

Understanding language

Some children have difficulty understanding spoken language. This is also known as *receptive language difficulties*. These children may have difficulty following instructions and learning new words and concepts. They may appear to not do as they are told. Other children may be quiet and rely on familiar routines or watching others to know what to do.

A child who has difficulty understanding spoken language may have difficulty with:

- Listening & attention – attending to the speaker and listening to what is said
- Auditory processing & memory – remembering what has been said in order to process it
- Vocabulary & concepts – understanding the words and ideas
- Sentence structure – understanding the grammar and sentence formation used
- Pragmatics – interpreting what is meant within the context



Children need to be able to understand words and sentences before they are able to use them. A child's ability to understand spoken language is crucial for all aspects of learning and for making sense of the world around them. Changing the way we present information by adjusting what we say can help, as well as allowing extra time to process what has been said.

Strategies for understanding language:

- Get your child's attention. Say their name to get their attention first before speaking or giving an instruction.
- Simplify what you say. Use short, simple sentences and break instructions down into smaller parts (e.g. 'Go and get your shoes and coat and wait by the door' → 'Get your shoes. Now get your coat. Now wait by the door.').
- Pause and wait. Pause between sentences to give additional time to process information. Slow down your talking and give your child plenty of thinking time.
- Repeat. Use repetition to reinforce information if necessary.
- Use visual supports. Our body language, facial expressions and gestures all reinforce the words we say. Using visual aids such as objects, pictures and symbols can support understanding further. Spoken language disappears quickly while visual information stays present for longer.
- Use multi-sensory learning. When introducing new words or concepts, use real, hands on experiences to support word learning.



