

## Supporting Children with the Development of Concepts



West Midlands  
Speech & Language  
Therapy

### What are concepts?

Concepts are words that help a child to understand and think about the world. They are important words because they give a child the means to talk about, interact and expand their understanding. A good understanding of concepts helps a child to follow instructions and be specific in what they are talking about. A child first needs to develop a good understanding of concepts before they are able to use them in their talking.

Concepts can be hard to learn as they tend to be more abstract than noun/object words. However, they can often be learnt in a fun way at home and within early years settings.

Some examples of concepts include the following:

- **Size** e.g. big, long, tall
- **Quantity** e.g. empty, more, some
- **Space** e.g. under, behind, next to
- **Time** e.g. after, early, night
- **Movement** e.g. fast, slow, quick
- **Touch/look** e.g. wet, soft, smooth
- **Order** e.g. first, last, next
- **Comparison** e.g. old, same, different

### Does my child have problems understanding concepts?

A child who is not fully understanding concepts may present with difficulties:

- following instructions accurately
- using correct concepts in their spoken language. For example, the child may say "I am sitting **in** the bench" rather than **on** the bench.



- being specific when talking and may use vague statements such as 'thingy', 'that one'. For example, the child may say "I want that one there" rather than "Can I have the **little, green** car".
- problem solving (as they do not have the necessary conceptual language).
- reading and writing.
- When drawing pictures, the child may be unable to conceptualise what it looks like.

### General strategies to support understanding of concepts

- **Model** the correct version of a sentence when the child makes errors, or does not use specific concepts. For example, if the child says "I want that one" you could say "ah you want the **big** apple".
- **Emphasize** the word you want the child to learn, so that it stands out in the sentence. Use the word in a variety of situations so that the child sees the different ways that the concept can be used.
- **Use actions/signs/showing** to support the child's understanding of specific concepts. This helps the child to 'see' what you mean and helps them to link the new concept word to what they are watching. For example, "this bear is the **biggest** one" (while stretching your arms out to indicate the size).
- **Describe** to your child what they are doing or what you can see. For example "your drink has all gone and now your cup is **empty**", "look, the rabbit is running very **fast**".
- **Repeat** new concepts many times in different situations. Children need to hear a word many times before they fully understand its meaning. Ensure that you have your child's attention so that they are looking at the object that you are talking about (if using a less abstract concept such as size, colour, quantity).
- **Stick to the exact word** e.g. if you are teaching 'tall' don't change this to 'taller' or 'tallest'.
- **Opposite words** – it is considered better to teach these one at a time rather than in pairs so that the child fully understands the meaning of each concept. For example, if teaching '**long**' you could use the term '**not long**' before using '**short**' until the child fully understands 'long'.
- **Use of home language** – if English is not your child's first language, and he/she understands the concept in their home language, this will help them to understand the word in English.



## Activities to support the development of concepts

The following are just a few ways that you can support the child's understanding of concepts in a fun way:

- **Read story books** – for example lift the flap books such as 'Where's Spot?' (e.g. he's **under** the bed), opposites books, books displaying different colours etc.
- **Singing songs/nursery rhymes** that involve concepts e.g. 'if you're happy and you know it'.
- **Hide and seek** – hide toys around the room for your child to find. They have to say where they have found the toy e.g. "he's **behind** the settee" (or you can model this for your child). Alternatively you could take turns to hide. The person who is the 'finder' has to say where they have found you e.g. "you're **under** the chair".
- **Posting games** – take turns posting cards in boxes. You could stick a picture of an animal on each box to make this game more interesting e.g. 'I've put my picture **in** the lion's mouth/box".
- **Sorting games** – e.g. sorting beads into different **colours**, sorting socks into **big/little** or **long/short**, sorting washing into **wet/dry**, sorting washing up/clothes into **clean/dirty**.
- **Sand/water play (including bath time)/play dough** – all these activities provide lots of opportunities to teach your child many different concepts.

Developmental Language Disorder  
(DLD): I'll Help You Understand It  
[www.stasspublications.co.uk](http://www.stasspublications.co.uk)

AFASIC

[www.afasic.org.uk](http://www.afasic.org.uk)

RADLD – Raising Awareness of  
Developmental Language Disorder

[www.youtube.com/RADLD/camp](http://www.youtube.com/RADLD/camp)  
[aig.n](http://aig.n)

### Useful books and links

'The Communication Cookbook'+  
other resources from ICAN

[www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

Talking Point

[www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)

The Communication Trust

[www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk)