



# Scouting speaks to all

**A leader's guide to speech,  
language and communication  
needs**

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## Learn more

### What are speech, language and communication needs?

- Making friends
- Understanding words
- Having a conversation
- Understanding simple instructions

Do you take the above for granted? For over a million young people in the UK today, such simple everyday tasks are hugely problematic, making communication a frustrating and distressing experience. They can struggle to read, learn, join in, make friends and achieve, and can have difficulties speaking, listening and understanding what others have said. These young people have speech, language and communication needs – often referred to as ‘SLCN’.

There’s more to communication than speech. Communication is about expressing ideas and understanding what is said or written down. There can be ‘knock-on’ effects from problems in this, such as behavioural problems, failure at school, or difficulties with reading and writing. Young people may be labelled as ‘thick’ or as ‘poor readers’ or ‘naughty’ when these things could be the visible effects of an undetected SLCN.

It’s highly likely there is someone in your Scout Group with a speech, language and communication need. A large number of young people are affected by SLCN, and about one in ten will have a long-term difficulty that needs ongoing support. In some areas up to 50% of children will start primary school with some form of SLCN, some of which can be resolved with appropriate support.

It’s not always an immediately obvious issue, so you

can’t spot someone with a SLCN just by looking at them. Such needs cut across labels and diagnoses, so many young people may have other special educational needs as well.

This booklet provides information about SLCN, signs to look out for and ways to provide support. Remember everyone with a SLCN is an individual, and their needs can change over time. Although many examples refer to young people, these strategies will work equally well for an adult with speech, language and communication needs.

Communication is key to a positive Scouts experience

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### Specific language impairment

Specific language impairment (SLI) is a type of speech, language and communication need. It's all dependent on the individual, but impairments may vary in severity. Specific language impairment is not the result of any other condition, and is more common in boys. Difficulties may include:

- Saying individual words but not putting them into sentences.
- Talking in sentences that can be difficult to understand.
- Sounding muddled; it can be difficult to follow what they are saying.
- Finding it difficult to understand words and long instructions.
- Having difficulty remembering the words they want to say.
- Understanding little spoken language and having no or few spoken words.

There is no known cause as to why people develop SLI, which makes it a complicated and difficult condition to understand for young people and their families, and it can be hard to get it acknowledged and identified.

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## It's highly likely there is someone in your Scout Group with a speech, language and communication need.

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### Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty primarily affecting the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. People tend to think that dyslexia is merely a matter of finding reading difficult and writing letters backwards, yet it can be a huge barrier to communication. People with dyslexia may be highly articulate verbally, and demonstrate excellent spatial and creative thinking skills, yet be affected in the areas of reading, spelling and writing.

### Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is mainly known as an impairment of planning and movement coordination. However, for some children and young people with dyspraxia, while they have a good understanding of language, they may have limited expressive communication skills (verbal and written). Where this is the case, the person's ability to understand language is broadly within the typical range of development, but his or her

expressive language is not.

These young people might need time to allow them to process speech, and could need instructions to be given one at a time. Others may have difficulty in producing and coordinating speech sounds, leading to difficulty in producing words and sentences correctly and consistently, and this can affect their ability to communicate their ideas/feelings verbally or contribute to discussions. This is often referred to as 'verbal dyspraxia' or 'developmental verbal dyspraxia'. Some of these young people, while having such severe needs that their speech is mostly unintelligible, can still communicate through alternative means for example by using gestures or drawing as an alternative to speech.

### Hearing impairment

Hearing impairment occurs when there is a problem with, or damage to, one or more parts of the ear. The degree of impairment can vary.

A young person with a hearing impairment is likely to have difficulties learning how to communicate because they cannot hear all the speech sounds around them, or even their own voice. Therefore their basic development of language will often be delayed.

Depending on the severity of their hearing loss, some young people can be helped to hear all speech sounds with hearing aids or a cochlear implant, whereas others may still not hear all speech sounds with this support. In noisy surroundings however, most hearing-impaired young people and children will find hearing harder, regardless of whether or not they have a hearing aid.

### Helping understanding

Depending on the severity of the impairment, and the effectiveness of any hearing-aid support, young people will need to have things explained carefully on a one-to-one basis, to a greater or lesser extent. This will include practical details such as what you are going to do and what is going to happen. This explanation can be time consuming, but is vital to their communication needs.

You will need to be aware of any background noise, and may need to change location in order to make sure you can be heard clearly when speaking. If possible, position yourself so that other non-verbal clues, such as lip or hand movements and facial expressions, are clearly visible.

**Young people with hearing impairments may need extra help when learning new words and concepts. When explaining things, try to use short, clear sentences and non-verbal communication, drawing or using pictures as required to illustrate what you mean.**

### Aids to communication

To aid communication and understanding, young people with hearing impairments may use any of the following, and may combine these elements:



### Sign Supported English (SSE)

It is perfectly possible for a hearing-impaired person to speak, although their speech may be difficult to understand, so patience is a must. Some young people will also add some signs as they speak. This is called 'Sign Supported English' or 'SSE'.

If someone's speech is not fully intelligible, and you are not able to understand their signs, ask them to write down the words you cannot understand. If they cannot spell, ask them to draw what they want to say.

### British Sign Language (BSL)

British Sign Language is a language in its own right, with separate grammar to English. Those who communicate in this way will benefit significantly from specialist support and contact with people who regularly use British Sign Language to develop their language skills. Some of these young people will also learn to develop their use of English, either spoken, written or both.

### Lip reading

A young person may use this method to aid their understanding. It is a good idea to face them and speak directly at normal speed, while they are looking at you. Do not cover your mouth or face with your hands, and don't look away until you've finished talking. Avoid doing anything other than speaking, such as waving a pen, as this may be distracting, while they are looking at you. Do not cover your mouth or face with your hands, and don't look away until you've finished talking. Avoid doing anything other than speaking, such as waving a pen, as this may be distracting.

### Autistic spectrum disorder and communication

Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with other people.

This disorder affects different people in different ways. Some individuals can function well on their own, while others need more assistance.

Some people with autism have good verbal skills; others do not speak at all. ASD is characterised by difficulties involving social relationships, communication, and an unusual attachment to objects or routines.

Many will also exhibit characteristics of other developmental disorders that may include dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Tourette syndrome and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

### Triad of impairments

You may notice some or all of the following:

#### Impairment of social interaction

Often appears aloof and indifferent to other people, especially other young people and children, although some will enjoy certain forms of active physical contact.

Passively accepts social contact and even shows some signs of pleasure in this, but rarely makes spontaneous approaches.

Occasionally approaches other people but in an odd, inappropriate, repetitive way, paying little or no attention to the responses of those they approach.

### **Impairment of language and communication**

Does not appreciate the social uses and pleasure of communication. This is true even of those who have a lot of speech, which they use to talk 'at' others and not 'with' them.

Does not understand that language is a tool for conveying information to others. They may be able to ask for things relating to their own needs, but find it hard to talk about feelings or thoughts, and will not understand the emotions, ideas and beliefs of other people.

### **Impairments of imagination/rigidity of thought**

Is unable to play imaginatively with objects or toys with other children or adults.

Tends to focus on minor or trivial things around them, for example an earring rather than the person wearing it, or a wheel instead of the whole toy train.

Has a limited range of imaginative activities, possibly copied and pursued rigidly and repetitively.

### **Other characteristics of ASD**

The characteristics of autism vary from one person to another but as well as the above three main areas of difficulty, people with autism may display:

- Love of routines
- Sensory sensitivity
- Special interests
- Learning disabilities

They may also demonstrate challenging behaviour such as running away, screaming, biting or kicking, which can be due to frustration at being unable to communicate effectively.

About 10% of children with ASD have some special skill at a much higher level than the rest of their abilities, for example music, art or numerical sequences. Some have a remarkable memory for dates and particular things that interest them.

This is sometimes called savant ability.

### **Strategies to communicate effectively with someone with an ASD**

Be as clear in your communication as possible and say exactly what you mean.

Keep your language direct, avoiding the use of double meanings, sarcasm, teasing, complex open questions or subtle jokes, unless you are really sure the young person understands.

Make sure that you have a person's attention before communicating, and use their name. Don't expect to gain full eye contact – this can be difficult for people with an ASD.

Allow time to process instructions and check that a child understands what they have to do. Visual aids can help.

Be patient. Young people with an ASD may seem to be intentionally rude or disinterested. This is rarely the case. They may not have the basic social understanding to realise how they appear to others.

### **Alternative Communication**

#### **Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)**

Augmentative and alternative communication describes a wide range of techniques that children and young people can use to support both their understanding of language and their spoken communication.

People do not always use just one method to communicate. If they have some speech skills, they may use speech and another system or systems to augment their speech, for example with signs and symbols. If children have no speech skills, then they will use an 'alternative' means of speech, for example a voice output communication aid (VOCA) or a VOCA and some signing. These methods of augmentative and alternative communication may also change over time as a young person's needs change.

There are two main types of AAC systems: unaided communication and aided communication.

#### **Unaided communication**

This refers to methods that do not involve additional equipment. They use what a person already has available to them – their face, hands and body – to convey their message.

#### **Body language and facial expressions**

Many people add meaning to what they are saying through using facial expressions such as smiling or frowning, and gestures such as waving goodbye or nodding their head.

The speaker's use of non-verbal communication can support the young person's understanding of language. For children and young people who have difficulties with speech, use of facial expressions and

gestures can become a very important way to help them get their message across.

Some children with physical impairments may find facial expressions and gestures difficult to produce, and may have their own unique ways to express what they want to say, for example, looking down to indicate 'no', and smiling to indicate 'yes'. It is important that the listener takes time to find out what the young person's preferred method is, and to be consistent with what they use. It may be a good idea to speak to parents to find out what this is.

### Signing support

Signing is a way of using your hands to make different movements and shapes to communicate. British Sign Language, which we've discussed with relation to hearing impairment, is often thought of as a signing system, but it is in fact a language in its own right. Signing systems can also help some people understand what's being said to them. Signing can be used by the young person alongside speech, or instead of it.

To make communication effective, leaders supervising Scouts with these needs must learn what signs mean and learn to make signs themselves. There are some essential signs that all those in contact with a young person will need to know, such as those associated with safety or need, while you should also have someone available during activities with a wider understanding of the signing used for maximum participation.

**Versions of the Beaver, Cub and Scout Promise are available from the Member resources area of [scouts.org.uk](https://scouts.org.uk)**

Example signing systems in the UK include:

- Makaton
- Paget Gorman (PGSS)
- Signalong
- Signed English



### Makaton

Makaton uses signs, symbols and speech to help people to communicate. It is a visual way to develop communication skills, which helps stimulate sounds and words, and in turn helps to encourage language development and learning. Makaton aids understanding, giving the child or adult an extra visual clue to help understanding.

The signs used are from British Sign Language, which is used by many of the deaf community in Britain. A Makaton symbol is a simple black and white drawing that shows the meaning of a word. Symbols are lasting and permanent, and give a child or adult more time to take in information.

**Tips for using Makaton:**  
**Use the sign or symbol for the important word in the sentence. Remember to speak and sign at the same time.**

**Use clear, short sentences. Remember to position yourself well for facial contact, and use facial expression, body language and gestures.**

**Use real objects and mime to give reference and meaning. Use the sign and symbol for 'good' to give praise.**

### Aided communication

This can be 'low-tech' (tools that do not need the use of batteries) or 'high-tech' (devices which need batteries to work them) and refers to methods that involve additional equipment, such as a picture or symbol, chart or book, a talking computer or a voice output communication aid.

### Symbol support

Symbols are all around us, on food labels, computers and mobile phones. Symbols can be used to support people's understanding of language, and by people who find speech difficult, to help them communicate effectively. Individuals may have their own set of symbols, so be sure to check you are using the correct

ones. There are many different symbol systems in use around the UK. However, they all represent what the person wants to say in a picture format.



### Voice output communication aids (VOCAs)

VOCAs include a wide range of devices that have been designed to help people who are unable to speak. A VOCA produces spoken words to help the user get their message across. They all work in different ways. For example, some store words or phrases and allow the user to put together messages which are then spoken out by the device. This is a 'high-tech' form of aided communication, and can be invaluable to many people.

#### How can I support someone with speech language and communication needs?

##### General tips to support a young person with SLCN

- Ensure bullying does not occur.
- Use simple and uncomplicated instructions, one at a time.
- To help those who struggle with concentration, use their name to prompt them to listen.
- Allow time for young people to listen and process what has been said. With time, they will have a response. Count to ten in your head after asking a question.
- Position yourself for giving information – near to/opposite/fully visible/away from extra background noise, etc.

##### For those who have difficulty understanding

Give the young person time to listen to, process and respond to instructions or questions. They may need a longer period of time than usual to process the information, particularly if the instructions are longer or contain a number of pieces of information. You may need to give each direction separately, allowing time for each to be followed before continuing.

- Keep instructions as clear and simple as you can, and be prepared to repeat them.
- Check for understanding or ask the person to repeat the instructions before acting.
- Try to keep your vocabulary at the young person's level. They will experience new vocabulary in different environments and may need support to learn Scouts-specific terms.
- Support what you say with visual clues, objects,

gestures or drawings/diagrams if appropriate.

- Limit background noise when possible.

##### For those who have difficulty expressing themselves

- Be patient. Stress will only make things worse.
- Let them know you are prepared to wait and that you understand their difficulties.
- Do not 'speak for them' or finish their sentences, but provide models of language or choices for them. So if they say a sentence with the incorrect grammar, repeat the sentence again with the correct grammar.
- Give them choices if they seem stuck for words.
- Let the young person know when you don't understand something, and work together to help each other understand.
- Do not pressure them into public speaking.
- Encourage alternative forms of communication like writing or drawing.
- Find out if they use another form of communication. This could be a form of sign language such as Makaton or British Sign Language, or electronic devices like voice output communication aids.

##### Where do I go for more information?

Don't forget to talk to the young person and their family about their needs.

Local and health authorities have speech and language therapy departments. [Find help and guidance in your local area.](#)

##### Organisations

**Ace Centre** [www.ace-centre.org.uk](http://www.ace-centre.org.uk) info@ace-centre.org.uk

Assistive technology and augmentative communication service.

##### Action on Hearing Loss (adults)

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

Action on Hearing Loss is the new name for RNID. They are working for a world where hearing loss does not limit or label people, where tinnitus is silenced and where people value and look after their hearing.

##### Afasic

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

A UK-wide organisation to provide advice and support to young people with speech and language impairments and their families.

##### The Communication Trust

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



The purpose of The Communication Trust is to highlight the importance of speech, language and communication across the children's workforce and to enable practitioners to access the best training and expertise to support the communication needs of all children.

It is supported by a consortium of organisations who deliver services to support children's speech, language and communication needs. They can signpost you to support people working with young people with specific needs.

### **I CAN**

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

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

The children's charity for communication needs, they provide support to young people, families and professionals, and run campaigns to raise awareness of communication needs.

Talking Point is full of information for parents and adults working with young people with SLCN. They are also behind Hello, the national year of communication which took place in 2011.

### **The Makaton Charity**

[www.makaton.org](http://www.makaton.org)

The Makaton Charity is responsible for developing and sharing the Makaton Language Programme.

### **The National Autistic Society**

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

Providing information and support for people with autism, including those with Asperger syndrome, and their families.

### **The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)**

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

A registered charity working for deaf children, young people and their families. It provides information and advice on childhood deafness and a helpline for parents and carers of deaf children and young deaf people.

### **Credits**

This resource was written by Matt Todd

(Diversity Ambassador), with support from the Communication Trust, a charity working to highlight the importance of speech, language and communication across the children's workforce.