Supporting Children

This document has been designed by the Children’s Speech and Language Therapy department as a tool to support children with comprehension difficulties. It provides information for school staff about children’s understanding difficulties and ways to support them.

Additional links to useful resources in the appendix are identified in boxes throughout

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Understanding is a complex process; difficulties with understanding have far-reaching consequences. The diagram below illustrates the types of behaviours often observed in children who experience difficulties with understanding.

**Spiral of Understanding**

A child who doesn’t understand is likely to...

- switch off
- become passive and demoralised
- opt out
- be distracted
- avoid tasks and instructions
- become disruptive in lessons
- find it more difficult to learn
- have difficulties understanding what they read

A child who is helped to understand is likely to...

- listen and concentrate
- make contributions
- learn new vocabulary
- be more interested and motivated
- be more likely to do what is asked
- be more likely to sit still
- have fewer barriers to learning

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**Appendix 1**

How to recognise a child with comprehension difficulties
Understanding: What Is It and How Do We Do It?

To understand everyday language, we rely on situational and non-verbal clues, for example, routines, gestures, pointing, tone of voice, objects, and sounds.

We also need to:
Understand words and concepts
Understand sentences
Understand grammar
Understand strings of sentences
Understand conversation
Understand figures of speech such as idiom and metaphor, for example, “pull your socks up”

Appendix 2
Situational and Verbal Understanding

Appendix 3
Development of understanding of language from birth to 11 years

Understanding naturally fluctuates in response to a number of factors related to the child, the person talking to the child and the setting and context in which communication takes place.

We often only begin to notice that a child has difficulties understanding when the child does not do what we expect him or her to do.
So, understanding is affected by:

**Child related factors**
- Reduced hearing acuity or discrimination skills
- Difficulties focussing or sustaining attention
- Difficulties with working memory or speed of processing information
- Motivation, mood and self-confidence
- Health and well-being
- Interest
- Behaviour

**Other person factors**
- The complexity of language used with the child
- Length of utterance
- Volume and rate of speech
- The use of tone of voice & gestures to add expression
- The pace of a conversation or lesson
- The amount of time given for the child to respond before prompting him/
- Behaviour of peers

**Setting and context factors**
- Background noise
- Class seating and organisation
- Working in groups, as a whole class or for individual activities
- Visual distractions, eg People traffic, a busy environment, too big a space, lots of toys or pictures

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**Appendix 4**
Factors which affect Comprehension of Speech, Language and Communication

**Appendix 5** Inclusion Development Programme for Speech, Language & Communication Needs (SLCN)
http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/505889
To develop your knowledge of a child’s understanding difficulties and the factors which affect them, it helps to reflect on times when understanding breaks down.

Here are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adult’s Instruction</th>
<th>Child’s Response</th>
<th>Possible Breakdown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Go and fetch your reading book.”</td>
<td>Completely distracted by something in room or outside window</td>
<td>Attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I want you to touch your solar plexus.”</td>
<td>Touches head</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fetch me a rubber, a ruler, and a pencil then go and sit next to John.”</td>
<td>Gets one thing and goes to sit next to John.</td>
<td>Length of sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Before you go outside get your snack”</td>
<td>Goes outside without snack</td>
<td>Order of sentence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 6
Why are the things we say sometimes hard to understand?

Research shows that understanding cannot necessarily be changed through direct intervention but can be *compensated* for by making adaptations and using strategies.
How to Help

If a child has difficulties with understanding, there are many simple adaptations and strategies that help:

Focus attention
Make sure the child is looking at you and listening. Think about how you introduce a new idea or activity.

Allow Time
Encourage the child to wait until you have finished speaking.

Give the child enough time to respond e.g. try counting to 10 in your head before prompting them.

Demonstration
The best way to help understanding is to demonstrate or help the child experience an activity.

Try...
“Fold your paper in half
Watch me; I’ll show you how to do it.
Now you have a go”

Role play and acting out often helps a child to understand a story.

Simplify
Use simple language and speak slowly and clearly with normal intonation.

“Match and Stretch”
In general keep language one step ahead of the language the child uses. Be mindful of the developmental language level that the child is using to avoid a big difference between your language and the child’s.
### Support Children’s Understanding

#### Keep sentences simple by:

**Using shorter sentences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of…</th>
<th>Try…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“We’re going to do some craft now, I want you to get some scissors from the craft corner”</td>
<td>“Get the scissors please” (whilst pointing and gesturing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Using simple vocabulary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of…</th>
<th>Try…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using the word “combine” in an instruction</td>
<td>“mix together”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Using positive statements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of…</th>
<th>Try…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Don’t run”</td>
<td>“Walk”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Avoiding sentences beginning with “if”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of…</th>
<th>Try…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“If you have school dinners go and line up at the door”</td>
<td>“Tom, you have school dinners; go and line up at the door”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Saying things in the order you want the child to do them**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of…</th>
<th>Try…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Before you go in the dining hall you need to wash your hands”</td>
<td>“Wash your hands, then go in for dinner”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Breaking information into smaller chunks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of…</th>
<th>Try…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| “The great fire of London was a catastrophe because it rapidly became a firestorm of temperatures over 1000C, spread at a rapid rate, resulted in extensive destruction and raged for along time.” | “The great fire of London was a big problem.”
“The fire was very hot.”
“The fire moved quickly.”
“The fire burned for a long time.”
“Lots of houses were burnt down.” |
Giving one instruction at a time and wait until they’ve completed each stage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of...</th>
<th>Try...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| “When you’ve finished painting, take your apron off, wash your hands then fetch a book ready for group time” | “You’ve finished!”
|                                                                               | “Take your apron off”                                                    |
|                                                                               | “Wash your hands”                                                       |
|                                                                               | “Get a book”                                                            |

Getting to the point

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Try...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Get your book”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Emphasising the important words within a simple sentence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Try...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Get the scissors please” whilst pointing and gesturing scissors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Say it again

| If the child does not respond or does not seem to understand, pause and then try saying it again or try saying it in a different way. |

Choosing your question word

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Think about the types of question you ask and the level of reasoning it demands of the child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who?  What?  Where? questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are much easier to understand than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When?   Why?   How? questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 7
For more information about levels of question complexity: Blank levels of Questions
http://askaspeechie.com.au/_literature_72624/Blank_Handout
Supporting Children’s Understanding

**Checking understanding.**
Check the child understands by:

- Asking simple questions “What have you got to get?”
- Asking the child to say what you have asked him/her to do
- Asking the child to recap what has been said or to repeat the key points

**Forced alternatives**
If a child is struggling to answer a question, help them by giving them a choice of answers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Try…</th>
<th>Is it James or Hannah?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Who is the helper today?”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When do we go swimming?”</td>
<td>On Tuesday or Friday?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Gesture**
Use gesture and pointing to help the child understand or to cue him in to the correct answer.

**Signs**
Use signs alongside key words and to help explain more difficult concepts. Refer to your school’s copy of the Signs and Symbols Directory for more information.

**Relate something new to what the child knows already**
We are going to learn about *melting*; like when you have an ice lolly in the sunshine; remember what happens to it...

**Visual props**
Having something to look at while you listen, helps understanding by:

- Helping to maintain a focus of attention
- Making the information less fleeting
- Reducing the load on the child’s memory
- Clarifying information or supporting explanations e.g. using a diagram to help explain shadows
- Condensing information e.g. “the Vikings came from Scandinavia to Britain in ships with oars” could be represented by a map with a picture of a Viking ship and an arrow showing the direction of travel.
Try:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doing quick drawings on the board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using gesture, pointing and signs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using pictures, symbols, and real objects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other visual support strategies used in schools include:

- Visual time tables, now and next boards, symbolised worksheets, key words in new topics, mind maps and time lines
- Refer to your school’s copy of the Signs and Symbols Directory for detail

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER!

It is important that children are reassured that it is OK if they do not understand something and that they are encouraged to ask for help when they need it.

It is important that school staff use these strategies to support children with understanding difficulties to learn and achieve.

Appendix 8

An action plan is included to help staff to implement these changes.
Appendices:

Appendix 1
How to recognise a child with comprehension difficulties

Appendix 2
Situational and Verbal Understanding

Appendix 3
Development of understanding of language from birth to 11 years

Appendix 4
Factors which affect Comprehension of Speech, Language and Communication

Appendix 5
http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/505889

Appendix 6
Why are the things we say, sometimes hard to understand?

Appendix 7
http://askaspeechie.com.au/_literature_72624/Blank_Handout
Compiled by Therapy Focus, based on Information by Marion Blank

Appendix 8
Action plan proforma
References:

Communication Trust (2010). Don’t Get Me Wrong: Information for supporting children and young people with speech, language and communication needs. Available from: http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/~/media/Communication%20Trust/Documents/Dont%20Get%20Me%20WrongFinal%20November.ashx


