

# Communication Practice Guide



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# Introduction

The *Communication Practice Guide* has been developed to support implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF).

The VEYLDF describes five Learning and Development Outcomes. The scenarios and learning activities in this guide will support engagement with key concepts of the VEYLDF, particularly Learning and Development Outcome 5: *Children are effective communicators*.

The Communication Outcome has five key components of learning:

- Children interact verbally and non-verbally for a range of purposes.
- Children engage with a range of texts and get meaning from these texts.
- Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media.
- Children begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work.
- Children use information and communication technologies to access information, investigate ideas and represent their thinking.

## Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to:

- strengthen early years professionals' understanding of the importance of communication across the birth to eight years age range
- support practices that consolidate and strengthen all children's communication skills
- guide the assessment practice decisions of early years professionals working within and across early years services and settings and in the early years of school
- support improvements in the quality of engagement between early years professionals and children and families, and with other early childhood professionals
- highlight the importance of the birth-to-three-years period in establishing a strong foundation for subsequent communication skill development.

This guide draws on evidence detailed in *Assessment of Children as Effective Communicators in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review*, (Verdon et al. 2018).

The guide is designed to help educators better understand the trajectory of communication skill development and highlight the importance of communication in enabling children to access and participate meaningfully in a diverse range of learning opportunities.

Engagement with the learning activities will help educators to see the observational data they hold about a young child's communication skill development as meaningful and valuable assessment data. This will contribute to holistic understandings of the child's development by other professionals and by families.

## How to use this guide

The concepts, scenarios and reflective questions in this practice guide align with the National Quality Standard and support all early childhood professionals to engage with the learning activities in a way that shows a commitment to ongoing quality improvement. Those responsible for professional development can choose how to engage with the guide so their specific setting and team are supported.

The scenarios are designed to provoke rich and meaningful conversations. Each scenario details a particular communication focus, key learning points and VEYLDF Practice Principle focus and concludes with reflective questions that serve as discussion prompts.

Before engaging with colleagues, early childhood leaders should become familiar with the *Assessment of Communication in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review* (Verdon et al. 2018). This will support informed decision-making about how best to incorporate materials into practice discussions.

The flexible design of this practice guide provides the opportunity to either engage with one scenario at a time (perhaps as part of a regular team meeting) or to set aside periods of time to look at one of the following theoretical sections. The material can be revisited depending on current themes within settings and used as a reference tool to help work through practice challenges. Group discussion will maximise engagement; however, the scenarios can also be used with individual staff to guide discussions as part of their regular professional mentoring or supervision sessions.

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# Communication in the early years

## What is communication?

Communication is a process in which a person integrates a multiplicity of informative signals in order to understand the thoughts, intentions and knowledge of others and express the same to others. Speech Pathology Australia states that 'Communication involves speaking, hearing, listening, understanding, social skills, reading, writing and using voice' (Speech Pathology Australia factsheet, 'Communication impairment in Australia').

Signals can come from:

- following the direction of another's gaze, facial expression, body language, gestures, and voice tone
- the context and culture, what's happening in the environment at the time, what has just happened and what is going to happen next
- the knowledge we have about a person's interests and preferences and prior behaviour
- our recall of similar past experiences
- interpretations dependent on our own emotional states
- sounds, words, grammatical formation of sentences and inferences
- symbols, signs and written language.

Communication is inextricably linked to executive function, which enables us to develop self-regulation. Communication enables us to form relationships with others, feel secure, included and worthy, learn from others, and collaborate with others.

Children are neurologically wired to incrementally acquire the understanding and use of these signals. From their earliest days,

babies can persist with head turning to localise a voice and hold eye contact with their mother. In their first six weeks, they can respond to others with body movements and smiles. In their first months, they can watch mouths and imitate jaw opening and tongue movements. By three to four months of age, they can turn their head to direct a 'coo' to a caregiver to initiate an interaction and take turns in babbling with their parents soon after. By nine to 12 months of age, babies have reached the extraordinary milestone of joint attention, where they can follow another's gaze to see what they are focusing on, and start to understand the thoughts and intentions of others. By the time a child is five years old, they can communicate with their peers to cooperate, negotiate and direct others in imaginative play and collaborative endeavours.

If there is any developmental intrusion (that is, development is affected by emotional deprivation or trauma, social disadvantage or a neurodevelopmental condition) during a child's early years, the child's ability to receive and use all elements of communication may be compromised. Early identification of this intrusion and explicit intervention can contribute towards improved outcomes. This is critical to a child's future, because we know that communication skills are fundamental to positive social relationships, reading, spelling and writing, future employment, earning capacity and mental health.

It is the responsibility of all professionals who work with young children to identify any such developmental intrusions and to seek assistance as early as possible. This will enable the provision of appropriate supports to give every child the best opportunity to reach their potential (Winner 2013).

**The VCAA's Wellbeing Practice Guide provides scenarios and learning activities to support engagement with the key concepts of the VEYLDF, including the Learning and Development Outcome: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing. This guide is designed to inform a greater understanding of wellbeing and its place as both a prerequisite for and outcome of learning. It focuses on the critical role of executive function in the development of wellbeing.**

**[www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EYWellbeingPracticeGuide.pdf](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EYWellbeingPracticeGuide.pdf)**

## What is executive function?

### Executive function and the development of communication skills

Children's communication is a complex process. It allows a child to both gain meaning from and give meaning to a myriad of stimuli or signals (either internal or external), so they can understand and convey the needs, intentions, thoughts and opinions of themselves and others.

Executive function is the underlying organisational system that enables us to selectively attend to one stimulus over another, to remember, to sort, to prioritise and to integrate the multiplicity of informative stimuli to enable communication. Executive function is a set of mental processes that play a critical role in how our brains plan, organise, remember details and pay attention to incoming information. These mental processes allow us to filter distractions when we are trying to concentrate on something and help us to regulate and control our impulses in response to what is going on around us.

Young children in the early years have to manage a barrage of incoming information, from one moment to the next. From the very first days of life, their brains are bombarded with

a constant stream of information, and infants are required to begin refining their responses to both external and internal stimuli (Lally & Mangione 2006).

It is the prefrontal cortex of the brain that is responsible for executive function. This region of the brain has connections to other regions of the brain and has been likened to an air traffic controller because of its ability to process a myriad of stimuli seemingly simultaneously – remembering, sorting and prioritising the information in order to make plans and execute them. The frontal lobes of the brain can also override our lower brain 'fight or flight' responses enabling self-regulation, that is, the ability to think before acting and the ability to reflect on and improve our responses. The skills required to do all this are part of the organisational process called executive function.

Children are not born with executive function skills – they are born with the ability to develop them (Center on the Developing Child 2018). In their responses to and interactions with children, early childhood professionals can help them develop their executive function for communication. Early childhood professionals can then share these strategies with families.

### Executive function: Skills for learning and life

*This five-minute video provides an overview of Building the Brain's 'Air Traffic Control' System: How Early Experiences Shape the Development of Executive Function, the joint working paper from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child and the National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs.*

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-executive-function-skills-for-life-and-learning/>

### Speech Pathology in Schools resource

Learning Activity 5 (page 13) explores the communication development of a school-age student. The Speech Pathology in Schools resource, published by Speech Pathology Australia, is designed to support the engagement and participation of students with speech, language and communication needs in schools.

<https://speechpathologyaustralia.cld.bz/Speech-Pathology-in-Schools-2017>

## Strategies for supporting executive function skills for communication

### Paying attention

In order to communicate, a child must use executive function to pay attention to the information being communicated. As early childhood professionals, we can help children to be better at selectively attending by removing distracting background noise, digital technology and other distracting visual stimuli when we communicate with them. We can use an alerting call-and-response technique such as 'One, two, three, eyes on me ... One, two, eyes on you'. We can more successfully engage a child's attention by making their interests and what's important to them the focus of the communication, for example, family, animals, sports, fantasy or something about which they have expressed concern.

### Working memory

Early childhood professionals can help children with the executive function of **working memory** in communication by using sentence lengths that match the child's age. For example, seven words before a one-to-two-second pause for a four-year-old and shorter sentences for younger children.

### Making connections

As early childhood professionals, we can use visual supports and demonstrations of an expected response to support the meaning of what we say to a child. We can help the child remember what has been said by making connections to and finding similarities with the child's prior experiences and existing knowledge. This also helps support the development of the executive function skill of sorting information, which then helps children to keep to the topic as they respond.

### Communication style

To help children to prioritise particular information or selectively attend to a communication message, we can stress certain words in our sentences and exaggerate our voice tone to convey the emotion of the sentence. This is particularly powerful for young children, who naturally start by understanding key words in a sentence. For example, 'Let's go to the *park* and we might see some *dogs*'. Exaggerated facial expression, gestures and voice tone with words help children to attend to non-verbal information, which adds an additional layer of emotional information that supports them to interpret what is being said.

## Communication milestones

Speech Pathology Australia publishes a **Communication Milestones Kit with specific advice about speech development. Having this information about milestones can be useful to educators in discussions with families and speech pathologists.**

[www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au) (see **Resources for the Public**)

'Children's trajectories of communication may not follow a linear process and there can be considerable variation in the time taken to develop particular skills. Furthermore, children simultaneously develop interrelated skills, understandings and abilities across speech, language and literacies. Learning is impacted by contexts (for example, home and early childhood settings), availability of tools to support learning (for example, books and drawing implements) and children's interactions with more knowledgeable others (adults and older children) ...' (Verdon et al. 2018, p. 5)



As early childhood professionals, we can also help children to build their capability for selective attention and focus on a specific aspect of a verbal communication by posing a question to them before the information is presented. For example, 'On this page, listen and find out who knocked on the door'.

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### **Flexible thinking**

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Executive function enables children to switch ideas, thoughts and responses from one angle or direction to be able to quickly understand or respond in another when more information comes to light. This is flexible thinking. Continually modelling alternatives and using flexible language like 'might' and 'could' helps children with flexible thinking such as 'Mummy *might* be late because there is a lot of traffic or she *might* be late because she had to stay and finish her work. She *could* be here very soon.'

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### **Routines and language**

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Executive function enables children to plan and organise (Center on the Developing Child 2011). Communication requires a high level of organisation. Children are required to form a response that may be a combination of verbal and non-verbal communication within a second

or two and the ideas need to be organised in a sequential manner. Executive function skills help children to inhibit unnecessary talk and inappropriate comments or questions so that they can effectively 'turn take' in communication and have positive social interactions.

Children are helped by clear models of language connected to their play or immediate context. The language that educators use can help children with planning and to feel secure in their environment. For example, educators can introduce structure through the use of words like 'first, next, then, after that, finally'.

This is an important aspect of the valuable work that educators do when they create routines for all children in the room. Without these routines being developed and modelled by the educators, the group would not function well and the children would not feel secure (Winner 2013).

It is important to help all children feel calm, comfortable, secure and safe in their education and care setting so that their executive function skills are developed. Educators can do much to support the development of executive function skills to enable children to have optimal learning opportunities and experience success.

## **Literacy Teaching Toolkit**

**Evidence-informed teaching strategies for early childhood educators and teachers working with children from birth to Level 6 can be found in the Department of Education and Training's online Literacy Teaching Toolkit.**

**It is designed to provide access to information about effective language and literacy teaching and learning through:**

- **detailed accounts of how educators should support children's language development and scaffold learning experiences**
- **detailed experience plans with practical examples of language and literacy teaching and links to the VEYLDF**
- **video vignettes that demonstrate literacy teaching practices.**

**<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/Pages/default.aspx>**

## Assessing children as effective communicators

Assessment of children's knowledge, skills and capabilities is at the core of all work undertaken with children and families in the early years. Early childhood professionals use a wide range of reliable and accessible assessment tools to develop individualised, targeted, holistic and effective programs of learning. In this they are guided by evidence-based practice that is underpinned by the Early Years Planning Cycle (Figure 1), as first described in *Educators Belonging, Being and Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2010).

### Principles for assessing children as effective communicators

Assessment of children's communicative competence is an integral part of early years practice. In order to observe and support children to become effective communicators, early childhood professionals require an understanding of how communication development progresses, together with reliable and accessible assessment tools. Identifying evidence of children's communicative competence and its progression is essential for effective assessment that will inform future learning opportunities for the individual child and the learning group.



Figure 1: Early Years Planning Cycle: Reflection occurs at every step in the cycle

## Five essential skills for reading

The NSW Centre for Effective Reading sets out the five skills required for reading in the first year of school:

- phonemic awareness
- phonics
- vocabulary
- fluency
- comprehension.

[www.cer.education.nsw.gov.au/professional-learning/early-years](http://www.cer.education.nsw.gov.au/professional-learning/early-years)

Learning Activities 3 (page 18) and 6 (page 26) explore the five essential skills.

*Assessment of Children as Effective Communicators in Early Childhood Care Education and Care: Literature Review* (Verdon et al. 2018) identifies seven principles for assessing children as effective communicators:

1. Effective assessment of communication requires a clearly defined purpose.
2. Communication is multifaceted and each element may require specific assessment.
3. Communication assessment may include both formal methods (for example, standardised tests) and informal methods (for example, observation tests, parent and teacher checklists).
4. Assessment of communication considers the multiple languages and communication systems that a child may use, to gain a holistic understanding of communicative competence.

5. Assessment of communication includes children's own reports, evidence from families and multiple sources of information in a range of settings.

6. Assessment of communication considers a child's functional use of language and participation in daily life as a communicator.

7. Assessment of communication is an opportunity for multidisciplinary collaboration.

Incorporating these elements into the assessment of communication will enable practitioners to ensure a holistic and effective approach. They also provide opportunities for critical reflection on service practice and philosophy.

## **Social disadvantage and communication**

*'The ability to communicate effectively is at the core of children's social and cognitive success. Effective communication is the foundation for lifelong autonomy and engagement in society ... The presence of speech and language difficulties in early childhood has been found to significantly impact long-term educational outcomes over and above other predictive factors such as IQ and maternal education ... researchers have found a strong association between childhood communication difficulties and youth incarceration ...'* (Verdon et al. 2018).

**Children experiencing social disadvantage may face greater challenges to their education and development. Social disadvantage comes in many different forms, such as low income, family or health difficulties, and being socially or geographically isolated. Social disadvantage may reduce the opportunities of individuals or families to participate fully in society. Many families experience long-term social disadvantage, which may extend across multiple generations (intergenerational disadvantage).**

**Learning Activity 5 (page 23) explores family and social influences on communication development.**

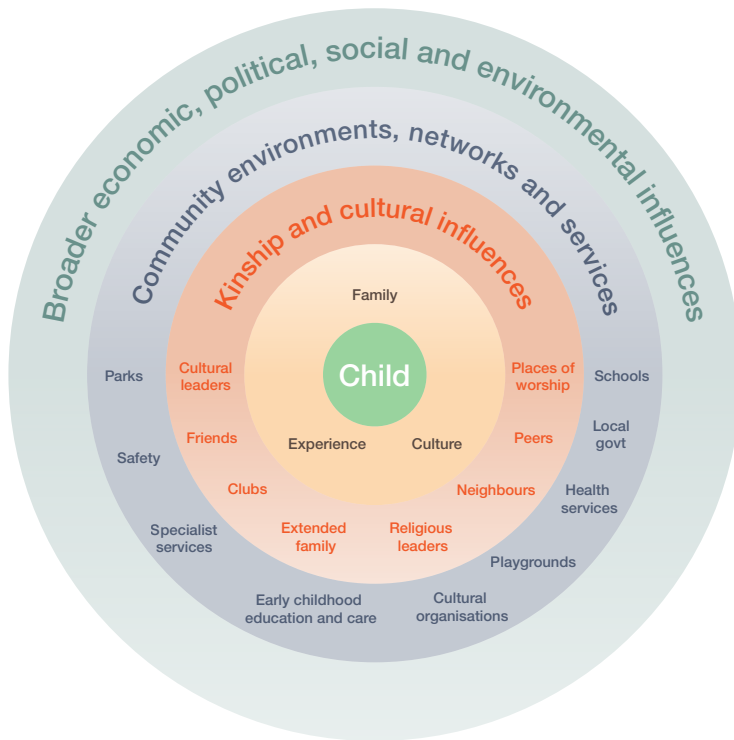


Figure 2: The ecological model of child development

Children learn about themselves and construct their own identity within the context of their families and communities. This includes their relationships with people, places and things and the actions and responses of others. Identity is not fixed. It is shaped by experiences. When children have positive experiences they develop an understanding of themselves as significant and respected, and feel a sense of belonging. Relationships are the foundations for the construction of identity – ‘who I am’, ‘how I belong’ and ‘what is my influence?’

*(Belonging, Being and Becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia p. 20)*

The ecological model (as adapted from Bronfenbrenner 1979) that underpins the VEYLDF acknowledges the life of each child within a social, environmental, political and economic context (see Figure 2).

The ecological model, in which the child is at the centre, recognises that all children influence and are affected by the environments that surround them. The child is viewed as active and engaged in their learning and development within their local context shaped by family, culture and experience.

Families and kinship members have the primary influence on the child’s learning and development. They provide the child with relationships, opportunities and experiences that shape each child’s sense of belonging, being and becoming.

A child’s local community, cultural events and spaces, and their accessibility, reinforce a sense of belonging and wellbeing for a child and their family. Each adult around the child learns, leads, supports and actively invests in the child’s success. Each professional who engages with the child has a part to play.

When you consider the assessment of children as effective communicators through this lens it is evident that assessment will need to take account of multiple sources of information from the different environments that surround the child.

The learning activities in this practice guide provide examples of the effective practices and positive outcomes that can be achieved when the ecological model underpins thinking and decision-making.

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## Tools to support an understanding of communication

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*Assessment of Children as Effective Communicators in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review* (Verdon et al. 2018) identifies a range of tools that can be used to assess children's communicative competence. Eleven tools that can be accessed or administered by early childhood professionals are identified and evaluated. A further 17 tools that can be administered by professionals with specialist expertise are included as an appendix.

The evaluation summary of the 11 tools assists early childhood professionals to make informed decisions about the most appropriate assessment tools for their context and setting. The information on the range of tools also helps educators better understand the types of assessment data that are represented in reports from other professionals.

As with all aspects of development, the skills associated with children becoming effective communicators are progressive and develop across time. Having a clear understanding of the indicators of effective communication progression and each child's individual developmental trajectory supports early childhood professionals to be specific and explicit in assessment of and subsequent planning for communication development.

Early childhood professionals can use a variety of assessment tools, across multiple contexts, in partnerships with families and other relevant professionals. This will provide the most balanced and accurate account of how a child is progressing in their communication development.

### Language in the Class website

**Mahogany Rise Primary School in Victoria published the scope and sequence for language goals on the Language in the Class website. This resource was developed with a speech pathologist as a free resource to teach language and phonemic awareness skills in the classroom.**

<https://languageintheclass.com>.

**Language in the Class Learning4Life songs are available on YouTube.**

<https://www.youtube.com/user/Learning4LifeSongs>.

### Supporting multilingualism

**Learning Activity 7 in this document (page 29) explores language fundamentals for writing and the simultaneous integration and execution of many complex language and motor skills required for writing. Early childhood educators can support children with English as an additional language by creating a multilingual environment in which their rights as bilingual or multilingual people are upheld.**



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# Learning Activities

## Learning Activity 1

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### Communication focus

- Communication development from birth
- The many forms of babies' communication
- The links between communication and relationships

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### Key learning points

- Communication development begins at birth, and a baby's communication takes many forms (including non-verbal communication).
- Communication development is inextricably linked to the relationships that young children have with those around them.
- When parents or primary caregivers learn to observe, wait and listen in communication with young children, this leads to attuned and attentive care-giving, enabling secure attachment and communication growth.
- Highlighting a family's strengths builds their confidence and helps to build trusting relationships between them and professionals.

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### VEYLDF Practice Principle focus

#### Respectful relationships and responsive engagement

- Early childhood professionals demonstrate sensitivity and initiate warm, trusting and reciprocal relationships with children and their families (VEYLDF 2016, p. 11).
- Early childhood professionals help children to establish secure attachments and develop self-regulation (VEYLDF 2016, p. 11).

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### Scenario

#### Background and initial analysis

Natalie has recently given birth to her first child, Billy, and is attending her eight-week assessment with Lyn, the maternal and child health nurse. Natalie has a history of anxiety and depression and places high expectations on herself. During the appointment, she is teary and says that she is exhausted from lack of sleep. Natalie describes Billy as 'unhappy' and

feels that he cries constantly, although she also says that he has started to smile. Natalie knows it is important to try to interact calmly with Billy, as she knows that this is likely to help soothe him. The way that Natalie's responds to Billy's crying can further influence his behaviour; this is known as 'emotional co-regulation'. Natalie wants to connect with Billy, but feels that she is struggling to be the mother she wants to be.

Lyn is aware that these early weeks with a first baby are very stressful. She has seen the benefits of helping new parents understand how to read their baby's communication signals and respond to them. Lyn also knows that when parents learn to **observe, wait and listen** and then respond to what their babies are communicating, these skills will have a lasting impact on their relationship with their child.

Lyn works with parents to support them to attune to their child (that is, 'tune in' to their child's emotions) and to respond sensitively and positively. This leads to an emotionally secure and supportive relationship between the child and their parents (known as 'secure attachment'), which provides a firm basis for children to engage with developmental challenges as they grow, learn and develop.

Together, these factors support the beginning of 'back-and-forth' exchanges in which each person takes their turn to communicate. Back-and-forth exchanges are the basis for conversations when the child is older, as well as the development of responsive relationships.

#### Building a respectful relationship and demonstrating responsive engagement

Lyn acknowledges that Natalie's feelings of exhaustion and lack of confidence are experienced by many parents in the first weeks. During the appointment, Lyn asks Natalie how Billy likes to be held, what type of voice he likes to listen to, at what times he looks at her eyes and at what times he smiles at her. This provides Natalie with specific behaviours to observe, and reassures her that she is already attuned to Billy. She is already reading her baby's communications and connecting with him. Lyn observes and reinforces Natalie's adjustment of Billy's position when he communicates

discomfort. Lyn takes opportunities in the appointment to positively reinforce Natalie's instinctive and successful communications with Billy.

Lyn and Natalie discuss the different states of a baby's regulation, from being calm and available for interaction, to the warning signs of restlessness, to the full cry. They talk about the communication opportunities in the calm state. When Billy is in the feeding position, on a change table or being held, he is at the ideal distance from her to enable him to make eye contact, watch her face and mouth and where mother and baby can imitate each other by poking out a tongue or rounding a mouth.

Lyn and Natalie discuss Billy's reaction to each parent's voice, including 'motherese', repetitive babble or songs and rhymes. Does he startle if the voice is too loud, if there are sudden or unexpected sounds, or in response to any other changes in his surroundings? Does he turn his head to the side to have a break from the stimulation? This discussion helps Natalie to think about interpreting Billy's communication and attuning to him, so as to have successful interactions with him and provide timely support.

Lyn shows Natalie a book from the parents' library, which has pictures of babies' body language. They study the picture of a baby trying to self-soothe by bringing his hands together in front of his body. This is a warning communication that he may soon start to become restless, and may need help to

settle for sleep, or other support. Natalie seems relieved that she has some tools for understanding Billy better. Lyn and Natalie also discuss the fact that no one is perfectly 'in sync' with their baby and that, from time to time, communications are missed.

### **Outcome**

At the next visit, despite Natalie's ongoing fatigue, she is more relaxed and talks about Billy's warning communications that she can now identify, and which help her to support him in a timely manner for easier settling. She proudly reports on her baby's imitation attempts, initiation of interactions and new and deliberate sound-making.

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### **Reflective questions**

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Think of a time when you helped a parent to identify their strengths in supporting their child's development. What sorts of things did you say to the parent to help them recognise their existing skills and strengths? How did you help or encourage the parent to build on these skills?

Children and adults communicate in many other ways (that is, not just with words). How are the children in your setting communicating with you? How are they telling you what they need, what they are worried about or what they are thinking? What communications do you use with children other than words? How do children respond to different affects (emotional expressions), tones of voice, gestures, pictures and actions you might demonstrate?



## Learning Activity 2

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### Communication focus

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- Engaging with families to influence early language development in the home learning environment
- Educating parents about the critical role of communication development in their child's future
- Early effective strategies to strengthen speech and communication development with children under two years of age

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### Key learning points

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- Communication with families provides a platform for educating them about the crucial role that communication development plays in a child's future.
- Raising a family's expectations of their child's communication development motivates families to learn effective strategies to stimulate communication development.
- When speech pathologists and early childhood educators collaborate effectively, there are opportunities for educators to develop explicit skills and knowledge in relation to communication milestones, and effective strategies to support the achievement of these.
- Early and effective strategies to strengthen communication development benefit all children and their families.

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### VEYLDF Practice Principle focus

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#### Partnerships with families

- Early childhood professionals create a welcoming and inclusive environment where all families are encouraged to participate in and contribute to experiences that enhance children's learning and development (VEYLDF 2016, p. 9).
- Early childhood professionals listen to each family's understanding, priorities and perspectives about their child with genuine interest to inform shared decision-making and promote each child's learning and development (VEYLDF 2016, p. 9).

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### Scenario

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#### Background information

Kate is 16 months old and has recently started attending an early education and care centre for three days a week. Kate's chatty older brother, Oscar (3½ years of age), attends the kinder room at the same centre. Kate's room leader, Priya, observes that Kate is a gentle and cautious child, who watches other children from the edge of the group. Priya has noticed that when Kate hears sudden, loud noises such as screams, children arguing over toys, or educators calling loudly to other children, her facial expressions and body language, such as blinking rapidly or holding her head down, appear to reflect a 'stress' response. Kate is also not using any words or babble yet, and is completely quiet when she plays.

Kate's parents are separated and Priya regularly sees Joanne (mum) or Rob (dad) when they bring Kate to the centre at the beginning or end of the day.

#### Educator reflection to support analysis

Priya appreciates that, although children develop speech at different rates, the expected developmental milestone for first words such as 'mama' and 'dada', and high-interest words such as 'ball' and 'car', is 12 months of age. Priya has seen that by 15 months of age, young children babble and use intonation patterns (changes in their tone of voice) that make it sound like they are saying something to you, even when the babble is not understandable. Priya knows that by 18 months of age, children have a vocabulary of between three and 50 words and start combining two words to make one word, for example: 'allgone' and 'whazzat?'. Priya is aware that communication skills at this age form the foundation of a child's relationships, and also influence their long-term learning and development outcomes.

#### Educator advocates for the child in collaboration with the family

Priya explains to Joanne and Rob that they can help her learn more about Kate, and asks each of them if they would prefer to talk by phone or to meet with her at the centre, when they have

more time and Priya can be relieved from her responsibilities in the children's room. Joanne and Rob see Priya's request as a high priority, and they decide to attend the centre together to talk with her.

Priya begins the meeting by sharing some positive observations of Kate with Joanne and Rob, and describing how Kate has settled in to the room routines. Priya explains how helpful it is when parents share information with her and she shares information with them – together they can build a more complete understanding and create the best environments for Kate to learn and grow.

Priya asks a range of questions about Kate's health, her interests and her interactions with her brother Oscar. Joanne and Rob are hesitant at first, but respond positively to Priya's questions when they see that she is committed to supporting Kate's progress.

Priya discovers that Kate has had chest and ear infections every three months since she was six months of age. Kate's parents describe her as a smart little girl, but say that she has always been quieter than her brother, adding, 'She can't get a word in with her brother around!'

Rob says that he was relieved when Oscar began talking at the age that he should have, because Rob's mother had told Rob that he didn't start talking until he was nearly three years old. Rob explains that he is beginning to wonder if Kate is going to be like him. Rob reveals that he didn't enjoy school because he found learning to read very difficult.

Priya realises that Kate is at risk of late speech and language development because of her family history and her recurrent ear infections, and she recognises that Rob, and possibly both parents, are anxious about this. Priya knows it is important that she uses positive and supportive language when discussing Kate's speech development with Rob and Joanne.

Priya explains to Rob and Joanne the critical importance of communication development for Kate's overall development. Priya talks through how children's speech allows them to engage in social interactions and respond to their environment and she explains that Kate's recurrent ear infections could be placing her at risk.

### **Educator collaborates with the family**

Priya explains that for some children, like Kate, additional professional advice can ensure that appropriate and effective strategies are developed and applied to support their language development. Priya recommends that if Kate's ear infections continue, Rob and Joanne should ask their general practitioner for a referral to a children's ear, nose and throat specialist. Priya also says that, with Rob and Joanne's consent, she would like a speech pathologist from the local community health centre to come to the education and care centre.

At this visit the speech pathologist would observe Kate and to show the educators some strategies to support Kate's speech development. Priya could then share these strategies with Joanne and Rob. The speech pathologist could also provide advice as to whether Kate would benefit from a more formal individualised communication assessment.

Joanne and Rob feel that they have received useful advice and support from Priya. Rob and Joanne give their consent for Priya to facilitate a referral to the speech pathologist from the local community health centre and complete the necessary documentation with Priya.

### **Educator collaborates with a speech pathologist**

Priya approaches her educational leader and centre coordinator and organises a referral to Fatima, who is one of the speech pathologists from the local community health service and already works with an older child at their centre. Fatima confirms that it is better to assess Kate promptly rather than take a 'wait and see' approach. Fatima agrees that this may have flow-on benefits for the other children in Kate's age group, as the new skills and strategies that educators will use with Kate may also be relevant for the other children.

Fatima notices that Priya has developed a trusting relationship with Kate's family, and that this has enabled Priya to gather detailed information from Kate's parents. This will help both Priya and Fatima to understand and address Kate's needs.

Priya explains to Fatima that Kate's parents have been receptive to the guidance and support she has offered them so far. Priya and Fatima believe Kate's parents are likely to support any recommendations arising from the speech pathology referral. Fatima acknowledges that Priya is proactive in seeking to support Kate's communication development rather than adopting a 'wait and see' approach.

Together, Priya and Fatima conduct an observation of Kate, and they note that Kate:

- frequently uses **joint attention**, following the direction of an educator's gaze to share what the educator is looking at, such as the trolley as it arrives with morning tea
- can also follow an educator's pointing finger, and understands that this tells her where to go next or where to find something
- follows other children in routines, like going to the bathroom to wash her hands
- turns to look at Priya or another familiar educator when they call her name
- understands directions such as 'get a book' when she is in the book corner
- can initiate actions as part of a game, such as putting her hat over her face and pulling it off when the educator plays 'Where's Kate?' with her
- enjoys helping the educators with routine tasks such as sweeping the floor and wiping the tables
- points to indicate that she wants something
- waves back when her educator waves at her
- enjoys exploring toys, and appears comfortable enough to sit and explore toys alongside the calmer children.

Fatima points out that the behaviours they have observed show that Kate has strong **preverbal communication skills**. Fatima advises that monitoring Kate's ear health and providing her with **explicit interaction** will give her the speech development support that she needs.

Fatima demonstrates strategies such as getting down to Kate's level to be face to face with her, and focusing on what Kate is interested in. Fatima explains the strategy of **observe, wait and listen**. She points out that when educators observe Kate using facial

expressions and gestures to communicate – for example, when she holds her hand up in a 'stop' gesture to mean 'no more banana', and points to what she wants – this is an opportunity for adults to model words that match Kate's communications.

Fatima demonstrates how to model words and gestures for these situations, saying 'no' with an exaggerated shake of her head, and 'apple' while pointing to the apple that Kate wants. Then, Fatima holds up the apple and waits for at least three to five seconds. Waiting gives Kate a communication opportunity. Fatima tries this several times, and then Kate says 'ap'. Fatima then responds in an animated way, saying 'Oh, you want some apple?' Fatima also listens carefully and hears Kate make sounds like 'uh-oh' when she drops her apple. Fatima plays a 'copy-cat' game, repeating 'uh-oh' back to Kate. Kate laughs with a twinkle in her eye.

### Actions

Fatima and Priya conduct another observation six weeks later. Priya reports that she has demonstrated the techniques to Rob and Joanne and they feel empowered knowing how to help Kate in a natural and playful way. Everyone is delighted with Kate's progress as she approaches 18 months of age and is now using some words. Fatima will continue to work with Priya to monitor Kate's progress and add new techniques as Kate progresses. All the educators in Priya's room now understand the importance of using these teaching techniques for every toddler in the room in order to optimise their communication development.

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### Reflective questions

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- What do you see as signs of a communication delay? What role does your knowledge of children's typical development play in your assessment? What would you plan for a child who is behind in their communication milestones? What resources do you have in your workplace to help you determine what is developmentally normal and when there might be a need for intervention?
- How do you create learning environments where young children are relaxed and involved in learning experiences?
- How do you prepare for discussions with families about your observations of their child's development? What do you do if the discussion doesn't appear to be going well?

### Learning Activity 3

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#### Communication focus

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- The importance of speech development for self-assurance and peer interaction
- Optimisation of communication opportunities for three-to-four-year-old children

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#### Key learning points

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- Supporting children with speech sound disorders enables positive communication experiences for them.
- Educators and speech pathologists can collaborate to provide explicit teaching to develop children's speech sounds.
- Early speech sound teaching is linked to speech sound awareness, and is one of the five essential skills for reading.
- Speech sound disorders can mask how the child is progressing in other areas of their development.

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#### VEYLDF Practice Principle focus

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##### Partnerships with families

- Early childhood professionals create a welcoming and inclusive environment where all families are encouraged to participate in and contribute to experiences that enhance children's learning and development (VEYLDF 2016, p. 9).

##### Assessment for learning and development

- Assessment of children's knowledge, skills and capabilities is an essential ingredient of planning for and promoting new learning and development (VEYLDF 2016, p. 13).
- Early childhood professionals assess children in ways that include information from a wide range of sources to help them assess and plan effectively (VEYLDF 2016, p. 13).

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#### Scenario

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##### Background and initial analysis

Luca is three years old and attends an education and care program. Luca's speech is very difficult to understand. He also has difficulty separating from whichever parent or grandparent brings him to the centre. Luca's early childhood educator, Simon, monitors his separation anxiety and observes that when his family leaves, Luca finds security by engaging in parallel play with other children in the large-blocks and cars area. Simon observes that as Luca settles, he plays imaginatively with the cars, filling them with petrol at a pretend service station and driving them to the pretend shops. He makes car-engine and filling-up sounds as he plays. After approximately 10 minutes, Luca can usually be encouraged by an educator to join other children at the Play-Doh table.

Simon has assessed that Luca's understanding of instructions is developing well. Simon has assessed this by giving him two related requests that are not part of the usual routine, such as, 'Use your finger and make holes in the Play-Doh'. Simon has also asked Luca 'what', 'who' and 'where' questions, to which Luca can give three-to-four-word answers, as expected for his age, even though the words are very difficult to understand. Luca communicates well using facial expressions, body language, pointing and voice intonation to show that he understands the question he is being asked.

Simon knows that by three years of age, children should be 80 per cent understandable to an unfamiliar person. Simon judges that, even though he is familiar with Luca, he can only understand approximately 50 per cent of what Luca says. Simon thinks that if interpreting what Luca says is hard work for him, then communication is probably exhausting and frustrating for Luca.

Simon is concerned that Luca's speech difficulties reduce his opportunities to be part of a successful 'back-and-forth' circle of communication. Luca rarely experiences a relaxed conversation with his peers or educators. Simon has noticed that Luca sometimes makes inappropriate comments such as 'poo poo' to create connections with the other children. The other children laugh at him and this reinforces Luca's behaviour. Simon has heard other children saying, 'Luca's a baby' or, 'Luca talks like a baby'. Simon notices that some of the educators treat Luca as if he is a much younger child because of his speech difficulties. Simon notices that lately Luca is contributing less to interactions with his peers.

#### **Collaborating with the family to make a plan**

Simon decides to arrange a meeting with Luca's family, and consults his coordinator as part of his planning process. Simon arranges to speak with Luca's parents away from the busy room.

When they meet, Simon explains that it can sometimes be difficult to understand what Luca is saying. To help him interpret what Luca is likely to be talking about, Simon asks Luca's parents for background information about the family, their usual family activities and Luca's interests. Simon says that most three-year-olds enjoy telling stories, and he suggests that Luca's parents email him some photos of family activities so that Luca can use the pictures to share stories with his peers. Simon also asks if Luca has been seen by a maternal and child health nurse for his three-year-old check, and whether the family has a general practitioner.

Luca's parents are very appreciative that Simon has taken the time to speak with them. They acknowledge that they too have concerns about Luca's speech. They know Luca is hard to understand, but everyone around them keeps telling them not to worry and that he will grow out of it. They ask Simon if they should take Luca to see a doctor. Simon agrees, and supports the family to have the confidence to visit their general practitioner and request an assessment of Luca's ear health and a referral for a hearing assessment.

Simon also recommends a speech pathology assessment of Luca's speech development. He provides Luca's parents with a list of local speech pathologists, which has been developed by the coordinator of the centre. Simon tells the parents that the speech pathologist is welcome to contact him to discuss Luca's needs. Luca's parents agree to follow through with Simon's recommendations.

Several weeks later, with the permission of Luca's parents, Genevieve, a speech pathologist who has seen Luca over several sessions, rings Simon to discuss her findings.

#### **Collaborating with the family and speech pathologist**

Genevieve recommends and supports the introduction of a photographic communication book that Luca can take with him so that he can share his experiences at the centre with his family, and can continue to share his family activities with his peers and educators at the centre. Luca can also use the communication book at any time when he needs support with what he wants to say.

Genevieve and Simon set up a file-sharing system so that Genevieve can share Luca's weekly speech goals, activity ideas and tips with Simon and he can then incorporate them into Luca's program.

Genevieve informs Simon that one of the factors making Luca's speech difficult to understand is that Luca is not always making the final consonant sound of words. Genevieve and Simon identify this as a goal for his speech therapy sessions, and as something that Simon can support in the education and care environment. Genevieve suggests making a special box of small toys for Luca that contrast words with and without a final consonant sound, such as *bow/boat*, *moo/moon*, *she/sheep*, *tie/time* and *buy/bike*. Genevieve also suggests that Simon emphasises consonant sounds at the end of his words to help Luca's awareness of these sounds.

### **Educator reflection on progress**

In a few months, Simon notices that Luca is becoming much easier to understand and that he is talking more and using more 'back-and-forth' communication with the other children. Luca now experiences positive communication exchanges every day. Other children at the centre love joining in with Luca's 'special' speech games, which provide a fun introduction to speaking and listening (phonological awareness) for all of them, creating a strong foundation for later literacy development. Luca's parents delight in sharing Luca's speech progress with Simon. They report their enjoyment in hearing Luca describe his interesting ideas, which he now shares more readily and easily with them.

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### **Reflective questions**

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- How might communication difficulties affect a child's sense of identity and the development of relationships with others? In what ways can a child's separation anxiety indicate difficulties with communication? What else could be causing the separation anxiety, and how would you be able to find out whether it was communication difficulties or something else?
- Can you identify behaviours you have found challenging in children you work with, that may indicate difficulties with communication? What are some of the more helpful and less helpful ways that you have seen educators (or other adults) respond?
- What are some ways that you support children in your centre who are hard to understand or who have communication difficulties? What professional help would you recommend to the family and how would you go about setting up the environment for such a recommendation to be provided?
- How do you react to colleagues when they point out children who are (developmentally) different in some way? How do you encourage colleagues to treat each child in a respectful and developmentally appropriate way?

## Learning Activity 4

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### Communication focus

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- Oral language and phonological awareness
- Making the transition from talking to reading

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### Key learning points

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- Oral language and phonological awareness lay the foundations for learning to read and write.
- Preschool learning opportunities play a key role in developing essential skills for reading and writing.
- Educator reflection stimulates professional growth, enabling educators to connect theory and evidence with their own practice.

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### VEYLDF Practice Principle focus

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#### Integrated teaching and learning approaches

- An integrated teaching and learning approach is an active process founded on learning relationships with children. This involves attunement to children, active engagement (by and with children), sustained shared thinking and conversations, and intentional teaching (VEYLDF 2016, p. 14).
- Effective early childhood practices use integrated teaching and learning approaches to support sustained and shared interaction with children (VEYLDF 2016, p. 14).

#### Reflective practice

- Effective practice is strengthened when early childhood professionals collaborate with professionals from other disciplines to provide, receive and consider multiple perspectives (VEYLDF 2016, p. 8).

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### Scenario

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#### Educator reflection stimulates professional growth

Tania is the kindergarten teacher for a four-year-old group. She has just attended a professional development workshop led by a speech pathologist. The workshop focused on the relationship between children's oral language and awareness of their own speech, and children learning to read.

Following the workshop, Tania realises that many of the experiences she provides for children are in fact developing their phonological awareness. This is the ability to 'pull apart' a stream of speech into separate segments. Tania has always noticed that the children are very engaged when they stomp out the syllables in words, say rhymes together or fill in the missing rhyming word when she reads a rhyming picture storybook aloud to a small group. Now she understands that experiences such as these are matched to the children's emerging phonological awareness and are consolidating and extending this skill.

Tania understands more about why phonological awareness is such an important part of learning to read and write. In order to read, children need to decode text into speech, and in order to write, children need to represent speech in the form of text. As early readers and writers, children need to be able to first identify the different segments of speech (phonological awareness). Later they learn to isolate the individual speech sounds they hear in words so they can begin to decode and represent them (phonemic awareness).

#### Educator's language can support children's understanding

Tania sometimes plays games where she says the first sound of a child's name as a cue for the children to guess who she means, such as 'sh' for 'Charlotte'. Tania has noticed that only some children can give a correct response. She now realises that this is because these games require the children to identify the smallest segment of speech, which is the individual speech sound. As Tania learnt in the workshop, this skill is called **phonemic awareness**, and develops later than the ability to segment the larger phonological segments of speech, such as syllables and rhyming words. This ability to identify individual speech sounds is a critical precursor for the development of reading and writing skills.

Tania now realises that it is important that she doesn't confuse the children by saying the letter name when she wants them to identify the *sound*. For example, 'Charlotte' starts with the 'sh' sound, but the letter 'c' is the initial letter. Tania decides to help children understand this difference by using the phrases 'sounds we can hear' and 'letters we can see'.

### **Applying reflective insights to enable integrated teaching and learning**

Tania knows that at four years of age, oral language should be well established. Children should be easily understood by people who are familiar or unfamiliar to them. Tania knows that her group of four-year-olds enjoy asking and answering complex 'how' and 'why' questions as they wonder about the world around them. They can use complex conjunctions such as 'because' and 'until' to relate two ideas together in order to express complex thoughts, for example, 'I'm not allowed to go on my own until I'm big'. They are also increasingly able to understand the sequential structure of stories, and to tell their own stories.

In the professional development workshop, Tania learnt that helping children make numerous rich connections between talking, reading and writing also helps them to develop their overall communication. This prompts Tania to reflect on the oral language opportunities in her program and how she can help children make connections between what we communicate and what we read and write.

With this reflection in mind, Tania joins a group of children in the sandpit. Tania knows that several of these children have delayed speech and language development, and often engage in sensory play with early symbolic or pretend play themes.

Joseph, Ishaan and Hayden are piling sand onto a plate, pretending to make a cake. They take Tania's cue to ice the cake by sprinkling sand on top. Joseph then says, 'Let's make a cake factory!' Tania recognises that Joseph and his friends may need additional support for this play idea to be successfully realised. She provides scaffolding to help Joseph talk about the sequence of his idea: first, the cakes are made at the factory, then they are delivered to the bakery, then someone buys the cakes and finally, they take the cakes home and eat them.

Ishaan and Hayden have been listening to Joseph and Tania. They join in, saying, 'We're bringing sugar and flour to the cake factory'. When the children tip water into the cake mix, the cake leaks and the boys squeal with excitement, 'Leak, leak!' This is now a sensory and social game with a 'problem' they did not expect.

Tania recognises the opportunity to highlight the storytelling or narrative structure in their sequence of pretend play.

Tania brings a large sheet of paper outside and starts recording the sequence of their story in sketches. Soon she has a larger group of children surrounding her, contributing their ideas to the story. Tania observes that the children with well-developed language skills are creatively using the story structure from the book they had read together earlier that morning. Now, it is not Tiddalick the Frog who drinks all the water in the land, it is Joseph, Ishaan and Hayden who use 'all the flour and all the sugar and all the milk and all the eggs in the land' to make an enormous cake. Tania takes every opportunity to model expanded vocabulary, including nouns, verbs and describing words. She also models longer and more complex sentences.

Joseph, Ishaan and Hayden are proud of their story and engage enthusiastically. They check frequently with Tania to make sure she gets their ideas onto the story board.

Tania is pleased that she has been able to enhance the children's learning by helping them to make so many rich connections between talking, writing and reading.

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### **Reflective questions**

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- Reflect on your understanding of phonological awareness and phonemic awareness and why they are essential skills for learning to read and write. What opportunities do you, or could you, include in your program to develop this awareness?
- Think of a time when you have joined in children's play and been able to support extension of their pretend play sequence, model expanded language or make connections between storytelling and text. What did you do or say? Did you see any of the children's new skills carry over into other play scenarios and storytelling in the following days?
- How do you talk with families about encouraging literacy and learning at home?



## Learning Activity 5

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### Communication focus

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- Family and social influences on communication development
- Understanding that every behaviour is a communication

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### Key learning points

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- Students affected by social disadvantage may not have as many learning opportunities in their home environment as other students, and need their school day to be filled with optimal learning opportunities to ensure effective language and reading development.
- Children who demonstrate behavioural challenges in the early years should have a speech pathology assessment that is evidence-based. There can be many causes of behavioural challenges; however, if they are related to speech, early intervention is critical.
- Explicit teaching in vocabulary, language concepts, sentence construction, phonemic awareness and phonics can help close the gap for disadvantaged students.

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### VEYLDF Practice Principle focus

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#### Partnerships with families

- Early childhood professionals show respect in their relationships with families, adopting an open, non-judgmental and honest approach that is responsive to a family's situation (VEYLDF 2016, p. 9).

#### Equity and diversity

- Inclusion is the active response by early childhood professionals to understand all children's and families' experiences and children's individual capabilities (VEYLDF 2016, p. 12).

#### High expectations for every child

- Early childhood professionals ensure that every child experiences success and is motivated to accept new challenges through which to learn and grow (VEYLDF 2016, p. 10).

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### Scenario

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#### Background and initial analysis

Dylan has made an enthusiastic start to his first weeks of Foundation-level schooling. He appeared to enjoy being the focus of classroom celebrations at the end of March, when he turned five years of age.

Dylan often arrives at school late and without his jumper, hat or lunchbox. His snack and lunch usually consist of pre-packaged savoury crackers with little else. Ben, the Foundation-level teacher, collects the following observations of Dylan's behaviour in the classroom:

- Dylan often becomes loud and excited when it is time to move between activities, and he takes longer than the other students to settle after he moves from table to mat or mat to table.
- When seated on the mat, Dylan is constantly moving or fidgeting, and also leans on and touches other students, which distracts them.
- When Ben reads a picture storybook to the group, Dylan comments on the story using short sentences that lack specific vocabulary, such as, 'My dad's got one of dem'.
- Dylan rarely contributes when the students talk about what they did on the weekend.
- Ben notices that if he asks Dylan to keep his body still for listening, Dylan responds by crossing his arms on his chest and looking at Ben with a scowling expression before crawling away from the group to the toy area or moving under a table.
- Ben often needs to intervene in situations where Dylan has become frustrated and screwed up his own work or he has scribbled on or screwed up someone else's work.

This school is located in an area of identified social disadvantage. In response to the complex nature of the home environments of many of the children entering the school, the Foundation-level teacher is supported to visit students in their homes before the school term begins. This visit enables the teacher to begin to build a relationship with the families and to understand the social, cultural and linguistic context that the student might bring to their learning, their classroom and their school community. Unfortunately, Ben had not been able to arrange a visit to Dylan's home.

### **Developing collaborative partnerships for assessment**

Ben is acutely aware that he needs to build a partnership with Dylan's parents that is non-judgmental, unbiased and responsive, to ensure the best possible learning opportunities for Dylan and to help build connections between learning at school and learning at home.

Ben tries to be in the playground during school drop-off and pick-up so that he has opportunities to talk informally with all the families. Ben is attentive and persistent in trying to make contact with Dylan's dad, Chris.

Eventually, Ben and Chris are able to have a discussion about how Dylan is settling in at school. One of the first comments that Chris makes to Ben is, 'I never really liked school, and school didn't do me much good. And you know, it was pretty much the same for Dylan's mum.' Ben realises how difficult it must be for Chris to bring his child into an environment that holds such strong emotions of humiliation and failure for him.

Now that Ben has some insight into Chris's educational experiences, he wonders if Dylan's behaviours may be due to a listening and speaking delay, or even disorder. He suggests to Chris that now may be a good opportunity for Dylan to have a speech pathology assessment at school. Ben describes how a speech assessment can help teachers determine the best way to teach Dylan so that he learns to read and develops a love of learning. Chris agrees to this and Ben keeps in touch about the assessment and its outcomes.

The speech pathologist, Samantha, confirms Ben's concerns. She updates Ben on current research which shows that some of the highest risk factors for speech and language difficulties, and resultant reading difficulties, are:

- low socio-economic status
- low educational attainment by the mother
- a family history of speech and language difficulties with resultant reading difficulties.

The speech pathology assessment indicates that Dylan's comprehension of what is said, and his ability to express his needs and opinions, is in the 'moderately to severely impaired' range. Ben recognises the significance of these assessment results, and is not surprised that Dylan is demonstrating difficulties with attention, behaviour and social interaction.

### **Moving from assessment to planned action**

Samantha is enthusiastic about the effect that explicit teaching in vocabulary, concepts, sentence construction, phonemic awareness and phonics can have in closing the gap for Dylan and students with similar needs. Samantha suggests some individual speech pathology sessions for Dylan, as well as small-group work and a 'whole class' approach to oral language development.

Samantha works with Ben in the classroom to model explicit teaching in each skill area. Ben appreciates the practical resources that Samantha provides, such as the scope and sequence for language goals on the Language in the Class website on page 11.

Ben builds on his relationship with Dylan's parents by inviting them and other students' families to an information session led by Samantha. This session supports the families to learn about creating communication opportunities with their child, and offers helpful resources to expand their child's language, such as the Language in the Class Learning4Life songs on page 11.

### **Reflecting on progress**

As the term progresses, Dylan responds to the explicit, systematic and sequential teaching in language and reading. Dylan appears happier and is more focused in the classroom. Ben continues to talk with Chris informally about Dylan's progress and the success of the strategies that Ben and Dylan's parents are using to assist Dylan.

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## Reflective questions

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- What do you think a parent means when they say that they never really liked school and that school didn't do them much good? What do the statistics tell us about the number of students leaving school without adequate literacy skills to support their everyday work requirements? What do you predict are the life outcomes for students who have undetected and unsupported communication and reading difficulties? (See *Assessment of Children as Effective Communicators in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review*, p. 3.)
- How do you demonstrate a commitment to equity and avoid practices that may contribute to prejudice or discrimination?
- How could you create an inclusive and welcoming environment that will establish and enhance partnerships, allowing you to share strategies that will support families' confidence in their interactions with their children? Do you take an individualised response for families as well as using broad strategies that are applicable to groups of families?
- Imagine that you are Ben, and that when you first try to speak with Chris about Dylan's learning, Chris becomes angry and defensive and walks away. What would you do next?

## Learning Activity 6

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### Communication focus

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- Crossing the developmental bridge from talking to reading
- Early identification of reading difficulties in children starting school

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### Key learning points

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- Phonemic awareness is one of the five essential skills for reading, along with phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.
- When teaching children to read, explicit, systematic and sequential teaching of the developmental steps of phonemic awareness is essential.
- Collaboration between speech pathologists and teachers in and outside the classroom strengthens the teaching of essential skills for reading.

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### VEYLDF Practice Principle focus

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#### Equity and diversity

- Early childhood professionals recognise multilingualism as an asset and support children to maintain their first language, learn English as an additional language and learn languages other than English (VEYLDF 2016, p. 12).
- Early childhood professionals identify and implement the type and level of support or intervention that is required to demonstrate and improve children's learning and development (VEYLDF 2016, p. 12).

#### Assessment for learning and development

- Early childhood professionals assess children in ways that include information from a wide range of sources to help them assess and plan effectively (VEYLDF 2016, p. 13).

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### Scenario

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#### Background and initial analysis

Mei is in the second term of Foundation level. At home, her parents speak Mandarin to each other and the children. Mei's teacher, Tess, has read the Transition Learning and Development Statement developed by Mei's kindergarten teacher at the end of the previous year. She noted that Mei had attended the local early childhood education and care centre where English was the language of instruction for just over two years.

Tess is aware that children from non-English speaking backgrounds who have been exposed to two years of English language in an education setting can be expected to have well-developed English language skills, even if the family's first language is used exclusively in communications in the home and with extended family members. Tess listens to Mei's speech and notes that she:

- is not yet consistently able to use pronouns – for example, Mei confuses he/she and his/her
- is not yet consistently able to use the system of verb tenses – for example, she might say, 'I go outside now. I finish eat my lunch'
- is not yet able to say age-appropriate sounds such as 'l', 'r' and 'th' – for example, she says 'yight' instead of 'light', 'wice' instead of 'rice', and 'fink' instead of 'think'
- mispronounces longer words, such as saying 'amblance' instead of 'ambulance', and 'hostiple' instead of 'hospital'.

Tess notices that Mei often seems unsure of vocabulary when describing weekend activities or scenes in pictures in books. However, when Tess speaks to Mei's parents, Jin and Hua, using an interpreter, they indicate that she speaks Mandarin with fluency and confidence. Tess reassures them that they should continue to speak with Mei in Mandarin so that she continues to build her knowledge and skill in her first language.

Tess notes that Mei chats quietly to other girls in the class, who look for her at recess, and that Mei can be gently encouraged to contribute to class discussions, especially when Tess creates small teaching groups. From these observations, Tess concludes that Mei has good social communication skills and that she can follow instructions.

When Mei is shown a letter of the alphabet, she seems to guess at the sound it represents or may say a familiar word that starts with the letter – for example, saying ‘pig’ when shown the letter ‘p’. When Tess sits with Mei to work through a **decodable reader**, she relies heavily on the pictures and guesses what the words on the page are without using the text as a starting point.

### **Educator advocating for the student**

Tess writes down her observations of Mei, as well as her specific concerns about Mei’s speech, oral language development and reading progress. Tess meets with her level leader, Rebecca, to discuss her observations and concerns. Rebecca says that from Tess’s detailed observations it appears that Mei is presenting as a student who could have a language disorder underlying her slow reading progress.

Rebecca recommends that Mei is assessed by the speech pathologist employed at the school. Tess commits to speaking with Jin and Hua to support them to progress a speech pathology referral. The family takes up Tess’s suggestion and they give permission for her to speak with the speech pathologist.

### **Referral and collaboration**

Tess contacts the speech pathologist, Louise, and outlines the concerns that prompted her to suggest the family request a speech pathology assessment for Mei. Louise assesses Mei, and confirms that Mei needs intervention to support the development of her oral language and speech sounds, and that this will support her reading progress. Louise is keen to have a detailed discussion with Tess to ensure that they both understand Mei’s communication needs, and to plan how they will work together to ensure that those needs are met.

Tess knows that speech and oral language development provide the foundation for reading development. From her training and the professional development workshops she has attended, Tess knows that at Foundation level, it is a high priority to develop learning plans that:

- teach students to understand and express themselves using rich vocabulary and language
- teach students that what people say can be represented in a ‘code’ of letters, which is text – similar to a digital device converting speech to text
- develop children’s phonemic awareness, which is the ability to identify the separate individual sounds that make up the words they hear, as well as to blend individual sounds together to form a word, and to manipulate or play with individual sounds to form different combinations. Children need to develop phonemic awareness before they can learn to attach individual sounds to letters (phonics)
- incorporate the teaching of **phonics**, which is the ability to understand the relationship between the individual sounds (or **phonemes**) in spoken language and the letters used to represent them (called **graphemes**), and is a requirement when learning English and other alphabetic languages
- make use of games, songs and rhymes that are familiar to students from their time in early childhood education and care.

When they meet, it soon becomes clear to Louise that Tess has a good understanding of speech and oral language development, and how this bridges to the learning of reading. Louise describes phonemic awareness as one of the five essential skills for reading, along with phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.

Louise explains that the phonemic awareness assessment she completed with Mei forms an important part of the speech pathology assessment. The phonemic awareness assessment is an auditory assessment rather than an assessment of letter recognition. Louise reports that Mei cannot yet identify individual

sounds at the beginning or end of three-sound words that she hears. When given the three sounds of a word such as ‘m-oo-n’, she cannot mentally blend the three sounds so as to recognise the word.

### Developing a collaborative plan

Louise describes a previous experience at another school where she was part of a ‘whole of class’ phonemic awareness program for Foundation level. In that program, Louise helped the teacher to assess all the students’ phonemic awareness skills, and then put the students into four groups according to their phonemic awareness development. Each group was then provided with **explicit, systematic and sequential teaching** that was matched to their phonemic awareness development.

Louise shows Tess a chart of the developmental steps that Mei needs to achieve during early phonemic awareness development – for example, to be able to identify the initial sound in a word. The developmental steps start at ‘judgment’, with the students selecting ‘yes’ or ‘no’ after judging whether two words start with the same sound. The next steps are, ‘judging the odd one out’, ‘matching words’, ‘sorting words that start with the same sound’, and finally, ‘production’, where students are instructed, ‘Tell me a word that starts with “g”’ (the sound ‘g’ as in gate, not the letter name ‘gee’).

After her meeting with Louise, Tess feels equipped with a clearer understanding of phonemic awareness and how she might embed this into small group and one-on-one learning experiences. The level leader, Rebecca, and the school leaders agree to help Tess set up a phonemic awareness program at their school, in collaboration with Louise. Together, Louise and Tess conduct an information session for families so that they understand how to reinforce the skills at home.

### Reviewing the outcomes

Over the six months of the program, and in consultation with Louise, Tess collects data that clearly identifies the ways in which each student – including Mei – has made progress with their oral language and reading skills.

Tess knows that Jin and Hua have reasonable conversational English, but when she meets with them to discuss Mei’s progress she always uses an interpreter. This ensures that vocabulary knowledge is not a barrier to information-sharing. Jin and Hua comment that Mei seems to be very positive about school and learning and they enjoy listening to her read her simple picture storybooks to her younger sibling in English.

Tess is asked to take a leadership role in developing the Foundation-level teaching of a reading program that the school will implement the following year.

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### Reflective questions

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- At transition to school, what are the opportunities to build awareness of children’s backgrounds, including exposure to language?
- What are some early signs you might observe in Foundation-level students that could indicate they are having difficulties learning to read? What type of professionals could provide collaborative support in this identification?
- How do you set up environments in the classroom and what strategies or methods are best used to support students across different levels of reading development?

## Learning Activity 7

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### Communication focus

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- Language fundamentals for writing
- The simultaneous integration and execution of many complex language and motor skills required for writing

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### Key learning points

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- Phonemic awareness and oral language skills are essential precursors to written language.
- Students need explicit instruction to develop the many subskills of writing to be able to participate and be successful at writing.

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### VEYLDF Practice Principle focus

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#### Partnerships with professionals

- Early childhood professionals work in partnership to improve the quality of children's learning experiences and advance children's learning and development (VEYLDF 2016, p. 16).

#### High expectations for every child

- Early childhood professionals recognise that every child learns from birth, but some children require different opportunities, spaces and specific supports, in order to learn effectively and thrive (VEYLDF 2016, p. 10).

#### Assessment for learning and development

- Early childhood professionals assess children in ways that are transparent, giving all adults close to the child access to best 'next steps' in promoting a child's learning and development (VEYLDF 2016, p. 13).

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### Scenario

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#### Background and initial assessment

Brandon is seven years old and in Term 3 of Year 2. Brandon has difficulty starting, continuing and completing tasks. He is easily distracted and distracts other children, particularly at writing time. His teacher Malika observes that Brandon:

- has difficulty with pencil grip and posture and slumps on his forearms as he tries to write
- uses irregular directionality when writing letters and forms letters that are large for his year level

- cannot keep the letters he writes sitting on lines
- does not regularly use an upper-case letter at the beginning of a sentence and does not use full stops or commas in his writing
- uses a mixture of upper- and lower-case letters within words
- can spell regular three-sound words but will leave out vowels in longer words and consonants in consonant blends
- has difficulty using correct grammar in his sentences and expressing a logical sequence of ideas in his writing.

Malika is aware that this expressive difficulty is also present in Brandon's oral communication as even though Malika can understand the words that Brandon says, it is often hard to work out what he means.

After reflecting on her observations of Brandon, Malika appreciates that he is having difficulty with every one of the language subskills needed for writing – vocabulary, sentence construction, spelling and oral language. Malika notes that there is a widening gap between Brandon's writing skills and those of his peers.

Not surprisingly, Brandon is using an increasing repertoire of avoidance strategies whenever he is required to pick up a pencil. Malika determines that she needs some professional partnerships to understand Brandon's individual profile and to design effective intervention for him.

#### Including the family and creating an initial plan

Malika is an experienced teacher and she invites each of Brandon's parents in for a meeting. Brandon's parents are separated and Brandon's mother Kirsten attends. Kirsten says she has been worried about Brandon's writing for a while but doesn't know how to help him. She shows great interest as Malika explains the many subskills required for writing. Kirsten seems to appreciate this explanation, saying that she never realised how complicated writing is.

Malika introduces the idea of further assessment to support them to understand what support Brandon needs both at home and at school so that he can make greater progress with his writing skills. Malika explains that she

has previously worked with an occupational therapist to help students with posture, pencil grip and letter formation. Malika also explains that the school has a speech pathologist who can assess Brandon's vocabulary, sentence construction, oral language and spelling – all essential language fundamentals for writing.

Kirsten expresses concern about the cost of this help. As Malika provides Kirsten with the contact details of local occupational therapists who have worked with other children at the school, she advises Kirsten to ring her general practitioner's office to talk about Medicare help for some of the cost of occupational therapy.

Kirsten agrees that the school speech pathologist, Anna, should conduct the speech pathology assessment. Kirsten shows determination to do whatever she can for Brandon's education and expresses relief this help is available at a cost she will be able to manage.

### Ongoing actions

After the assessments, Malika, Anna and Robert (the occupational therapist) meet with Kirsten to develop an individual program for Brandon. The plan has a focus on explicit skill development, with systematic and sequential tasks in all areas. This will allow Brandon to experience success and gradually increase his intrinsic motivation in relation to writing. Anna provides a sequential list of oral language skills and phonemic awareness skills matched to Brandon's current development and skill levels that will support his literacy skills. Anna also provides examples of the explicit tasks needed to develop these skills.

The group chooses a digital communication tool to keep in contact and ensure they are all aware of progress in the specific skills they are each working on. Malika uses the digital communication tool to alert her colleagues to how the family is managing and responding to the strategies the group is providing. The group can then use this information when they are setting that 'just right' challenge for Brandon while continuing to maintain his engagement. They agree that communication between home and school is essential – especially after each weekend – so that Malika is better able to support Brandon with writing about his weekend experiences.

Anna's recommendation to Malika is that Brandon would benefit from scaffolding when engaged in writing tasks. Anna provides a set of templates for Malika to use with Brandon. The templates will provide the sequential structure that Brandon requires and will help him to master one genre of writing at a time.

Anna also recommends that they begin with the 'Recount' template and that initially Malika works through it orally with Brandon and scribes his speech. The first template provides a line for each of the 'When, who, what, and where' components of the 'orientation'. Malika sees how mastery of this will later transfer to the 'orientation' of narrative writing. The templates gradually add lines for 'First', 'Next', 'Then', 'After that' and 'Finally'.

Over the next few weeks, Malika is able to shift from scribing Brandon's speech to dictating what he has said to her a few words at a time while he writes. Malika does not overwhelm Brandon with any other goal such as punctuation, spelling or letter formation at this stage. Malika points out and celebrates any skill that has transferred to Brandon's writing, for example, 'You remembered to put a full stop at the end of this sentence'. After Brandon has written the sentences, Malika supports him to go back and look at his work with the further goal of attending to details such as upper-case letters at the beginning of sentences.

Malika feels well supported by both Robert and Anna. With their guidance, Malika feels more confident now in providing a range of specific and sequential learning opportunities for Brandon and other children like him. Brandon now has great success at the stepped tasks to build skill development for writing. Kirsten is able to identify Brandon's progress in specific areas; she recognises that he is showing a greater enthusiasm for writing tasks and she feels very proud of his efforts.

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### Reflective questions

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- What is your experience of working in professional partnerships with children who have writing difficulties? How has this enriched your teaching practices?
- How do you ensure that writing tasks are at the skill level of each student? What explicit skills training do you provide and what scaffolds and supports do you use?



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# Glossary

**Decodable readers** are books that contain only phonetic code that the student has already learned. For example, a child who has learnt to sound and blend the letters s, a, t, p, i, n, will be able to decode words like pat, tan, pin, tin and sip. A child who has learnt more of the English code will be able to read more complex text.

**Explicit interaction** refers to an adult being thoughtful, deliberate and purposeful in their interactions with children to ensure that they are providing the appropriate stimulation and scaffolding to extend the child's learning and development.

**Graphemes** are the letters used to represent individual sounds in spoken language.

**Joint attention** is the ability to follow another person's focus of attention and also to direct someone else's attention to what you are interested in, so that you both attend to the same thing at the same time. Young children demonstrate joint attention by coordinating looking between objects and people, by pointing at objects to share their interests, and even by bringing and showing objects to others. Looking at something together and the adult commenting or talking about what they are seeing helps a child learn about the world and attach meaning to words.

**Motherese** is the simplified speech that is often used by adults when speaking to infants. It is characterised by short, often repetitive phrases with exaggerated intonation and rhythm.

**Observe, Wait, Listen (OWL)** is a practical strategy that helps adults to be good conversation partners for young children. It requires adults to:

- **observe** for what the child says or is interested in
- **wait** to give the child a chance to initiate or get involved in something. Waiting lets the child know 'I think you are important, and I'm interested in what you have to say'
- **listen** to what the child is trying to tell you. Once the child initiates, respond with interest and enthusiasm and wait again for another response <<http://www.hanen.org>>.

**Phonemes** are the individual sounds in spoken language.

**Preverbal communication skills** are important skills that form the foundation for children to be ready to talk. These preverbal communication skills enable children to communicate prior to the development of verbal language skills. They include gestures, facial expressions, imitation, joint attention and eye contact.

**Speech sound disorders** involve difficulty with and/or slowness in the development of a child's speech. 'Speech sound disorder' is an umbrella term with several subcategories: articulation disorder, phonological disorder and childhood apraxia of speech, all of which affect the child's speech intelligibility.

**Working memory** refers to an individual's capacity to hold and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time. It is an important skill for learning, reasoning, comprehension and following instructions. Working memory operates in coordination with mental flexibility and self-control to enable the successful application of executive function skills.

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