

Written evidence submitted by I CAN

Written Evidence from I CAN, the children's communication charity

Education Select Committee: The impact of COVID19 on education and children's services

About us

I CAN is the leading charity for children and young people's speech, language and communication. We provide effective, practical, evidence-based solutions that change the lives of children and young people with communication difficulties and support all children's communication development.

We welcome this focus on the impact of COVID19 which recognises the longer-term implications of school closures on vulnerable children.

Children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are already vulnerable to being left behind and there is evidence and concern that COVID19 will leave them even further behind. Evidence tells us that 10% of all children have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)¹, which are complex and long term. In addition, in some areas of disadvantage, upwards of 50% of children start school with poor language². In fact, more children have SLCN than any other special need³. There is strong evidence for the impact of SLCN on learning, reading, behaviour and mental health⁴.

Children's speech, language and communication (SLC) is multi-faceted and includes vocabulary, narrative skills, listening and social skills. These skills are not only crucial for learning and in building and maintaining relationships but are also identified as supporting resilience when it comes to mental health⁵. During school closure many vulnerable children will have missed out on the opportunity to practise these skills which will have some impact on their ability to learn and engage with others when back in the classroom.

- **The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to:**
 - **Children's early development**

Children's early development encompasses a range of factors, but our comments will focus on the impact of the closure of settings on early language development.

There is no statutory requirement for EYFS data to be collected this year. This means that schools will be making a judgment about where children would be, but the prediction is that children will

¹ Norbury et al (2016) *The impact of nonverbal ability on prevalence and clinical presentation of language disorder: evidence from a population study*. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry

² Law, J., McBean, K and Rush, R. (2011) Communication skills in a population of *primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage* IJLCD, VOL. 46, NO. 6, 657–664

³ DfE (July 2019) Special Education Needs in England

⁴ The Communication Trust (2017) *Talk about a generation*

⁵ Public Health England (2016) the mental health of children and young people in England.

have failed to make expected progress and some who were already struggling will have fallen behind even further. Communication and language will be no exception.

We know that there is strong evidence for the critical role early language plays in children's life chances. For example, language at age five is the most important predictor of literacy at age 11⁶. Language at age five is also linked with outcomes well into adulthood: mental health, employment, independence⁷.

In early years, language and social skills progress alongside each other with the development of good social skills being crucial for a child to interact effectively with others and form healthy relationships throughout life. We know that through play opportunities and interactions, with peers and skilled practitioners, children learn a range of social skills, including how to turn take, cooperate and pay attention. Given the strong evidence that high quality early education improves outcomes for children⁸ we anticipate that lost opportunities and the isolation experienced by some children will impact on the development of these skills.

What needs to happen

Encouragingly, with the right support, many disadvantaged children with delayed language can be supported to 'catch up'. At I CAN, through our own programmes such as *Early Talk Boost*, we have seen the positive impact that working with children at an early age can have on their life chances.

A focus on training early years practitioners in supporting children's early language, targeted interventions and providing parents with access to information about how to support their child's language development and knowledge about when to access support⁹, can significantly impact on children's language development¹⁰. These approaches may well provide effective solutions at this time .

Children with more significant, long term problems can be effectively supported through individualised programmes to reduce barriers to learning. Access to specialist support will be critical if they are to make up for lost time.

- **Support for pupils and families during closures, including:**
 - **The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning**

We welcome the opportunity here to highlight the experiences of children with SLCN accessing remote learning.

⁶ Save the Children (2016) *The Lost Boys: How boys are falling behind in their early years*

⁷ Law, J. et al (2009) *Modelling developmental language difficulties from school entry into adulthood: literacy, mental health, and employment outcomes*. Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research, 52(6): 1401-16.

⁸ silva et al 2004) <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8543/7/SSU-SF-2004-01.pdf>

⁹ Nottinghamshire Children's Centres services (2017) *The speech and language team's year of evaluation*

¹⁰ Clegg, J. and Vance, M. (2015) *Evaluation of the Early Language Development Programme (ELDP): Child Outcomes* University of Sheffield

From our contact with colleagues in education we know that many vulnerable children have been unable to take advantage of online learning, as their wellbeing and safeguarding have been the focus for schools. Closure of schools is therefore likely to have had a significant impact due to missed learning and a widening of the gap between these pupils and their peers. A recent report on school closures calculated how much time pupils will have lost and the impact of this on progress. All children will have been affected by the loss of opportunities to develop their speech, language and communication skills through interaction with adults outside the home, education opportunities and contact with their friends and peers. For vulnerable pupils these figures are likely to be higher.¹¹

For those children with SLCN who have received online learning few are likely to have accessed individualised schemes of work differentiated for their own level and style of learning. Evidenced approaches to support learning such as visual support, scaffolded steps and responsive support from classroom support staff will have been difficult to achieve for each pupil. We know that these are the children often without the skills to ask for help or the home support needed for them to effectively make progress.

For families engaged with specialist services, there is evidence that for some, there has been more and more regular contact. The increase, success and impact of teletherapy approaches is yielding a growing evidence base¹². However, those students who need the most help are the least likely to have access to the help and resources required. Many will be from areas of social disadvantage¹³ where issues such as technology and internet availability will have increased the attainment gap between them and their counterparts from more affluent areas.

Lack of access to peer groups and unfamiliar adults during periods of quarantine, together with the restrictions in terms of social contact and the wearing of mask will all have an impact on the development of social emotional skill sin children and young people. Studies are currently underway and many are reporting increased levels of social anxiety especially amongst younger children.¹⁴

What needs to happen

We recommend that pupils' language levels are screened alongside other areas of learning to ensure that those needing either class based support or more specialist help will receive it. There is evidence that doing this for whole class groups, alongside screening for reading levels, is possible and can lead to identification and support of students needing more help¹⁵.

¹¹ Kuhfield M.and Tarasawa B. (2020) The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement. NWEA

¹² Royal College of Speech and Language Therapist <https://www.rcslt.org/-/media/docs/Telehealth/INFO09EBP.png?la=en&hash=95BB8E83FAD0E5C691B2667EE76D5337E5CAE8F9>

¹³ DfE(2018)EYFS results additional tables by pupil characteristics

¹⁴ The Co-SPACE study New Scientist July 2020

¹⁵ Hendricks et al (2019)

Opportunities to develop social skills will be key. I CAN recommends that children and young people are supported to re-connect with their peer groups and with adults outside of the home and that the development of their social communication skills is given as much a priority as catching up academically.

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