Visual impairment and speech and language therapy

The best of both: working together to support children with visual impairment and additional complex needs

A series of leaflets exploring ways that the QTVI (Qualified Teacher of Visually Impaired children) and other professionals can achieve an effective working relationship together and ensure the best outcome for children with special requirements.

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“The team”

A child with a combination of disabilities is likely to receive continued support from several agencies, each to address a medical, educational, therapeutic or social need. Each supporting professional will have their own expertise, priorities, methods of working and aims for the child.

In this series of leaflets we look at the above scenario and explore ways that the QTVI can support effective team work with other professionals. We aim to discover how good communication and joint working can help to:

- eliminate seemingly conflicting or confusing practice for both professionals and parents
- avoid, or solve, practical problems
- co-ordinate working practice, aims and targets to ensure the best possible outcome for the child.

Other titles in the series include:

- Visual impairment and physiotherapy
- Visual impairment and occupational therapy
- Visual impairment and orthoptics (clinical and functional vision assessment)
- Visual impairment and specific medical needs and medication.

How the speech and language therapist and QTVI can achieve the “best of both”

Some practitioners are not aware that speech and language therapists (SLTs) have a role with children who have visual impairment and complex needs who may not speak or have any symbolic language. In fact, SLTs deal with communication in its broadest sense and can make an important contribution to supporting this group of children. Many of these children have difficulties with eating and drinking and SLTs focus on these issues too.

With regard to communication, SLTs work in similar ways to QTVIs.

The role of the QTVI focuses on the child’s learning and development in relation to visual and non-visual communication.
The QTVI:
- has a role in reducing the impact of VI on communication and in assessing capacity to access visual communication
- raises the class team’s awareness and knowledge of visual impairment and its impact on children with complex needs
- assesses the child’s functional vision
- gives advice on managing the environment
- assists with the selection of targets
- assists with devising intervention strategies.

The role of the SLT focuses on maximising communication opportunities.

The SLT:
- supports the class team’s understanding of communication
- assists with assessing communication
- gives advice on designing the communicative environment
- assists with the selection of targets
- assists with devising intervention strategies.

How is communication affected by visual impairment?

Having little or no vision has an impact as soon as a baby is born. A new-born sighted baby is interested in people’s faces. When a sighted baby looks at her, the mother engages with the child, responding naturally to what the child does. A child who has visual impairment does not give the same signals as a sighted child, making it much harder for the mother (and others) to respond in helpful ways: the child makes little or no eye contact, smiles later and possibly less warmly, may startle when picked up and may babble less. The crucially important early interactive patterns are not easily established.

Visually impaired babies also tend to be passive; without being able to see the exciting world around them, they explore less. Many show little interest in the world. In turn, this means they have less to communicate about. A passive child rarely takes the initiative to spontaneously communicate what they need or want. This is very disabling.

For sighted infants, vision plays an essential role in learning to request. At about 10 months of age, an infant who sees something interesting is likely to ask for it by looking at the object, then at an adult, back at the object and so on; the child will point and vocalise to emphasise that they want the object. With little or no vision, learning to request is much harder.

When the child has additional disabilities the difficulties outlined above may be compounded by others such as poor attention, limited memory, impaired movement, poor co-ordination, hearing loss, and the effects of issues such as a poor sleep pattern, epilepsy and medication.
In school, who has a role in promoting communication?

Everyone does: all staff who come into contact with the child have a role. Communication occurs throughout the day, in all situations and with all people. Everyone must promote it.

What has the SLT to offer?

Supporting the class team’s understanding of communication

This may be through informal training sessions but is more likely to be embedded in the SLT’s regular work. For example, in assisting with assessment, the SLT may outline an aspect of communication development in typical children and explain how that might differ in children who have vision impairment and complex needs. The class team’s understanding will also grow through discussion of the communicative environment and the selection of targets and intervention strategies.

Assessment

A difficulty for the SLT is not being in regular contact with the child. This means their role is to assist the class team with assessment. Teachers are required to report against the P Levels so will need to assess, monitor and record progress of children who have vision impairment and complex needs using P Levels. Difficulties may arise because these omit many important visual skills and are not readily applicable to children who do not follow a typical visual developmental pathway. With their expert knowledge of early communicative development, SLTs can assist teachers to obtain an accurate assessment of communication.

Designing the communicative environment

Supporting communication is necessary at all times and requires an appropriate communicative environment to provide children with the means, opportunities and reasons to communicate.

Means of communication

Many children who have visual impairment and complex needs require alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) means. Those children who have not yet reached the stage of symbolic communication or who cannot speak clearly require at least one alternative means for expressive communication. Staff must also augment their spoken language to help the child to understand; this is so even if the child has some understanding of spoken language.
There is a range of both alternative and augmentative means. Possibilities, depending on a range of factors, include signing, objects of reference, tactile pictures/symbols, enlarged visual pictures and symbols, and voice-output communication aids. Routine, music, and even smell can also be used as alternative means.

Selecting alternative and augmentative means is often very difficult and may rely on trying different means to establish which works best for the child. The following example highlights the impact of using alternative communication means.

**Rashid**

Rashid has some functional vision, but the SLT was unsure whether this was sufficient to see signing. The QTVI advised that he would be unable to see signs clearly unless they were made very close to him. However, he dislikes having someone in his personal space more than very briefly, so on-body signing is inappropriate. The QTVI also informed the SLT that Rashid enjoys exploring everyday objects by touch. The SLT therefore recommended that staff should augment their spoken language with objects of reference. Rashid is also beginning to use objects expressively as an alternative to spoken language. A small plastic box is kept on a shelf just inside the classroom. When he is not engaged in an educational activity, Rashid finds this box, takes it to a member of staff, and exchanges it for a large box containing several everyday objects he enjoys exploring.

**Opportunities for communication**

Classroom staff must provide children with opportunities to communicate. Because children who have vision impairment and complex needs require additional time to process what they experience, and extra time to respond, it is essential that staff slow down and wait for the child. The importance of this is evident in the following examples.

**Charlie**

Before lunch Charlie is positioned in his wheelchair. It would be very easy for staff simply to push the tray into place. However, Charlie is given the opportunity to respond to communication and to play an active part in this. The QTVI advised the SLT that the tray is large enough for Charlie to see if it is held up in front of him and he is given 30 seconds to process the visual information. The SLT therefore advised the teaching assistant to hold the tray in front of Charlie for 30 seconds and then to say “Tray. Arms up.” and wait. After what can seem like a long time, Charlie slowly raises his arms, allowing the tray to be fixed.

As noted above, many children who have vision impairment and complex needs rarely initiate. It is essential to give them opportunities to do so. The only way of providing such opportunities is to wait. This is essential.

**Kiran**

Kiran loves the spinning top and dancing bear, but relies on someone else to set them going. Each time one of the toys stops, the adult waits and observes Kiran. After a pause, Kiran hums quietly if she wants the top, or jiggles her left leg for the bear. The QTVI said that she thought Kiran might have sufficient vision to see the top and bear if they were no more than a metre away. Initially,
Kiran displayed no visual interest in the toys. However, because of the QTVI’s advice, staff looked for visual interest. After several months, it was observed that as well as humming or jiggling her leg, Kiran was looking towards the toy in question.

Reasons for communication

Children communicate for many reasons. For example, they request, reject, greet, gain attention, protest and express feelings and emotions such as pain, discomfort and boredom. School staff become skilled at knowing what children like and dislike. It is easy to fall into the habit of simply giving children their favourite items and never those they dislike, but this denies them reasons for communicating. The following example demonstrates communication through the picture exchange communication (PECS) system.

Freddie

The SLT considered using PECS to support Freddie. However, being unsure about the most suitable means of communication, she sought advice from the QTVI. The QTVI informed the SLT that Freddie has sufficient vision to his right to recognise items several centimetres long at a distance of up to two metres. The QTVI recommended the use of clutter-free life-like pictures on cards 12 cm square.

Freddie likes to use the bells in circle time. The SLT therefore recommended that a teaching assistant sits about 1.5 metres from Freddie, on his right, with the bells resting in her lap; she also recommended that a suitable picture of the bells be placed on the table to Freddie’s right. To draw Freddie’s attention to the bells, the teaching assistant briefly shakes them. As circle time begins, Freddie picks up the picture, walks to the teaching assistant and hands over the picture, in exchange, Freddie is given the bells.

Routines can help children to understand what is happening and predict what will happen next. Once the child knows a routine, staff should sometimes pause, or introduce a change and wait for the child to signal awareness or request the next step.

Lois

Lois participates in dressing: Afzal, her teaching assistant, helps her to put on a sock; instead of immediately putting on her shoe, Afzal waits; Lois lifts her foot to ask for her shoe to be put on.

Selecting targets

Selecting targets can be complex, especially when assessment indicates several possible targets. SLTs can assist in such situations by drawing on their knowledge of how communication develops. Classroom staff, who know the child far better than the SLT, contribute with their knowledge of the child and what happens during the school day.
Don
Don is working within P4 in Speaking: he uses several single words, all names of familiar people and objects. Mark, his teacher was unsure of which words to target next. The SLT noted that a typical child at this stage might also have a few words concerned with actions, such as “gone” and “splash”. However, Don has no vision, so would not see objects disappearing; he also dislikes water. It was therefore decided not to target these words. In contrast, Mark knew that Don really enjoyed it when Mary, a teaching assistant, clapped. The target selected is therefore that Don uses the word “clap”.

Selecting strategies
Having selected a target, it is important to specify the strategies for achieving it.

Because Don sometimes copies a word he hears, the SLT advised that modelling could be used. Several times a day, Mark and Mary take Don to the quiet corner. Mark tells Don who is present and then models the target behaviour by saying “clap”. Mary immediately claps for a few seconds. Again, Mark says “clap”. Again, Mary claps briefly. This time Mark waits, giving Don the opportunity to say “clap”. If he does not do so, Mark again says “clap”. Don is not directly asked to say “clap”. Many other opportunities are taken to use the word “clap”. For example, whenever a pupil has worked hard, they are given a clap. Thus Don hears the word many times a day.

Conclusion
Everyone who comes into contact with each child has an essential role in supporting and facilitating communication. Different members of the team bring different things to this work.

By understanding and respecting each other’s work, and that of the school staff, the QTVI and SLT support the classroom team, enabling them to have ‘the best of both’.

More information
Communication is very complex. Therefore, we have provided only a very brief introduction here. The Complex Needs pages of the RNIB website are a source of further ideas, visit rnib.org.uk/professionals/education/schoolbasedlearning/complexneeds/Pages/complex_needs.aspx

Some children who have visual impairment also have autism. The strategies for supporting such children have received little attention to date. The Visual Impairment and Autism Project is preparing a Resource Pack which will provide guidance for practitioners. For more information, visit rnib.org.uk/autism
Best of both: other titles in the series

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