



# 1 Part one: Understanding the experiences of children with speech, language and communication needs

---

Enabling decision-making by children and young people  
with speech, language and communication needs  
– a four part practice guide

---

# 1

## About this practice guide

This is the first part of a four-part practice guide that offers guidance, tips and practice pointers for anyone seeking to actively involve a child or young person with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in making decisions about their lives.

The four parts are:

- > **Part one: Understanding the experiences of children with speech, language and communication needs**
- > **Part two: Why inclusive communication is everyone's responsibility**
- > **Part three: Strengthening your listening mindset**
- > **Part four: Working creatively with individual children**

The guide's primary focus is on helping practitioners to make sure that the voices of children and young people with SLCN are heard within assessment and review processes. It will therefore be of particular interest to social workers, independent reviewing officers, early help practitioners, SENCOs (special educational needs coordinators), special educational needs (SEN) caseworkers and children's advocates.

Part 1 focuses on understanding the lived experiences of children and young people with SLCN. This includes a discussion of definitions, prevalence and the 'hidden' nature of SLCN.

We have deliberately chosen generic examples of creative practice (see Part four: *Working creatively with individual children*) to ensure that the guide is relevant to a wider audience also. Examples are presented alongside a set of core principles (see Part three: *Strengthening your listening mindset*) for undertaking inclusive assessments and reviews with children and young people with SLCN. These principles can be applied by practitioners working in all settings.

## How to use this guide

We strongly recommend that you read all four parts of this practice guide in sequence. This will enable you to reflect on your own views and experiences and to think about the contextual landscape for children with SLCN before moving on to consider the range of ideas and tools for creative communication that are described in Part four. The guide includes reflective questions and exercises throughout.

The guide can support individual continuous professional development (CPD) and structured CPD within teams and organisations – for example, by asking practitioners to read each part and then participate in a reflective discussion session. Social workers can also write up their reflections to help provide evidence for [Social Work England's Professional Standard 4: Maintaining my CPD](#).

### Note on terminology

Throughout the practice guide, we refer sometimes to 'children' and sometimes to 'children and young people'. No distinction is intended. Unless otherwise specified, all references to 'children' with SLCN include children and young people also. To maintain readability and conciseness, we don't use the full phrase 'children and young people' in every instance.

# 1

## Part one: Understanding the experiences of children with speech, language and communication needs

### Key points

- > Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) involve difficulties producing speech, making sense of what others are saying and/or understanding social communication.
- > Around 1.4 million or one in ten children in the UK have a speech, language and communication need.
- > Evidence suggests SLCN are more common in areas of high deprivation and among children facing other forms of disadvantage.
- > Children's SLCN often remain hidden due to practitioners' limited awareness of SLCN and a tendency to misinterpret behavioural signs.

### What do we mean by speech, language and communication needs?

We each have different ways of expressing ourselves and understanding others. But being able to communicate in multiple and creative ways is especially important for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) due to the range of difficulties they experience.

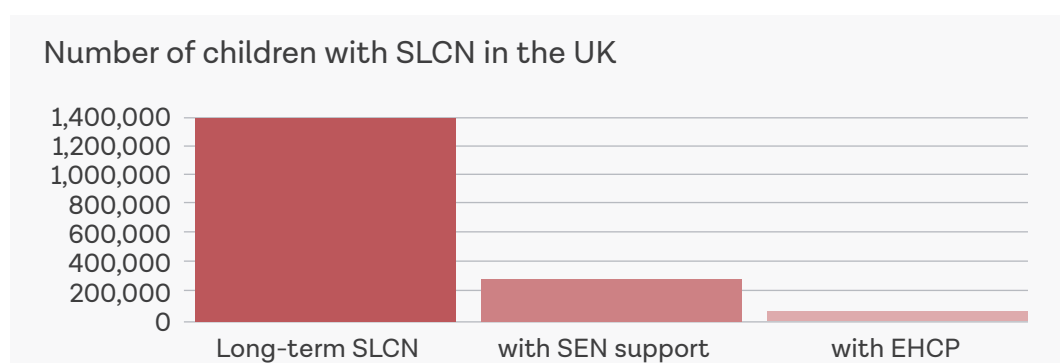
The nature and extent of children's speech, language and communication difficulties vary widely, but those difficulties commonly include:

- > speech that is difficult for others to understand
- > difficulty in producing sounds or forming words
- > struggling to understand and construct sentences
- > finding it hard to make sense of what others are saying, including understanding instructions
- > problems using language socially and interacting with others, including difficulties in understanding non-verbal rules of communication (I CAN, n.d.; RCSLT, n.d.-b).

## How common are SLCN, and which children are most likely to develop them?

An estimated one in ten children in the UK have long-term SLCN (Law et al., 2000, 2011; Norbury et al., 2016). This equates to around 1.4 million children with persistent needs that they will not grow out of (Norbury et al., 2016; Speech and Language UK, n.d.).

SLCN is the most common type of need among pupils with special educational needs (SEN). In 2022-23, SLCN was identified as the primary need for 278,596 children receiving SEN support<sup>1</sup> (Department for Education, 2023) and a further 66,287 children with an education, health and care plan (EHCP).<sup>2</sup>



Evidence suggests SLCN are more common in areas of high deprivation and among children facing other forms of disadvantage.

- > Nursery and primary-aged children from socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods are four times more likely to have delayed language development than those from non-deprived areas (Ene et al., 2019; Law et al., 2011; RCSLT, n.d.-a).
- > Boys and those children born pre-term living in the most deprived areas are at highest risk of developing SLCN (Ene et al., 2019).
- > Pre-school children whose first language isn't English are twice as likely to experience speech and language concerns than their English-speaking peers (Ene et al., 2019).
- > Some children from Black and ethnic minoritised backgrounds may be more likely to experience difficulty accessing the curriculum once they start school due to a relative lack of exposure to the language and cultural conventions on which the learning curriculum is based (Snow, 2019).

Recent reports also point to the potentially long-lasting impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions on children's development, with teachers reporting that many more children were struggling to speak or understand language at an age-appropriate level due to reduced opportunities for social interaction during the pandemic (I CAN, 2021, pp. 2-3).

1 SEN support is for pupils with a learning difficulty or disability who need extra help beyond what is usually provided to other pupils through the curriculum; a pupil receiving SEN support will not have an EHCP.

2 A local authority may issue an EHCP for a pupil who needs more help than is available through SEN support. An EHCP will set out long-term outcomes for the child and specify the provision required to deliver them. This will follow a statutory assessment that considers the pupil's special educational needs and any relevant health and social care needs.



# 1

## A 'hidden' difficulty

Although as many as one in ten children are affected, SLCN is often referred to as a 'hidden' difficulty or disability (I CAN, n.d.). In 2018, a major report by I CAN and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) (2018) highlighted that children's SLCN are frequently missed, misinterpreted or misdiagnosed.

The report identified practitioners' lack of awareness of signs and symptoms of SLCN as a major factor in SLCN going undiagnosed. Rather than a child with a communication need, practitioners may instead see a child who is displaying poor behaviour, becoming withdrawn or socially isolated or struggling to learn. Yet such behaviours are often the only outward sign of a child's frustration at not being able to understand or make themselves understood or of a child's attempt to take control of their situation (I CAN, n.d.).

Law et al.'s literature review found a widely reported association between language and problematic behaviour, with a high prevalence of SLCN among children who also experience social, emotional and behavioural problems (Law et al., 2017, pp. 24–25). The authors note that 'persistent disruptive behaviour may keep underlying language difficulties from being diagnosed, if behavioural issues are treated as the primary problem' (p. 25).

The tendency among some practitioners to misinterpret signs of SLCN may also help account for the disparity between the large numbers of children with SLCN and the significantly smaller number recorded as receiving support related to their needs (Department for Education, 2023).



For more information see:

- > I CAN (n.d). *About SLCN: About speech, language & communication needs.*
- > Speech and Language UK (n.d.). *Scale of the issue. The prevalence of speech, language and communication needs.*
- > I CAN, & Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (2018). *Bercow: Ten years on. An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England.*



## Reflective questions

Take a few minutes to think about what you have read in this part of the practice guide.

- > Did anything surprise you? Or did this information mostly reinforce what you already knew?
- > Does any of the information in this part of the guide suggest aspects of practice that you may want to approach or do differently?

## References

- Department for Education. (2023). *Special educational needs in England: January 2023* [National statistics].  
[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2023](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2023)
- Ene, D., Der, G., Fletcher-Watson, S., O'Carroll, S., MacKenzie, G., Higgins, M., & Boardman, J. P. (2019). Associations of socioeconomic deprivation and preterm birth with speech, language and communication concerns among children aged 27–30 months. *JAMA Network Open*, 2(9): e1911027.  
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.11027>
- I CAN. (n.d). *About SLCN: About Speech, Language & Communication Needs*.  
[www.icancharity.org.uk/about-slcn](http://www.icancharity.org.uk/about-slcn)
- I CAN. (2021). *Speaking up for the Covid generation*.  
<https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/speaking-up-for-the-covid-generation>
- I CAN, & Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT). (2018). *Bercow: Ten Years On. An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England*. I CAN & Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.  
[www.bercow10yearson.com](http://www.bercow10yearson.com)
- Law, J., Charlton, J., & Asmussen, K. (2017). *Language as a child wellbeing indicator*. Early Intervention Foundation.  
[www.eif.org.uk/report/language-as-a-child-wellbeing-indicator](http://www.eif.org.uk/report/language-as-a-child-wellbeing-indicator)
- Law, J., Lindsay, G., Peacey, N., Gascoigne, M., Soloff, N., Radford, J., Band, S., & Fitzgerald, L. (2000). *Provision for Children with Speech and Language Needs In England and Wales: Facilitating Communication Between Education and Health Services* (Research Report No. 239). Department for Education and Employment.  
<http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4475/1/RR239.pdf>
- Law, J., McBean, K., & Rush, R. (2011). Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 46(6), 657–664.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-6984.2011.00036.x>
- Norbury, C. F., Gooch, D., Wray, C., Baird, G., Charman, T., Simonoff, E., Vamvakas, G., & Pickles, A. (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*, 57(11), 1247–1257.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12573>
- RCSLT. (n.d.-a). *The links between speech, language and communication needs and social disadvantage* [Factsheet]. Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.  
[www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/factsheet-slc-social-disadvantage.pdf](http://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/factsheet-slc-social-disadvantage.pdf)
- RCSLT. (n.d.-b). *What are speech, language and communication needs?* [Factsheet]. Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.  
[www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/rcslt-communication-needs-factsheet.pdf](http://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Project/RCSLT/rcslt-communication-needs-factsheet.pdf)
- Snow, P. C. (2019). Speech-Language Pathology and the Youth Offender: Epidemiological Overview and Roadmap for Future Speech-Language Pathology Research and Scope of Practice *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 50(2), 324–339.  
[https://doi.org/10.1044/2018\\_LSHSS-CCJS-18-0027](https://doi.org/10.1044/2018_LSHSS-CCJS-18-0027)
- Speech and Language UK. (n.d.). *Scale of the issue. The prevalence of speech, language and communication needs*.  
<https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/talking-point/for-professionals/information-for-inspectors/scale-of-the-issue>

Authors: Jane Heron and Anita Franklin

With thanks to: Jessica Husbands for peer reviewing this publication and providing anonymised practice stories.



[www.researchinpractice.org.uk](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk)



[ask@researchinpractice.org.uk](mailto:ask@researchinpractice.org.uk)



[@researchIP](https://twitter.com/researchIP)

Part of the National Children's Bureau -  
Registered charity No. 258825. Registered in England and  
Wales No. 952717.

NCB RiP - Registered in England and Wales  
No. 15336152.

Registered office: National Children's Bureau,  
23 Mentmore Terrace, Hackney, London E8 3PN.  
A Company Limited by Guarantee.

[www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

© Research in Practice June 2024