Effective language and communication skills are essential for children to access the curriculum. In the classroom, spoken language is the primary medium through which teachers teach and children learn. It is expected that when a child starts primary school, they will be able to understand much of what is said, express themselves clearly, share their feelings and make their needs known. This level of proficiency in speech, language and communication is critical to the development of a child’s cognitive, social and emotional wellbeing.

However, many children are starting school with delayed language skills, may have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) arising from other special educational needs, or may have Specific Language Impairments (SLI). For all of these children, the impact of their SLCN can be significant and wide-ranging.

DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING: Some children may not be able to understand the words being spoken to them and/or the grammatical rules of sentences. This means, when their teacher tells the class what they need to do, or explains a new idea or concept, they may struggle to understand what is being said. Having appropriate good vocabulary is essential for learning, however learning vocabulary has been identified as one of the most significant difficulties for some children with SLCN, meaning much of their teacher’s talk becomes inaccessible.

In addition, children may have difficulties effectively processing language. They may struggle to remember spoken information, making it challenging for them to follow more than one instruction at a time.

DIFFICULTY SPEAKING UP: The ability and confidence to ask questions is a vital skill for provoking and shaping new thinking. This is not an easy task for children with SLCN, so vital learning and opportunities to talk with school staff and peers can be missed. They may struggle with developing an adequate vocabulary, formulating sentences, using the right words in the right order and with following grammatical rules to understand or make it clear to others what has happened.

Children with SLCN may not be able to effectively process the speech sounds that make up words. This means they cannot identify which sounds come at the beginning of words or break up words into their component parts. These skills are essential for children starting at primary school as they learn to read and to spell, which involves linking sounds to letters and breaking up words so that they can effectively read them. Children who struggle with processing speech sounds are at risk of literacy difficulties. Other language difficulties can impact on emerging reading comprehension skills, adding to the literacy difficulties.

DIFFICULTIES WITH PRAGMATIC LANGUAGE SKILLS: The ability to understand and use language in a social context (pragmatics) can cause significant problems with social interaction. Children may have difficulty knowing when and how to use their language in different social situations, or knowing the differences in how to speak to adults or peers. They may not understand jokes or sarcasm or may struggle with metaphorical language, taking well-known phrases literally. This can often result in adults and other children misunderstanding reactions from these children as they can seem perverse, pedantic or unsympathetic.

There is a whole range of well-used phrases, which are new to children starting school, which can be very difficult and confusing for children with SLCN to understand. Phrases such as ‘fold your arms’ ‘line up’ and ‘break time’ can all be interpreted literally.
Talk and social interaction plays a key role in children’s social development and learning. It has been found that improving pragmatic language skills can help prevent problems in later educational performance.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
Taken together, the impact of SLCN can be seen on children’s learning, especially literacy development, and their social and emotional development. It is often a daily challenge for children with SLCN to make their thoughts and needs known and to make themselves understood. Just listening to the amount of language in school can be an overwhelming task in itself easily leading to frustration, aggression and isolation.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?
Fortunately, Primary schools can also be the ideal environment to support children’s language development. The environment can be made more supportive, especially through visual means, to help children with SLCN.

Staff training can also help so that adults are more aware of their own use of language, what to look out for when children are struggling, how to support children and where to get help. A whole school approach can also help by promoting collaborative work with other professionals, particularly Speech and Language Therapists, so that children receive consistent support throughout the school day, with greater opportunities to practice key skills in “real-life” situations.

I CAN’s Primary Talk programme has been designed to help schools develop their provision for all children, including those with SLCN. Training and accreditation materials are available separately or in combination to guide schools towards an effective whole school approach.

For more information, visit I CAN’s Primary Talk website www.ican.org.uk/primarytalk

© I CAN February 2013

Information above has been drawn from the I CAN Talk Paper No.6 “Speech, Language and Communication Needs and Primary School-aged Children” I CAN (2008). This may be downloaded from http://www.ican.org.uk/en/What_is_the_issue/I%20CAN%20Evidence.aspx