



# Speaking Up for the Covid Generation

Let's #SpeakUpForCovidGen



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# Foreword

It is no surprise that children's development has been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. They have lost months of being in school and nursery and daily chances to interact with the outside world. But now we are seeing the true impact this has had.

*Speaking Up for the Covid Generation* paints a worrying picture for nearly 1.5 million children struggling to be able to speak and understand what other people are saying to them. This should be a wake-up call to Government and the education sector. It is now vital that emergency support is put in place so that the Covid generation do not suffer long-term, lasting damage.

Speaking and understanding language is fundamental. Our children cannot learn optimally, develop socially, have good mental health, or get good jobs without this crucial skill. In fact, it underpins all other skills. We should be making sure our education system teaches speaking in addition to reading, writing and maths – the last three are impossible without language.

While Government has introduced a support package for 4- and 5-year-old pupils, our survey shows that classroom teachers need more support for children across primary and secondary education. This summer over 700,000 children will be preparing to transition from primary to secondary school. Our survey highlights that many of them will struggle to communicate in their new schools which will, if not given the right support, have a long-lasting impact on their futures.

Helping our children to speak and understand language should be a core goal for Government in deciding the next steps in the education recovery plan.

That means making a long-term commitment to supporting speaking and understanding skills by providing additional funding and training. We also need to see them encouraging schools to work alongside local authorities, health partners and other providers to ensure that provision is available to support children with spoken language. Without this, children's future looks bleak. The Covid generation need us to defend their future.



Jane Harris  
Chief Executive, I CAN

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# Introduction

It is already clear that Covid and the lockdowns it has entailed have had a huge impact on children's education. The average child has missed 84 school days. Children of all ages have been deprived of daily conversations, disrupting opportunities for all children to develop essential skills in speaking and understanding.

As the UK starts on the road to recovery, evidence is revealing the major impact the pandemic has had on children's speaking and understanding ability. Already the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) found that of the 58 primary schools surveyed, 96% were concerned about pupils' speech and language development.<sup>1</sup> Our survey has revealed the serious concerns teachers have about speaking and understanding. Speaking and understanding language is critical to children's ability to read, write and learn other subjects, not to mention their relationships, mental health and future job prospects. Lockdowns could leave a generation at risk.

## Our key findings:



1.5 million\* children are at risk of not being able to speak or understand language at an age-appropriate level.



Both primary and secondary school teachers are concerned that without further support, children at risk will be unable to catch up.



63% of teachers surveyed think children moving to secondary school in September 2021 will struggle more with their speaking and understanding than those who moved before the pandemic.



63% of teachers surveyed think the UK Government is not providing enough support for children to help with their speaking and understanding.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-56889035>

\*Teacher estimates of the percentage of children affected were subjected to a mid-point interval analysis. Using a pupil population estimate of England, Scotland and Wales of \*\*9,190,799 primary and secondary pupils, this equated to 1.5 million children.

\*\*This combined total figure for England, Scotland and Wales was equated from:

England: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristic>

Scotland: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2019/12/summary-statistics-schools-scotland-no-10-2019-edition/documents/summary-statistics-schools-scotland/summary-statistics-schools-scotland/govscot%3Adocument/summary-statistics-schools-scotland.pdf>

Wales: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-07/school-census-results-2019-764.pdf>





# Why do some children struggle with speaking and understanding language?



## Missing out on communication-rich experiences

Children learn to speak and understand language through their interactions with others. Covid has massively reduced the amount of social interaction that children of all ages have had over the past two years. It has also reduced the things that children learn to talk about. Without trips out of the classroom or new experiences, there is less reason for children to speak or use new words. Children in deprived areas are particularly at risk – levelling-up cannot happen without children's speaking and understanding being improved.



## Long-term communication barriers

Some children have lifelong difficulties speaking and understanding language that are not associated with another condition – this is called Developmental Language Disorder (DLD). Children with a diagnosis of DLD require extra support with their learning and many will also receive speech and language therapy. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists found that out of the 98% of survey respondents receiving speech and language therapy before March 2020, 62% didn't receive any in the first lockdown. In this time, nearly half saw no progress in communication skills, and 24% said it had dropped.<sup>1</sup>



## Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Some children with diagnosed SEND such as Autism, Intellectual Disability or Cerebral Palsy may find speaking and understanding language far more difficult. Time away from school because of lockdown has meant that some of these children's speaking and understanding skills have been impacted.<sup>2</sup> Many have lost out on speech and language therapy and their families have been stretched beyond all reasonable expectations - the Disabled Children's Partnership (DCP) found that 70% of families are still not experiencing pre-pandemic levels of support.<sup>3</sup>

## Methodology

I CAN commissioned polling company YouGov to survey 1,000 primary and secondary school teachers online from across the UK to determine how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted children's speaking and understanding.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rcslt.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Building-back-better-March2021.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/924670/Schools\\_briefing\\_COVID-19\\_series\\_Sept-20202.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/924670/Schools_briefing_COVID-19_series_Sept-20202.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Longest-Lockdown.pdf>



# Our Findings

## How many children are affected and how?

The majority of teachers believe that:



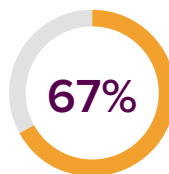
Children are behind with their speaking and/or understanding due to Covid.



Children who are moving to secondary school in September will struggle more with their speaking and understanding, in comparison to those who started secondary school before the Covid-19 pandemic.

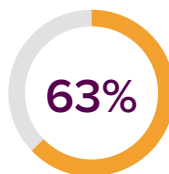


Teachers who have pupils who are behind with their speaking or understanding are worried that these pupils will not be able to catch up.



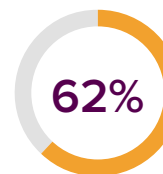
**of primary teachers**

surveyed believe that they have at least one pupil who is behind with their speaking and/or understanding because of Covid.



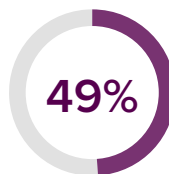
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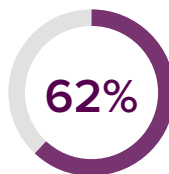
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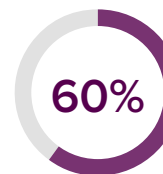
**of secondary teachers**

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**of secondary teachers**

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**of secondary teachers**

who have pupils who are behind with their speaking or understanding are worried that these pupils will not be able to catch up.



# Our Findings

## How has Covid impacted speaking and language skills?

Teachers with pupils who are behind with their speaking and understanding believe that their pupil's speaking and understanding has been impacted during the pandemic due to:

Not being able to talk face-to-face with their friends

75%

Primary

65%

Secondary

Too much use of tablets/phones/computers

72%

Primary

64%

Secondary



# Are there solutions?

There are many evidence-based interventions that schools can use to help children of all ages to speak and understand language better. Evidence shows that on average, pupils who take part in spoken language interventions make approximately five additional months' progress over a year, with some studies showing progress of up to six months for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

At I CAN, we have strong evidence that programmes such as [Early Talk Boost](#), a programme of special activities that nursery-aged children do in a group with an adult, help the majority of children to improve their speaking and understanding, with almost two thirds catching up with their peers completely after just nine weeks. Other organisations have well evidenced interventions: for example, the Nuffield Early Language Intervention programme (NELI) that Government has invested in for reception-age children. These types of interventions are inexpensive, with an average cost of £700 over three years per school, or around £20-25 per child.

The NELI programme cost £17m for reception-age children. Extending a similar intervention to children at key stages 1 and 2 could be achievable for similar amounts. If the Department for Education were to make funding of £20m available for the next three years, they could provide schools with grants towards the cost of implementing a suite of targeted language interventions for both primary and secondary pupils. Similar interventions are available for older children in primary and secondary schools. For example, ICAN's Talk Boost Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 quickly return high proportions of children to the speaking and understanding levels expected at their age.

Alongside the cost of interventions like these, we need to train teachers and teaching assistants to understand their role in supporting children's speaking and understanding skills in the classroom. Given the expansion of online training during the last 16 months, there are numerous cost-effective ways that this could be done. £200,000 could be used to develop a series of training modules on Speech, Language and Communication Development and the core role it plays in learning

across the curriculum. These online modules could then be incorporated into future initial teacher training and early and ongoing professional development for teachers. Engaging local providers to embed this training, where it adds value and as part of the enhancement of local provision, will support a sustainable and whole system approach. This would leave a positive legacy from the Covid experience.

In order to meet the needs of children and young people, it's important that health, education and third sector providers work together at the local level to support an integrated approach. The aim of any investment in new initiatives would be to enhance and add value and capacity to support existing provision, not to replace them. Covid has created more need for support, not less - we should be adding more support for children now, not taking it away.

**It is important to note that not investing in these types of initiatives will cost us dearly. Without support to catch up on their speaking and understanding, children could end up with lower academic and crucial life skills, leading to poor employment outcomes, mental health concerns and higher rates of offending.**



We need to choose between investing millions now after children have missed out on months of opportunities to develop their speaking and understanding, and paying far greater sums later after their lives have been damaged. In the context of Covid spending, this is a very reasonable investment in our children's and our society's future.

<sup>1</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/oral-language-interventions/>





# What happens if children don't get the help they need with their speaking and understanding?

Difficulties with speaking and understanding is not something children simply grow out of. Children with DLD have been found to continue to struggle with speaking and understanding later in their adult life.<sup>1</sup> Without the right support, these children are at increased risk of **low academic attainment, reduced job opportunities, behavioural and mental health difficulties, and youth offending.**

National statistics show that children who experience difficulties with speaking and understanding are over four times less likely to pass GCSEs in Maths and English.<sup>2</sup> This can lead to fewer job opportunities, as good communication is rated by employers as the most important skill for young people entering their first job.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it has been found that 88% of long-term unemployed young men have difficulties with speaking and understanding language.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of children with emotional and behavioural disorders also have significant difficulties with speaking and understanding which often goes unidentified.<sup>5</sup> As they get older, these children are at increased risk of antisocial behaviour and crime – 60-90% of young offenders have difficulties with speaking and understanding.<sup>6</sup> However, if their difficulties are identified and the right support provided, this leads to a reduced risk of youth offending, lower rates of crime and the costs they create.<sup>7</sup>

1 Botting, N. (2020). Language, literacy and cognitive skills of young adults with developmental language disorder (DLD). *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 55 (2), 255-265.

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-performance-2019-revised>

3 <https://asset.asdan.org.uk/56d578453a9eb>

4 <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.553779>

5 Hollo, A., Wehby, J. H., & Oliver, R. M. (2014). Unidentified language deficits in children with emotional and behavioral disorders: a meta-analysis. *Exceptional Children* (80(2), 169-186

6 Bryan, K., Freer, J., & Furlong, C. (2007). Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Language & Communication Difficulties*, 42(5), 505-520

7 Cronin, P. & Addo, R. (2021). Interactions with youth justice and associated costs for young people with speech, language and communication needs. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 1-15.





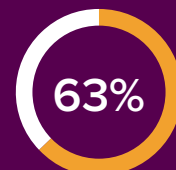
# What has Government done so far?

Government has put in various new funding streams for schools, including the recovery premium. There is guidance on how to spend this, but understandably a lot of discretion is given to schools to meet their local populations' needs.

Government has also invested specifically in the Nuffield Early Language Intervention Programme, which targets Reception pupils<sup>1</sup>. There is also a commitment to spend £153m in supporting the early years workforce in speech and language, alongside an extension of the Early Years People Development Plan costing £20m.

However, there is no central initiative targeting older children in either primary or secondary education. Government has also funded the National Tutoring Programme, but it is not clear how this could help children struggling with their speaking and understanding.

Despite the funding provided to schools, it is clear this is not enough. Our research found that:



of teachers

surveyed think the UK Government is not providing enough support to help children with their speaking and understanding.



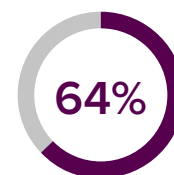
of teachers

surveyed think the Government has not offered very much/any extra support at their school to help children with their speaking and understanding.

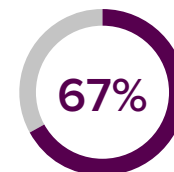


It is also clear that teacher training at all stages, as currently delivered, is not giving teachers the skills they need to support children with their speaking and understanding.

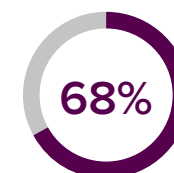
When asked how much training teachers thought they had received to support children who are struggling with their speaking and understanding at the following stages of their training/career, the following amount said **'Not very much'** or **'Not any'**:



Initial Teacher Training



Early stages of their career



Ongoing training

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/early-years-support-package-to-help-close-covid-language-gap>



# Recommendations

**Unless Governments across the UK take both short and long-term action to help children with their speaking and understanding, the Covid generation will be at risk.**

In the short-term, the English Government must enhance the Education Recovery plan so that there is support for all children who struggle with their speaking and understanding. This means:



- Recommend programmes that support children with their speaking and understanding across all phases of education and not just early years.
- Give specific guidance to schools on how they can use their recovery premium funding to develop skills in speaking and understanding as is clearly outlined in best practice guidance (including in the EEF's Covid support guide for schools).
- Including targeted support for speaking and understanding in the Recovery support package and putting a focus on speaking and understanding in the Covid recovery curriculum, alongside literacy and numeracy.
- Providing all tutors part of the National Tutoring Programme with training in how to identify children struggling with their speaking and understanding and how to support them.
- Provide additional funding to children's speech and language therapy services to enable them to support the children whose needs have been identified late or increased as a result of the pandemic.
- Develop a programme of training so that all school staff understand how to develop children's speaking and understanding skills and how to identify those who are struggling.

However, there is general agreement that recovery from Covid will be long-term, and Governments need to make sure that speaking and understanding language is more core to our education system for years to come. That means:



- Committing to creating a children's speech, language and communications strategy that works across Government departments to recognise that almost all subjects and most future employment rely on children being able to speak and understand language.
- Making a multi-year settlement for supporting all year groups with their speaking and understanding - not just early years and reception.
- Introducing assessment of children's speaking and understanding so that we know on a long-term basis whether children are continuing to struggle in these areas.
- Training all teachers to identify a child struggling with their speaking and understanding beyond age five.
- There should be a statutory need for schools to report on children's speaking and understanding.



# Recommendations continued

Throughout their careers it is important that every teacher has training to understand the importance of spoken language, how to support its development and identify those at risk.

**Government should:**

- Specify that any new providers for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) will deliver training in speaking and understanding.
- Review the Core Content Framework to embed teacher training in identification of children struggling with their speaking and understanding and how to support with a Needs Assessment.
- Include training on speech and language in the Early Career Framework – including how to identify when a child is having difficulties and where to gain support to help them.
- In ongoing CPD, encourage all schools to give all teaching staff opportunities to update their knowledge and skills on children's speaking and understanding.



**Schools also have a part to play regardless of central Government support. Using the funding they have been provided to date, schools should:**

- Enable teaching staff to access training on how to develop children's speaking and understanding skills.
- Put more focus on supporting children who are struggling with speaking and understanding through the transition between primary and secondary, and put in interventions so that children have the skills in speaking and understanding that they need for secondary school.
- Work in partnership with the local authority, health partners and other providers to ensure that provision is available to support children with spoken language.
- Track children's progress in speaking and understanding so that children can get help early.







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Company Registered Number 00099629

Charity founded in 1888

Registered under the Charities Act 1960

England and Wales Charity Registered Number 210031

Scottish Charity Registered Number SCO39947

