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Universally Speaking

The ages and stages of children's communication development from birth to 5



Children can all be great communicators

Communication is the way we connect with other people. It underpins learning and development in children of all ages and is a skill that can always be developed and improved.

Learning a first language is the most important thing a child will ever do.

Young babies and children need to learn how to:

- understand what people are saying
- use words and sentences properly
- speak clearly
- look, listen and take turns

People sometimes assume that speech, language and communication skills develop and flourish no matter what. This is not the case... children need adults to encourage and support development of their language and communication.

Find out more:

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5 top reasons to understand more about communication

1. It doesn't happen by accident!

Children need adults to nurture and support their language and communication development. The more all adults know and understand about language and how it develops, the better position they are in to help.

2. You can make the difference

Early years practitioners are in a unique position to support the development of language and communication skills in children.

- Supporting communication development is easy when you know how. With language and communication at the forefront of your mind, language and communication can be supported throughout the day.
- Quality early years settings and quality interaction with children can have a big impact on their language development.
- You can share information with parents about the development of these skills.

3. It helps to know what happens and when

Many practitioners report that they are not confident in knowing what children should be doing at different ages and stages, how to support good language skills and how to spot those children who might be struggling. **If this is the same for you the information in this booklet may help.**

4. Being able to talk and listen well is important

At home, in the early years, at school and throughout life, language is vital in order to learn, make friends and feel confident. Poor language also puts children at risk of poor reading and writing, poor behaviour, poor exam results and a lack of success in school.

5. The earlier we help the better

Lots of children struggle to develop their communication skills. About 1 million children in the UK will have long term difficulties and in areas of social deprivation around 50% of children start school with delayed language.

Although all children learn to talk at different rates, there are certain things they should be doing at different ages and stages. It's important for practitioners to know what to expect, so they can check whether children are on the right track and identify those who might be struggling.

NB Every effort has been made to align the content of this booklet with descriptions of ages and stages in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), Every Child a Talker and Healthy Child Programme guidance.

By six months...

Babies communicate from day one. As they develop, they begin to watch the adults around them and start making noises. They will communicate with adults by watching their faces and might try to copy what they do. Being able to copy is important for young babies – it is how they learn.

By six months, babies will usually:

- make sounds, like cooing, gurgling and babbling, to themselves and with other people
- make noises to get your attention
- watch your face when you talk to them
- get excited when they hear voices coming, maybe by kicking or waving their arms or making noises
- smile and laugh when other people smile and laugh
- make sounds back when talked to



How to check it out...babies are amazing!

Check out
how the
baby can
talk

Copy sounds the baby makes.

- Can they look at you and might sometimes join in?
- Are they cooing and gurgling to themselves?

Check out
how the
baby can
listen

Talk to babies about what is happening.

- Are they watching your face while you are talking?

Check out
how the
baby can
take part

Spend time talking and playing – get down on the floor with babies and play.

- Do they enjoy the company of adults?
- Do the babies smile and laugh with you?

If you are worried that a baby in your care is not doing these things there is more information on www.talkingpoint.org.uk or, using your setting's procedure, talk to the parents about your concerns.

Some lovely things to do to encourage baby talk:

- Get close, let them see your face, get right down to their level, even lying down to make eye contact, talk in a sing song voice – babies respond really well to this.
- Talk to babies in your care – tell them what is happening and what you notice about them - they are listening and taking it all in.
- Listen to them. Leave little spaces in your talk for the baby to join in or start the 'conversation' – ask them questions, tell them what you see - you may get a gurgle for an answer.
- Sing songs and rhymes.
- Play 'peek-a-boo' or similar games.
- Look at and talk about picture books – it's never too early to share books.

By one year...

Babies communicate in more ways now – making noises, pointing and looking to get your attention. They start to understand routines, simple words and activities.

By one year, babies will usually:

- make talking noises - babble strings of sounds, like 'ma-ma-ma', 'ba-ba-ba'
- point and look at you to get your attention
- many, though not all 1 year olds, will be saying their first words and they may also use gestures
- start to understand words like 'bye-bye' and 'up' especially when a gesture is used at the same time
- recognise the names of familiar objects, things like 'cup' and 'bowl', 'teddy' and 'mummy'
- look at you when you speak or when they hear their name called
- take turns in 'conversations', babbling back to an adult



How to check it out...babies are amazing!

Check out
how the
baby can
talk

Spend some individual time with the babies in your care.

- Do they try and get your attention?
E.g. If they want something they can not reach will they shout, point or make noises?

Check out
how the
baby can
listen

Talk about everyday activities, like getting dressed, eating and bathing.

- Do babies respond to things you say a lot?
E.g. You say "arms up" when you are taking off a jumper and the baby puts their arms up.

Have three or four familiar objects near the baby and ask for one of them.

- Do they look at the object or point to it?
They may even give it to you.
E.g. Say "Where's teddy?"

Check out
how the
baby can
take part

Spend time with babies in your care, playing and talking. Talk to the baby and leave a space for them to answer back.

- Do they make talking noises and join in the 'conversation'?
Wait for them to make a sound or do something, then copy the baby, and wait again.

If you are worried that a baby in your care is not doing these things there is more information on www.talkingpoint.org.uk or, using your setting's procedure, talk to the parents about your concerns. A referral to speech and language therapy may be needed.

Some lovely things to do to encourage baby talk:

- Write down the first words babies say in your care – this is an exciting milestone.
- Copy the baby when they are babbling, take turns and have a 'conversation'.
- Use actions with words. Try waving as you say "bye-bye" or holding your hands out to the baby and saying "up" – this will help them understand the words and encourage them to join in.
- Sing action songs like 'This little piggy went to market...' and play games like 'peek-a-boo' to encourage communication and concentration.
- Get on their level to play, listen and talk with them.
- Babies learn language through play, interaction and repetition, so anything that does this is good – e.g. 'ready, steady, go', with balls and 'all fall down' with brick towers.
- Babies love treasure baskets, full of things they can explore and tell you about – let them show you what can be done.

By 18 months...

This is a very exciting time – babies will be starting to talk now. Not everyone will understand but they are having a good try at saying a handful of words.

By 18 months, babies will usually:

- be talking! They will be able to say around 20 words. These are usually things they hear a lot at home or in the setting – such as ‘milk’, ‘doggy’, ‘hurrah’, ‘bye-bye’, ‘more’, ‘no’
- say words in a baby way, but the words are usually consistent in how they sound
- understand some simple words and short phrases. These are usually things they hear a lot during the day, such as ‘coat on’, ‘drink’, ‘shoes’, ‘bus’, ‘in your buggy’, ‘dinner time’, ‘all gone’
- recognise and point to familiar objects when you ask them
- enjoy games like ‘peek-a-boo’ and ‘pat-a-cake’ and toys that make a noise – they still like the comfort of a familiar adult near by
- be exploring their world and starting to enjoy simple pretend play, like pretending to talk on the phone



How to check it out...babies are amazing!

Check out how the baby can talk

Take some time to listen out for what the baby is saying.

- Are they saying words now in their own way?
- What do babies say at home? Write down the words you hear babies say – share these with their parents.

Check out how the baby can listen

Do babies in your care:

- Get excited when you mention things they enjoy?
E.g. "dinner time"
- Look around when you ask questions or give instructions?
E.g. Look round when you say "Where's teddy?"

When looking at a picture book:

- Can they point out some of the pictures you mention?
E.g. The dog when you say "Where's the doggy?"

Check out how the baby can take part

Talk while playing simple games with babies in your care – like 'peek-a-boo' or building a tower with bricks.

- Do they enjoy your company?
- Do they like playing and exploring?
- Do they join in with building and knocking them over?

Give the baby a pretend phone and you have another one.

- Do they pretend to talk?

If you are worried that a baby in your care is not doing these things there is more information on www.talkingpoint.org.uk or, using your setting's procedure, talk to the parents about your concerns. A referral to speech and language therapy may be needed.

Some lovely things to do to encourage baby talk:

- Get down to their level. Watch, listen and comment on what they are doing.
- Sing nursery rhymes with actions like 'Incy-wincy-spider'.
- Talk to babies about what you are doing, such as "Let's change your nappy".
- When babies point to an object, tell them what it is e.g. "Banana".
- If they try to say a word, say it back to them so they can hear the name of the object clearly.
- Share picture books and talk about the pictures in short sentences.
- Play 'ready, steady go' with games using bubbles or rolling a ball – remember to be on their level.
- Spend time outside with babies, talking, listening and exploring.

By two years...

Toddlers are into everything and will be exploring the world around them much more actively. Their understanding of words and phrases grows really quickly during this time. They often understand much more than they say. This can result in frustration when they don't get their message across.

By two years, toddlers will usually:

- use 50 or more single words like 'juice', 'car', 'biscuit'
- be starting to put short sentences together with two to three words, such as "more juice" or "bye-bye daddy"
- be asking simple questions such as "what that?", "who that?". They might do this quite a lot!
- understand between 200 and 500 words
- understand simple questions and instructions like "where's baby", "go get your coat", "mummy's turn"
- enjoy pretend play with their toys, such as feeding dolly or pretending to drive a car, usually making noises and talking while playing
- become very frustrated when they cannot get their message across. This is one reason for toddler tantrums



How to check it out....toddlers are amazing!

Check out
how the
child can
talk

Make sure you have time every day when you can have a 'conversation'.

You should notice toddlers using more single words, putting two or maybe three words together.

Comment on what they are doing and they may talk about it. This works better than asking questions.

*E.g. Adult: "Ah, you've got a baby"
Toddler: "Shh, baby sleeping"*

Or wait and respond to what they say.

Check out
how the
child can
listen

Toddlers do not always do what we want them to, but on a good day you can note toddlers' understanding.

- Do they understand simple questions?

E.g. When putting the toys away, do they follow "find me the bricks"

- If you are looking at picture books, can they point out familiar objects when you say?

E.g. "Where's the dog?" or "What's the boy doing?"

- Can they play a simple game in your setting?

E.g. Place some different toys on the floor with a big box to throw them all into.

Check out
how the
child can
take part

Watch how toddlers play and how they react to others. Toddlers enjoy adults' company and might even let you join in with their games.

- Do they enjoy simple pretend games?

E.g. With cars and trains, shopping and cooking?

- Do they also enjoy shape sorting games or simple jigsaws?

Toddlers are not great at being directed by adults, but you can set up different activities. Try to follow their lead.

E.g. Do toddlers begin to pretend to go shopping or cook dinner?

If you are worried that a child in your care is not doing these things there is more information on www.talkingpoint.org.uk or, using your setting's procedure, talk to the parents about your concerns. A referral to speech and language therapy may be needed.

Some lovely things to do to encourage toddler talk:

- Share books together; interactive books with flaps and different textures are great – one or two toddlers sharing a book with you is ideal.
- Wait for toddlers to initiate talking – don't feel that you have to fill the silences.
- Repeat and expand on what children say. If a child says "car" you can say "mummy's car", "blue car" etc. This shows children how words can be put together.
- Playing with children, taking their lead and building their language and thinking helps them learn and grow – young children really benefit from this approach.
- Finger rhymes and action songs help toddlers with the rhythms of language and makes talking and listening fun.

By three years...

Children will be saying lots more words during this time – you will notice that they use new words almost daily. This is a really exciting time and children will be asking endless questions to help them learn and find out about the world around them. They are often keen to have conversations with adults they know well.

By three years, children will usually:

- use up to 300 words. They will use different types of words to do different things, e.g.
 - to describe what things look like – ‘big’, ‘soft’
 - where they are – ‘under’, ‘on’
 - what they are for – ‘eating’, ‘playing’
 - that say who they are – ‘me’
 - to describe how many – ‘lots’
- refer to something that has happened in the past
- put 4 or 5 words together to make short sentences, such as “me want more juice”, “him want his coat”
- ask lots of questions
- have clearer speech, although they will still have some immaturities such as ‘pider’ instead of ‘spider’. They often have problems saying more difficult sounds like ‘sh’, ‘ch’, ‘th’ and ‘r’. However, people who know them can mostly understand them
- listen to and remember simple stories with pictures
- understand longer instructions, such as “put on your coat and get your bag” or “where’s mummy’s coat?”
- understand simple ‘who’, ‘what’ and ‘where’ questions
- play more with other children and join in with play
- play more complex imaginative games
- be able to have a proper conversation, though they may flit around the topic a bit and be difficult to follow at times
- be able to recognise how other people feel and will try to do something about it e.g “Ah, Josie sad. She need a hug.”



How to check it out....children are amazing!

Check out
how the
child can
talk

Spend some time with children and listen to what they are saying.

- Are they speaking in sentences, joining 4 or 5 words together?
E.g. "Me a big girl now"
- Have they stopped relying on pointing to get what they want or only using single words?

You should also be able to understand most of what they say at this age, though their speech might not be perfectly clear to everyone.

Check out
how the
child can
listen

Three year olds understand a lot more of what is being said now. Check it out.

- Can they remember longer instructions and information?
E.g. "Teddy is in the box", "find a big plate"
- Can they understand questions using 'what', 'who' and 'where'? (though not 'why')
E.g. When out walking or looking at a book can they follow "What is that?", "Where is Spot now?"

Three year olds should be able to understand these things by listening to adults talking without being shown.

Check out
how the
child can
take part

Three year olds often enjoy the company of adults and of other children.

They will watch other children playing and when they feel comfortable will join in. They might ask you to play with them and join in simple games.

Check out 3 three year olds in your care. They should enjoy playing and talking with others.

If you are worried that a child in your care is not doing these things there is more information on www.talkingpoint.org.uk or, using your setting's procedure, talk to the parents about your concerns. A referral to speech and language therapy may be needed.

Some lovely things to do to encourage child talk:

- Add words to children's sentences to show how words fit together. For example, if a child says "brush dolly hair" you can say "Lucy is brushing dolly's hair. Lovely".
- Share books and talk about the story and characters. Have children join in with stories to make them more active – e.g. join in with repetitive lines of stories.
- If children say words that are not clear, the best way to help is to repeat what they have said using the right words and sounds. There is no need to make them say it.
- Songs and rhymes are good to use at this age as they help children to learn the patterns of speech and language, important skills when learning to read.
- Have conversations about real things with children. Let them start the conversation, listen carefully to what they say and follow their interests.
- Keep the talk going by, nodding, smiling, encouraging them to tell more through comments "really..." "wow..." "a spiderman outfit...", rather than asking questions.

By four years...

Children understand and say lots of words and sentences now. You can see them using their talking to meet new friends or to work out problems. They talk to find out new information by asking lots of questions. A massive amount of learning happens in this time.

By four years, children will usually:

- ask lots of questions using words like ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘why’
- be able to answer questions about ‘why’ something has happened
- use longer sentences and link sentences together, e.g. “I had pizza for tea **and** then I played in the garden”
- describe events that have already happened, e.g. “We got dressed up and we went to the hall and singed songs. All the mummies and daddies did watch”
- have mostly clear speech, though will continue to have difficulties with a small number of sounds – for example ‘r’ – as in rabbit, ‘l’ – as in letter, ‘th’ as in thumb, ‘sh’ as in show, and ‘j’ as in jam
- listen to longer stories and answer questions about a story they have just heard, for example, simple questions such as “Who did Cinderella dance with at the ball?”, “Were Cinderella’s sisters kind?”
- understand and often use colour, number and time related words, for example, ‘red’ car, ‘three’ fingers
- enjoy make-believe play
- start to like simple jokes – though often their own jokes make little sense
- start to be able to plan games with others



How to check it out....children are amazing!

Check out how the child can talk

By four years, children can explain their ideas and talk in sentences and talk about things that have happened.

- Can they explain where they went and what happened?
E.g. The child says “Julie and Saria and me goed park and played on swings.”
- Can they use longer sentences joined up with words like ‘because’, ‘or’, and ‘and’?
E.g. “I like ice cream because it makes my tongue shiver.”
- Are they easily understood by others?

Check out how the child can listen

Four year olds are getting good at understanding more and more of what people are saying.

Check this out by asking them to do a simple task as part of everyday activities.

- Are they able to follow simple two part instructions reasonably well?
E.g. “Go and get me the big scissors and some blue paper from the drawer”
- Are they able to understand simple ‘why’ questions?
Talk about a story you have just read and ask a couple of questions.

Check out how the child can take part

Four year olds use talk in different ways.

- Do they use talk to organise themselves and their play?
 - You might hear them saying things like “let’s pretend we are in a jungle, you be theand I the”
 - They like make-believe play and dressing up.
- What about the four year olds in your care?
- Do they like to play and talk with others? Do they enjoy make-believe play?

If you are worried that a child in your care is not doing these things there is more information on www.talkingpoint.org.uk or, using your setting’s procedure, talk to the parents about your concerns. A referral to speech and language therapy may be needed.

Some lovely things to do to encourage child talk:

- Join children in pretend play. Play alongside them, let them take the lead. Listen and talk about what they are saying and doing rather than asking lots of questions.
- Give longer instructions for them to follow.
- Play around with words and sounds, e.g. think of words that begin with the same sound.
- Get the child to think of words that belong to the same category, for example as many different animals you can think of.
- Make up a story together – think of a character, where does he live, where does he go today, what does he do, are there any mishaps, and what happens in the end.

By five years...

By the age of five, almost all children will be in school.

At this stage, they need to learn how to listen, understand and share their ideas within the classroom. They also need to understand words and phrases used in school that they may not have heard at home – things like ‘line up’, ‘packed lunch’ and ‘talk to your partner’ etc.

They also still need to have conversations – to share information, to make friends and explain how they are feeling.

By five years, children will usually:

- take turns in much longer conversations
- use sentences that are well formed, for example, “I had spaghetti for tea at Jamilia’s house”
- be learning more words all the time as well as thinking more about the meanings of words, such as describing the meaning of simple words or asking what a new word means
- be able to re-tell short stories they have heard in roughly the right order and using language that makes it sound like a story
- use most speech sounds. However, they may have some difficulties with more difficult words such as ‘scribble’ or ‘elephant’ and some speech sounds such as ‘r’ and ‘th’ may still be difficult
- enjoy listening to stories, songs and rhymes and will start to make up their own
- ask relevant questions or make relevant comments in relation to what they have heard
- understand spoken instructions without stopping what they are doing to look at the speaker
- understand more complicated language such as ‘first’, ‘last’, ‘might’, ‘maybe’, ‘above’ and ‘in between’
- understand words that describe sequences such as “**first** we are going to the shop, **next** we will play in the park”
- choose their own friends
- use talk to take on different roles in imaginative play, to interact and negotiate with people and to have longer conversations
- use talk to help work out problems and organise thinking and activities



How to check it out...children are amazing!

Check out how the child can talk

By five years, children can have conversations; they know lots of words and can use longer sentences, though they still might make some little mistakes, which is fine.

- Can they organise their thoughts and put longer sentences together?
- Can you usually follow what they are saying?
- ! Do they regularly get frustrated or give up trying to tell you something?
- ! Do they regularly forget the words or miss out important pieces of information?
- ! Do they sound muddled and disorganised in their talking?
- ! If so, they may be struggling.

Check out how the child can listen

Check out children's understanding.

- Can they listen for instructions while they are busy with something else?
E.g. Ask them to get their coat and shoes while they are playing (not TV or computer, they are too absorbing).
 - Are they beginning to get the idea of time?
E.g. "Mummy will be here after lunch."
 - Do they understand a longer list of instructions?
E.g. "First get your lunchbox, then sit on the red table."
- Note if they have to watch another child in order to know what to do, rather than understanding it themselves.

Check out how the child can take part

There will be times when five year olds will be happy to play alone, with adults, or with other children.

- Do they talk with other children and join in with group conversations and games?
- Are there any children who seem isolated?

Check it out further.

Talk to children about what they enjoyed most in a day – these conversations often include different games or activities they play with friends.

If you are worried about a child in your care there is more information on www.talkingpoint.org.uk or, using your setting's procedure, talk to the parents about your concerns. A referral to speech and language therapy may be needed.

Some lovely things to do to encourage child talk:

- Playing board games that involve taking turns helps them to listen.
- Introduce new words and phrases to help them continue learning. Think of lots of different words that mean a similar thing – e.g. words that mean 'big'.
- Play around with rhyme e.g. "cat, fat, hat, splat....any more?" it's an important skill for reading.
- Children may need time to think before responding to questions and instructions.

Other important information

English as an additional language

Some estimates suggest that as much as two-thirds of the world's population speak more than one language. Speaking more than one language is a positive and beneficial skill and should be celebrated. There is no evidence to suggest that learning more than one language will delay the development of speech and language skills. In fact, bilingualism can have many positive benefits for children.

For children learning English as an additional language:

- it is important to recognise and value all languages
- accept and praise words and phrases used in home languages and give English equivalents where appropriate
- encourage parents of children learning English as an additional language to use the first language at home

Different languages have different sound and grammatical systems; the ages and stages used in this booklet refer to English.

There is more guidance available from Every Child A Talker (ECAT) at <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/153355>

A word about boys

Boys can struggle more with developing aspects of language, so it is good to check that your provision includes things that boys like to do and talk about. It's useful to have a range of books and resources that encourage their imagination and communication. Outside play and games to encourage language are also great for boys, as is thinking about how you involve dads.

Children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

These children may have difficulties with:

- **speech sounds** – they may not be able to use the right sounds for their age or may say sounds in the wrong place in words, or miss out some sounds altogether, which means their speech is unclear – e.g. “a tup of tea”.
- **fluency** – children might have a stammer, which means they may have a lot of hesitations in their speech and may prolong or repeat sounds, parts of words, whole words or sentences and sometimes they struggle to get words out at all.
- **understanding of language** – children struggle to understand words and sentences.
- **spoken language** – children may have limited vocabulary or be unable to put words together to form sentences or may be very muddled and disorganised when trying to talk.
- **social use of language** children may have a good vocabulary and can put sentences together, but don't know how to use their language to have conversations, play or interact with other children well.

Children with SLCN may have difficulty in one, or a combination, of the above. If you are worried about a child in your care there is more information on www.talkingpoint.org.uk.

Find out more

Talking Point

www.talkingpoint.org.uk

A resource all about children's speech, language and communication, designed for parents, people that work with children, and children and young people themselves. It contains information about supporting children's speech and language development, and helps you to identify if a child is having difficulties or falling behind. If they are struggling, then it tells you what to do.

If a referral to a speech and language therapist is required or you need further information, you or your setting can search a database to find a number of services by postcode.

www.talkingpoint.org.uk/talkinglinks

The Communication Trust

www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk

Consisting of over 40 voluntary sector organisations that bring together their expertise to ensure that the speech, language and communication needs of all children and young people are met through signposting specialist training support and guidance to people working with children. The Trust was founded by Afasic, BT, Council for Disabled Children and I CAN.

To find out more about the organisations involved in the Trust please go to:

www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/partners

If your organisation would like to become a member of The Communication Trust's consortium please go to www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/partners/consortium for more information or e-mail enquiries@thecommunicationtrust.org.uk

Frequently asked questions

What should I do if I am concerned about a child who has not been identified with speech, language and communication needs? Talk to parents to gain further information and if appropriate refer to your local speech and language therapy department, as long as you have parents' permission. Anyone can refer to a speech and language therapist, including the parents. You don't have to go through a GP or health visitor.

How can I find out if I need to improve my knowledge and skills in children's communication and where can I find out about further training? You could complete the Speech, Language and Communication Framework (SLCF). The SLCF outlines what people who work with children and young people need to know and be able to do in order to support children's communication. For more information about the SLCF go to www.talkingpoint.org.uk/slcf

Where can I find more information on supporting children with speech, language and communication needs? Inclusion Development Programme: Supporting children with speech, language and communication needs: Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/161358>

Your local Early Years advisory team, speech and language therapy team or children's centre may also be able to help.

Hello is the national year of communication

A campaign to increase understanding of how important it is to develop good communication skills.

Hello aims to make 2011 the year when communication for all children and young people becomes a priority in homes and schools across the UK.

Hello aims to use the national year to deliver tangible improvements for children, young people and families affected by speech, language and communication needs. This will include more support for parents and carers, earlier identification of difficulties as well as earlier and more appropriate referral to specialist support.

Visit www.hello.org.uk to sign up for regular updates and find out how you can get involved.

The *Hello* campaign is run by The Communication Trust, a coalition of over 40 leading voluntary sector organisations, in partnership with Jean Gross, the Government's Communication Champion.

The campaign is backed by the Department for Education and sponsored by Pearson Assessment and BT.

Pearson Assessment, publishers of standardised assessments for a range of speech, language and communication needs, are proud to be sponsors of this booklet. www.psychcorp.co.uk



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