



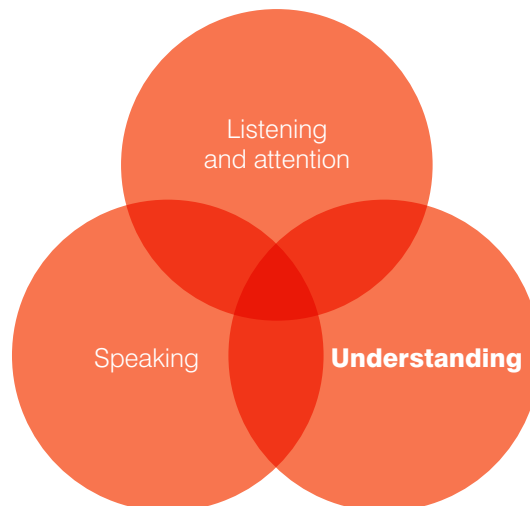
Communication and Language: Understanding

Introduction

Communication and Language (CL) is one of the **three prime areas** of learning and development in the EYFS framework. The other two are Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) and Physical Development (PD). These areas are called prime because they form the foundation for all other aspects of young children's learning and development. As soon as they are born, young babies begin to communicate with other people – start to build relationships with their immediate family and care givers and interact physically with the world around them. The three prime areas of learning are regarded as particularly important for engaging young children's curiosity and enthusiasm, laying the foundations of success in learning and in life.

Communication and language development involves giving children opportunities to speak and listen in a range of situations, and to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves.

In the EYFS **Communication and Language** consists of three aspects:



The importance of these three aspects has been established from the Every Child a Talker (ECAT) programme. By focusing on listening and attention, and separating receptive language (understanding) from expressive language (speaking), practitioners can gain a better understanding of how language develops, how to support the process, and how to identify children who could be at risk from language delay.

Prime and specific areas of learning

The **three prime areas** of the EYFS should be the focus for practitioners working with the youngest children, as they form the basis for successful learning and progress in the **four specific areas**.

As children become older, the emphasis will shift towards a more equal focus on **all areas of learning** as children's confidence and abilities increase.

If at any time a child's progress within any of the prime areas gives cause for concern, practitioners should discuss this with the child's parents and provide focused support in that area. This approach is designed to ensure that any issues are addressed at an early stage of a child's life.

The importance of developing understanding

Understanding covers part of the aspect of the original EYFS framework called 'Language for Thinking' with the change in emphasis in the new framework building on research findings from the ECAT programme. Understanding, or developing comprehension, is a fundamental part of interpreting spoken language. It is important that practitioners can distinguish between situations where a child may be following an established routine, or responding to gestures rather than understanding the spoken word.

As children develop their understanding and build up a large receptive vocabulary they become more able to make sense of complex sentences and questions. These skills are essential for reading comprehension and for making sense of information in all other areas of learning.

Progress in CL: Understanding

24-36 months

Children can identify action words by pointing to the right picture, e.g., 'Who's jumping?'. They understand 'who', 'what', 'where' in simple questions and are developing understanding of basic concepts, e.g., *big/little*.

36-48 months

Children respond to instructions containing positional language, e.g. 'over' and 'under'. They can identify objects by their use. They attempt to answer 'why' and 'how' questions using words like 'because.'

Early Learning Goal

Children follow instructions involving several ideas or actions. They answer 'how' and 'why' questions about their experiences and in response to stories or events.

[Statements from Draft EYFS Framework, 2011]

The relationship between Communication and Language and the other prime areas of learning

'Communication and Language supports Personal, Social and Emotional Development because a child who can communicate feelings, needs and ideas develops a strong sense of self and is increasingly able to relate to others in rewarding and appropriate ways. It supports Physical Development through description of actions which increase conscious control and through talk about health and the factors which influence this.'

[Tickell Review of the EYFS, 2011]

Summary of development for two-year-olds

When a child is aged between 24 and 36 months, practitioners must review progress in Communication and Language, along with the other two prime areas of learning. Parents or carers should be given a short written summary of their child's development as part of the ongoing dialogue between the setting and the family. This summary should identify any areas where the child's progress is less than expected and should shape a targeted plan to support that child's future learning and development in the setting.

There will be no standard format for this developmental summary, instead it should reflect the culture and ethos of the setting and the particular needs of the child and/or parental preferences.

What quality looks like in practice

These three scenarios are taken from a primary school with a foundation stage unit which also has facilities to provide wraparound care for younger children.

Under twos

Children and parents are welcomed into the setting by their key persons when they arrive in the morning. The practitioners make a point of talking to the children as well as parents, including them in the conversations that are going on.

Throughout the day the practitioners engage with the children and talk to them while they are playing, helping to put their actions and feelings into words. When playing with the younger children they name objects the children show an interest in and repeat these words several times to help establish a firm link between the object and the sound of its name.

There are interesting multisensory resources in the room to explore, many stored at child height so children can make choices and follow their interests. Practitioners listen carefully to what children are attempting to say and support their efforts by repeating and extending the words and phrases the children use. They respond with simple comments and look carefully to see if the child has understood. These simple two way conversations build over time as children's competence with spoken language increases.

The routine of the day is talked about – what's happening now and what is going to happen next. Children are familiar with this routine and sometimes move from one activity to the next when they anticipate something is going to happen. This is particularly obvious at mealtimes!

Two- to three-year-olds

As children's vocabulary and use of spoken language increases practitioners play alongside children, commentating on what they are doing, but not bombarding them with too many questions. To build children's understanding of the spoken word they use simple language, emphasise key words and information, and repeat words and phrases often. When they are talking to particular children they gain their attention first by calling their name and looking directly at them.

In the room there are lots of interesting things for the children to play with – puzzles and manipulative toys, building blocks, small world play resources, a water and sand area, hats and costumes, bags and shoes for role play, and a good supply of books. Practitioners are aware that different children are interested in different things and take time to have conversations with children in a variety of play situations. They talk with the children about what they are doing and use open ended questions such as, 'How do you think we could...', 'Can you show me how to...', 'What might happen if...'.

Practitioners give regular support to children who struggle to understand, acknowledging their efforts, adapting the language they use, and modelling correct sentences. There are visual signs and symbols around the room and the storage boxes are all labelled with pictures of what should be in there.

Favourite stories are read again and again and the children love saying what is going to happen next in a story. These are good opportunities for the practitioner to challenge the children's thinking and understanding by asking simple questions such as, 'What happens next?' and 'Why do you think that?'.

Four- to five-year-olds

The wide variety of resources in the room gives children lots of opportunities to make choices and follow their interests. Children can choose whether they play indoors or out of doors but are expected to observe the simple rules the children and practitioners have devised to ensure everyone's safety and comfort. Talking about these rules – which happens quite frequently – is a great opportunity to develop children's understanding as they discuss the consequences of things not being done correctly.

When giving children instructions, practitioners are careful to make sure they tell children what they want them to do, not what they don't want them to do. This has gone a long way to avoiding misunderstandings, particularly

for those children who find it difficult to listen and remember complex sentences. Playing games such as *Simon says*, following simple dance routines, provide good opportunities to practise listening to, understanding and following instructions. When acting out small world play scenarios, or playing games outside, practitioners model the use of positional language.

The children have access to woodworking and cooking materials, magnets, magnifiers, batteries, and bulbs. Exploring these resources, supported by the skillful use of open ended questions by practitioners, enables children to talk not just about what they can see happening but why they think these things happen.

Sequencing games and sets of pictures help children to organise and order their thoughts. At group story times children are invited to demonstrate their understanding of the spoken word through talking about what might happen next. Practitioners frequently invite children to elaborate on what they say, challenging them to think through their ideas and express them in a way that everyone can understand.

How to help young children develop their speaking skills

Use these reflective questions to think about how you might support young children to develop their speaking skills.

Under twos

- When did we last look at the environment from a small child's perspective to understand what it is they are seeing?
- How good are we at putting babies and young children's actions and feelings into words?
- Do we all understand the importance of giving babies and young children lots of visual clues to back up what we are saying to them?
- How good are we at repeating words and phrases so children begin to see the connection between an object or action and the sound of its name?
- How well do we use stories to build the link between pictures, sounds and written words?
- How could we add to our range of resources so there lots of different things to interest children?
- Where can we find out more about how children's language develops and how to support this process?
- How well do we demonstrate to parents that we value what they have to say about their child?

Two- to three-year-olds

- Are we aware enough of the importance of gaining young children's attention when we speak to them?
- Do we need to think more about the level of language that we use when talking with children to ensure it is appropriate?
- Do we always remember to give children positive instructions rather than negative ones?
- When was the last time we recorded ourselves talking with children to monitor the types of interaction that take place?
- How could we improve the layout of the environment so it is easier for children to make sense of?
- How could we extend our range of multisensory resources to give children more interesting things to talk about and wonder about?
- Could we find better ways to present resources to children so that they can understand what is available to them?
- How effectively do we support young children who struggle to understand?

Four- to five-year-olds

- What ways could we improve the way we use open ended questions with the children?
- How could we change the way we make resources available to children so they can find things that interest them and that they want to know more about?
- How could we improve the range of games and enjoyable opportunities for children to practise listening to and following instructions?
- How well do we use story time as an opportunity for children to demonstrate their understanding of people, places, events, feelings, and emotions?
- How often do we encourage children to elaborate on their ideas to help them deepen their understanding?
- Do we spend enough time talking to children about why certain things have to happen rather than just issuing instructions?
- Do we have effective strategies in place to support those children who may find it difficult to pay attention and understand what is required of them in different situations?
- How much do we encourage parents to share good ideas with one another?

Ideas for parents

Communication and Language

Communication and Language covers the three different aspects of how young children's language skills develop:

- **Listening and attention** – children tuning in to what they can hear and listening carefully. This is how children learn to distinguish between different sounds as a build up to learning how to read and write.
- **Speaking** – how children use words to express their needs, ideas and feelings and as a way of sharing what they are thinking with other people. Children need lots of opportunities to talk before they will be ready to communicate through writing.
- **Understanding** – how children make sense of spoken language, starting with simple short sentences and building up to more complex questions and sentences.

To develop their communication and language skills, children need to learn: how to listen and pay attention; how to speak; how to make sense of what they hear. These are all important skills that children are practising from the moment they are born, long before they can speak.

Helping your child to develop their understanding of what is said to them

There are lots of easy ways you can help your child to understand what is being said to them, progressing from single words to more complicated sentences.

You could use the ideas below as starting points to help you do this.

Under twos

- Help your baby to tune in to the sound of language by talking to him often.
- Look at your child so he knows you are talking directly to him.
- Use words to describe how he is feeling or what he is doing.
- Repeat words and short phrases about things he is interested in.
- You might want to use gestures as well as words to help him understand things.
- Look at picture books together and name things for him.
- When you are out and about, tell him what is happening in the world around him.

Two- to three-year-olds

- Say your child's name to get her attention before telling her something.
- Keep your language simple so it is easy to understand.
- Read stories together and talk about what happens next.
- Play simple games where play people or animals are moved around – up, down, in, out.
- Use words like big and little, tall and short to describe things.
- Ask simple questions; 'Who is that?', 'What is he doing?', 'Where's the dog?'
- Commentate on what's going on and say why some things are happening.

Four- to five-year-olds

- Tell your child what you would like them to do, not what you don't want them to do, so they don't get confused.
- Play lots of games where everybody needs to listen to and follow the rules.
- When reading a story you know well, stop before the end and ask your child to finish the story off.