Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) Factsheet for Professionals working with Children Looked After (CLA) and Care Experienced Children

Siarad Gyda Fi
Talk With Me

Many 'children looked after' (CLA) and care experienced children have unidentified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). These include difficulties both understanding language (making sense of what people say) and using language (words and sentences). Communication needs may also include their attention and listening skills, understanding cause and effect, and social skills.

Developing the speech, language and communication (SLC) skills of CLA and care experienced children supports relationship building, educational attainment and future life chances[1].

CLA and care experienced children and communication needs

Some CLA and care experienced children's SLCN may be associated with their environment. 68% of CLA in Wales have experienced abuse or neglect[2] and 42% of recently adopted children in Wales experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) before being placed for adoption[3]. This places them in the highest risk group for later life difficulties[4].

CLA and care experienced children are likely to carry risks to normal development resulting, not only from ACEs but also from pre-birth experiences and genetic vulnerabilities[5].

Attachment difficulties and any previous abuse, neglect and subsequent trauma may also have an impact on the development of CLA's SLC skills[6].

SLCN may be the result of developmental language disorder[7] or associated with other conditions, such as autism, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder or learning disability.

The size of the problem

50%

10% of children have persistent SLCN and this increases to 50% in the most disadvantaged areas of the UK[9].

90%

In a recent study, 90% of care leavers had below average language ability, and 60% met criteria for having Developmental Language Disorder – a condition where children have problems understanding and/or using spoken language. None of these young people had previously been diagnosed with SLCN[10].

92%

A similar pattern was found in a small study of young people in care in Australia: 92% had oral language skills below the average range, with 62% having significant language difficulties[11].

The impact of communication needs

CLA and care experienced children with SLCN can have difficulty understanding what is being said to them or making themselves understood. SLCN may also affect the words they can remember or their ability to explain or sequence events. SLCN are often hidden and older children in particular may have developed masking techniques[1].

Some CLA and care experienced children may communicate via their behaviour due to their SLCN. This may result in a pattern of antisocial behaviour, which without appropriate support can lead to offending behaviour as they get older. They may also be more vulnerable to others taking advantage of them. See Talk With Me website for a fact sheet on how to manage children's behaviour if they have SLCN.

How to help

SLCN can be identified and supported at any stage but the earlier the better in order to reduce the impact and improve outcomes.

The communication environment is a more dominant predictor of early language than social background[8] so we really can make a difference, just by changing the way we talk with children and young people!

Listening friendly environment – It's difficult for children to listen to two things at once so try to reduce background noise and minimise distractions while you are having a conversation e.g. turn off TVs and screens.

Responsive interactions – Talk with the child about what they are interested in and what they are doing. Remember to wait a few seconds longer to give them time to start or join in the conversation and to take in what you say.

Visual support – Use objects, pictures or gestures to show the child what is going to happen during the day or what you are asking them to do. This will help the child to understand your instructions.

What next?

Read

Visit www.gov.wales/talkwithme for information and resources for parents, carers and professionals.

Learn

Visit www.exchange wales.org/slc-training-resources/ for practitioner training videos.

Share

Share the website and facebook page @siaradgydafi with parents, carers and colleagues.

Signpost

Liaise with the child's Health Visitor, School Health Nurse or School staff if you have concerns about a child's SLC skills. Consider referral to specialist Speech and Language Therapy if there is a significant impact on the child or if concerns persist over time.

References:

[1] RCSLT Factsheet 'Supporting looked after children'.

[2] NSPCC (2019) 'Statistics briefing: looked after children'.

[3] Anthony et al (2019) 'Adverse Childhood Experiences of Children Adopted from Care: The Importance of Adoptive Parental Warmth for Future Child Adjustment'.

[4] Oxford Brooks University (2021) 'National Adoption Service for Wales Evaluation of the Adoption Support Framework. Institute of Public Care'.

[5] Selwyn (2017) 'Post-adoption support and interventions for adoptive families: Best practice approaches'.

[6] Windsor et al (2011) 'Effect of Foster Care on Young Children's Language Learning'.

[7] Bishop et al (2016) 'CATALISE: a multinational and multidisciplinary Delphi consensus study of problems with language development'.

[8] Roulstone et al (2011) 'Investigating the role of language in children's early educational outcomes'.

[9] ICAN (2017) 'Talking About a Generation Report'.

[10] Clegg et al (2021) 'Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) in Young People Leaving Care in England: A Study Profiling the Language, Literacy and Communication Abilities of Young People Transitioning from Care to Independence'.

[11] Snow et al (2020) 'The language, literacy and mental health profiles of adolescents in out-of-home care: An Australian sample'.