**Speech, Language and Communication Needs Guidance for Vulnerable Learners**

*This guidance has been put together jointly by the Speech and Language Therapy Service, the Communication and Interaction Service, The Educational Psychology Service, The Clinical Team within Oxfordshire Children’s Services, The Virtual School for Children We Care For and the ATTACH Team.*

***Why are we concerned about vulnerable learners and SLCN?***

Whilst the incidence of Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) is around 5 – 10% in the general population, up to 50% of children from deprived backgrounds and 60% of Children We Care For experience SLCN. Up to 63% of children in residential care have undiagnosed SLCN (McCool and Stevens, 2011). The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists estimates that 60% of young people known to youth offending services have undiagnosed SLCN sufficient toaffect the young person’s ability to communicate with staff on a day-to-day basis.

Communication problems have far-reaching negative consequences in terms of social engagement and competence, cognitive development and academic attainment. We are concerned because many vulnerable learners are likely to have these needs, and for many young people these needs are undiagnosed.

SLCN are often unsuspected, especially in older children. As children get older, good ‘surface’ language skills or clear speech might make everyday conversation manageable, effectively masking underlying SLCN. Communication needs are often expressed as social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH) in older children. Managing behaviour often becomes the priority and underlying needs are missed. However, behaviour management approaches that do not address these underlying needs are unlikely to be successful so it is really important to identify them.

***Why do vulnerable learners have more SLCN?***

Many children who have had a deprived and challenging start to life develop SLCN. Language develops through interactions with others: children who have not had sensitive and attuned caregiving from adults who take an interest in their non-verbal signals and emerging communication, and who can model communication themselves, do not develop as well as children who have these advantages. Securely attached children use more complex language than cognitively matched maltreated children.

In addition, language development is strongly influenced by emotional state: young children’s developing communication is negatively affected by feeling upset or excited, and prolonged anxiety or dysregulation affect language development significantly.

Many vulnerable learners experience pragmatic language difficulties. Language pragmatics are the social language skills we use in our daily interactions with others: what we say, how we say it, our body language, and whether it is an appropriate thing to say in a given situation. Pragmatic skills develop in the pre-linguistic phase of language development and include joint attention, understanding of actions and gestures as having communicative intent, and reciprocity. These skills underpin expressing our thoughts, feelings and intentions and interpreting those of others.

Children with poor pragmatic skills can present as superficially articulate; these difficulties are often hidden but may contribute to concerns being raised about ASD. It is not hard to see how lacking these skills leads to challenging behaviour and an increased risk of mental health difficulties as they are so fundamental to our ability to communicate our thoughts and feelings with others. Emotional understanding and verbal ability are closely correlated: language is a key part of expressing and regulating thoughts and feelings and understanding emotions and it also needs to be modelled by others: the amount of talk about thoughts and feelings used by mothers with their 6 month old babies relates to attachment security at 1 year old.

***What do good communication skills look like?***

Good speech, language and communication skills involve the following skills:

1. Articulation: the ability of an individual to express him or herself effectively through speaking, writing or non-verbal communication.
2. Perception: being able to recognise and understand the spoken or written word, body language and facial expressions.
3. Listening skills: the ability to listen carefully to what is being said.
4. Recall: being capable of remembering information that has previously been given.
5. Expression: being competent at expressing feelings and emotions in an acceptable manner.
6. Interaction: the capacity to relate to others in a socially acceptable manner plays a pivotal role in promoting social integration.

***How to use these resources:***

Children with attachment-related needs can exhibit communication and interaction needs, which further contribute to their difficulties in connecting with the wider world and making relationships. Whether these needs are caused by attachment experiences or not cannot be determined but identifying how communication and interaction skills are impacted will help focus intervention and support.

To help you screen for these difficulties, we have taken the Communication and Interaction needs SEN Descriptors and very slightly adapted them to also consider the context and relational aspects. We have also put together some simple screening tools for primary and secondary aged students to guide you through interventions to meet these needs.

To navigate your way through needs in this area we have designed a graphic of how to meet these needs at a universal, targeted and individual level and brought together suggested resources to help you to do so.