

Identifying children who have difficulties understanding language

Understanding of language may also be referred to as receptive language or comprehension. This is the ability to make sense of spoken information.

Children with difficulties understanding language may:

- Not follow instructions correctly
- Appear to ignore you
- Repeat all / parts of questions and instructions rather than responding to them
- Repeat words or phrases rather than generating their own
- Follow the classroom routine by watching what other children are doing
- Find activities which rely on listening to language difficult to cope with
- Have good mechanical reading but lack true understanding e.g. can read a book by rote but cannot answer questions about what they have read
- Have difficulty remembering information
- Use strategies to cover up difficulties understanding e.g. changing the subject or watching the speaker's face to guess the answer

Strategies to Support Understanding of Language

- **Gain the child's attention** before speaking by physical prompts such as touching their arm or saying their name
- Try to **minimise distractions**
- Be **aware** of the child's level of understanding
- **Simplify** your vocabulary and sentence structure
- **Reduce** your sentence length, breaking into manageable chunks
- **Repeat** key words and rephrase instructions as necessary
- **Speak slowly** – use pause and emphasis to highlight the key information



- Use **visual prompts** to support your language e.g. gesture, pictures, objects, mind mapping
- Give the child **plenty of time** to listen and respond
- Check the child **understands** the task (e.g. ask them to repeat or paraphrase the instruction)
- Encourage the child to **ask for help** if something's not understood
- Give **extra time** for teaching new concepts and vocabulary
- Try to **avoid** using abstract concepts such as “before” or “after” when giving instructions
- Encourage the child to use **strategies in processing information**.
Some that are helpful are:
 - Silent rehearsal of the instruction
 - Identifying important words in the instruction

If the child does not respond in the way you expected, try to work out where the breakdown in communication occurred. You could consider:

- Were they listening?
- Did they just copy the person sitting next to them?
- Was the instruction too long?
- Did they understand the vocabulary/concepts that you used?

Over time you will learn which specific strategies are most effective for each individual child.

