercow Report.

Locally, there is a concern related to outcomes for children with identified SLCN, but more recently the focus has been on the link between unwanted behaviour in various settings and previously unidentified communication needs.

The evidence base for this link is large and robust, repeatedly demonstrating significant levels of SLCN (behavioural, social and communication difficulties) in settings where children are a focus for behavioural change. This includes children and young people with psychiatric disorders (e.g. ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) or Conduct Disorder (CD)) – children in care, children at risk of exclusion or already excluded from school, and the young offender population. See Owen 2014 for a review of the evidence (1).

In short, for many children the focus is on behavioural management, when in fact a more responsive and appropriate intervention could be a focus aimed at supporting language and communication ability.

When you also consider that unwanted behaviour is usually addressed through verbal communication, the persistent dissatisfaction of many children can be viewed rather differently – did the student fully understand the instruction, or did they not understand verbal communication?

The large evidence-base referred to has been concerned with structural language abilities, predominantly verbal skills often assessed by means of expressive (speaking) or receptive (listening comprehension) language. However, our ability to communicate effectively relies on a much broader skill-set than being able to understand or understand verbal communication.

Figure 1 presents an influential and well-accepted model of language that identifies three dimensions of language development. Form and content in this model are structural language skills. The third dimension concerns the social use of language – or pragmatic language skills. This includes using and reading non-verbal communication, understanding communication conventions, and adapting to the needs of the listener, and taking cues from the social context.

In essence, a child (or adult) who has not yet become literate in this area is likely to miscommunicate and misconstrue, therefore they may be less aware of the signals they are giving out through non-verbal language and more likely to “take the wrong way”. Children with less well-developed pragmatic language abilities may:

• Not make appropriate eye contact.
• Not know how to initiate, turn-take and end conversations.
• Not understand social interactions.
• Not understand the implications of their words.
• Not understand the implications of their intentions.
• Miscategorise others’ communications to them.
• Have little awareness of social relationships.
• Have little awareness of unwritten social rules.

Or as summarised in one publication, such children “may appear rude, distracted or self-involved” (7), particularly if areas of form and content are strengths of their pragmatic abilities resulting in a child appearing to be a competent communicator who is being willfully disobedient or awkward.

What can be done?

One outcome of the Bercow Report was the creation of the Better Communication Research Programme, commissioned to enhance the evidence base in relation to SLCN.

One outcome of the programme was a thorough consideration of the interventions, and their evidence bases, available to support language and communication development in children and young people.

In partnership with the Communication Trust a web-based database was set up (8) called “What Works”. "What Works" web-based database has been set up (8) (9) in order to identify those interventions which are most effective and best fit with the current drive for adopting evidence-"What Works" database (9) (10)

Unfortunately, the evidence base is not robust for many approaches – because research has not been undertaken rather than concerns regarding the efficacy of the approach. However, inclusion in the database allows practitioners to see what interventions are being supported by the programme.

There are areas of school improvement and development the issue should be considered at different levels to ensure an effective response: whole-school, targeted and specialist. What follows are some general considerations for each level.

Whole-school

The cornerstone of a whole-school approach is knowledge and understanding among all staff in relation to SLCN. Each member of staff does not need to be a specialist, but knowing how to recognise signs of potential SLCN and which groups are more at risk of experiencing SLCN will support early identification.

Staff understanding how to modify their own communication methods can support the overall communication ability. This is vital for literacy. For example, supporting students who have pragmatic difficulties will improve their overall communication ability.

Schools may also want to consider their policies to ensure that if SLCN are suspected robust procedures are in place to ensure needs are met. It is work considering how language and communication skills are learnt through reciprocal interactions, with plenty of opportunities to practice the range of skills (form, content, use) in more able others) – children with SLCN need more opportunities to develop. Incorporating more talking, supported group activities and time for staff to talk with students individually could all be of benefit.

Do not presume that the child understands the social expectations in all areas of the school environment. When I deliver training on unwanted behaviour and pragmatic language competence I refer to arriving at a new social setting (such as a school) with less well-developed pragmatic language abilities as “entering without a compass”. You can help all children by ensuring the social terrain is mapped – explicitly.

Finally, a useful tool for auditing practice in the classroom is in relation to supporting language and communication development is the Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool (9). Available online, this observation schedule allows staff to evaluate current arrangements and identify areas for development.

Targeted

At this level, the focus is on early identification and intervention. Ideally children who may have less well-developed pragmatic language abilities should be identified before they start getting into trouble at school to prevent them associating the setting and the adults in it with uncomfortable and negative feelings.

Therefore it is important to identify vulnerable groups to targeted intervention. Such groups are likely to involve children who struggle with attention and concentration specific work may also be required to develop attention skills. Those who have a medical diagnosis of ADHD, ODD or CD, and white minority background, adolescents with low strive in the primary grades are susceptible.

Language and communication needs should always be considered for children viewed as persistently disruptive or at risk of being permanently excluded. Targeted interventions as recorded in the What Works database can then be selected to support need. Some programmes include checklists to ensure appropriate selection of children, although consideration of their behavioural presentation against descriptors above may suffice.

It is vital that evidence-based interventions are not delivered in isolation, with the onus on the child to independently transfer the skills to real-life situations.

Session-based interventions can be likened to learning to drive, the theory is essential, but you also need to be supported to part the theory into practice on the road.

Outcomes from programmes will be better if opportunities are provided where children can be supported to apply skills in the real social environments of the classroom and playground and if the wider staff group have knowledge of the intervention to ensure they are able to reinforce and remind learning.

Individual/specialist

Individual level intervention may overlap with targeted and is only usually required where whole-school approaches and targeted intervention are not producing results, suggesting more significant or complex needs. The child may require more intensive support to develop pragmatic skills on a one-to-one basis, although it will still be important to provide group work to practice skills and support to apply skills in the real world environment.

At this level, referral to specialist support, such as a speech and language therapist or educational psychologist, may be required, although not necessarily.

Many schools have supported members of staff to allow them to develop a specialism in SLCN, often in consultation with a speech and language therapist or speech and language services, to provide a robust package of intervention that can efficiently and effectively respond to the varying levels of need found within a school community.

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8. The Bercow Report: A multi-agency service for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (Department for Children and Families, 2008).

Figure 1: The interaction of content, form and language. Reprinted/ amended from Bloom and Lahey 1978 (2)