

Why Key Stage 3 is a golden opportunity for speech and language

Abridged from: 'Between Brains: Supporting SLCN in Tweens and Teens' by Juliet Leonard, specialist speech and language therapist.

The shocking rise in speech and language challenges has been widely reported with one in five pupils at primary and secondary schools struggling to talk and understand words.

For those students who have 'slipped through the net,' it's not too late. Key stage 3 is a crucial time for intervention for students with SLCN.

While teenagers are a wonderful group of people, the changes that are occurring in their brains can be overlooked or perhaps misinterpreted. So, what is happening in brain function at this age and how can we support young people with inspiring and motivational, but functional interventions?

The changing brain

A child's brain is fully grown by the age of 6 and so the changes occurring in the adolescent brain are not about brain size, but about brain composition. Hormones start to kick in from as early as 10 years and aside from the obvious physical changes, the second largest change in brain development begins.

The brain begins an 'edit' and an 'upgrade' and neural connections become hardwired in a process called 'sprouting'. The neural links that are used frequently are sped up, while neural links that are not frequently used start to die away, which is called 'pruning'. The remaining neural links are upgraded, the signals are sped up and the brain begins to work more efficiently than it has ever worked before due to myelination where the fatty sheath around those neurons speeds up the signal.

There is something else that is really special about this time. Over the adolescent years, the brain gains speed, but it also loses flexibility and pliability. There are however, some years in adolescence where the teen brain has increasing speed while maintaining pliability and agility. This is a golden window of opportunity for good brain training and developing processes and pathways which will be hardwired by the end of the adolescent period.

In terms of emotional responses there is a lot going on. The amygdala (a collection of cells at the base of the brain) controls quite crude responses like 'gut' reaction (as opposed to considered responses). Therefore, facial expressions can be misinterpreted and subtleties overlooked and can lead to misunderstandings. This goes some way to explain why a teenager's reaction might seem quite disproportionate to what the adult had intended and labelled as 'typical teenage behaviour' or 'moody'. The 'rational' frontal cortex' controlling judgements and impulse, control and planning, is still very much limited in its connections also and will not be mature up until around 25 years.

Should we pause work on SLCN until things have settled down a bit?

Although it is a time of turmoil and change for the student the answer is a resounding NO! It is the perfect time to be focusing on speech and language and communication, as the brain is getting faster and students are at a 'use it or lose it' stage. What is put in place now will last them well into adulthood which is why it is important that we harness and reinforce these language skills at this stage. The well-used pathways are going to be hardwired while the less used pathways are going to be lost so we need the pathways to provide the students with a lifetime of skills that are useful, generalisable, and that will set them up for adulthood.



The student with SLCN and how they will be experiencing the world.

The student will be experiencing an increasing awareness of the fact that they are different which might alter their confidence and their self-esteem as they become more aware that they are not the same as their peers. They will struggle more in learning areas, emotional areas and language areas.

They are going to experience increasing educational demands as the curriculum expects their knowledge and understanding to widen throughout key stage 3, but these may be students who are more at a key stage 2 level in terms of their understanding. When we consider that around 37% of teacher instructions in secondary schools contain multiple meanings and 20% have at least one idiom we can see that this is a huge leap in their language skills as well as their educational needs.

Some students may also have received a lot of support in KS2 and are still seeking that support at a time when independence is encouraged.

Challenges for school staff supporting a teenager with SLCN

There is an increasing mismatch between age and stage e.g., a 14-year-old student with a comprehension age of 10 will not want to be treated any differently and certainly will not want their difference to be highlighted by teaching staff or to have anything 'extra' or 'special'.

Suggestions

1. Language tasks should be directly related to the student's experiences to increase engagement and enable the best chance of them generalising skills. Tasks should be authentic, but relatable for the student.
2. Give the student frequent decision-making opportunities that put them in the position of leader – especially regarding topics where the student is the 'expert'.
3. Provide space for independence – time for spoken problem-solving, personal reflection and identification of strengths and needs.
4. Focus on functional – skills must be useful and natural for the student to be able to take their new skills and put them into practice.
5. Find appropriate, motivating resources and rewards.
6. Use an evidence-based speech and language support programme such as Secondary Language Link.

How can Secondary Language Link help?

- The universal standardised screen identifies the needs of students aged 11-14 years. Speech & Language Link recommends it is used with all of year 7
- Targeted, immersive interventions support identified students in small groups
- Tracks progress
- Supports professional development for staff with the SLCN Toolkit.



For more information and to book your FREE TRIAL please visit www.speechandlanguage.info/sectrial

Speech & Language Link: 0333 577 0784;
helpdesk@speechlink.co.uk;
www.speechandlanguage.link