



What is Expressive Language?

Language involves the ability to understand and communicate with others. Expressive language is the use of words, sentences, gestures, writing or other communication methods to communicate with others.

Expressive Language Difficulties

You may see the following in a child who has difficulties expressing themselves:

- Difficulty learning and using new vocabulary
- Rely on using familiar phrases, e.g. 'it's time to go!' 'I'm not sure'
- Cannot tell you about what they are doing without support from an adult
- Answers questions by repeating the adult's words
- Struggles to form sentences, and speaks in single words or just combines a few words together
- Use of disjointed sentences, e.g. jumbled up word order or missing words
- Does not use the correct grammar e.g. past tense verbs, plurals.
- Finds it difficult to ask questions
- Has trouble writing longer sentences

Why is this Important?

- Children who have expressive language difficulties will often become frustrated due to their limited ability to express themselves. This can lead to challenging behaviours.
- They might become withdrawn as they struggle to use language to relate to friends.
- Children with communication difficulties often identify themselves as less able than their friends, affecting their self-esteem.
- Children may find it difficult to express their feelings, which can result in difficulties with social communication.
- Poor language is a predictor of poor literacy skills.
- Difficulties with speaking, reading and writing can affect a child's ability to access the curriculum at school. If you can't say the words, you won't be able to easily write them.
- Communication needs in primary school children can have a large impact on their learning. Only a fifth of children with language needs achieve the expected levels for their age in English and Maths at age 11.



Expressive Language: What to Expect and When

AGE RANGE	HOW DOES THIS PRESENT?
4-5 years	<p>Using sentences of 5-6 words.</p> <p>Starting to link sentences together with 'and' 'because' 'but' 'so' and 'if'.</p> <p>Starting to use different verb tenses (<u>played</u>), but struggles with irregular tenses, e.g. 'we goed home'.</p> <p>Uses language to talk about events in the past, present and future.</p>
5-6 years	<p>Uses imaginative language in their play.</p> <p>Will ask lots of questions to find out information, including 'how' and 'why' questions.</p> <p>Uses language to explain or justify ideas, e.g. 'I'm older than you so I'm going first'.</p> <p>Starting to develop literacy skills.</p>
7-8 years	<p>Starting to use irregular and unusual grammar, e.g. 'I falled' becomes 'I fell'.</p> <p>Can use language to clearly summarise and explain ideas, including for topic work at school. E.g. 'So the bee's going to collect the pollen from the stamen and then fly to another flower and pollinate it'.</p> <p>Develops written language to write descriptive paragraphs.</p>
9-10 years	<p>Sentences are about 10 words long, but will be longer if telling a story.</p> <p>Can recognise when their sentence structure or grammar is not correct, and will self-correct this.</p> <p>Uses language and questions to help conversations flow.</p> <p>Uses language to engage in sarcasm, giving their opinion and arguing a point of view.</p>



Strategies to support Expressive Language



Adults should **provide a good model of language** around the child. Use sentences just above your child's ability to describe what you are doing.

Read books together or look at personal photos and talk about what is happening, what will happen next etc.

Create opportunities for your child to use language, e.g. telling you they need to use the glue, asking you for more food.

Listen to what they have to say, and show that you are listening through your body language, eye contact etc. Be mindful that some children with social communication difficulties find eye contact difficult.

Be patient and tell them that you'll wait for them to finish. Make sure they are not feeling rushed.

Respond to **what** they are trying to say rather than how they say it.

If you have struggled to understand what they said, kindly explain and figure out together another way to communicate, e.g. **ask them to show you**.

Try not to correct, but instead provide the right model of spoken language.

Prompt with cues such as 'first', 'after that'. If your child is able to understand 'wh-' questions, ask questions to encourage more information, e.g. 'where was that?'

Build on what they have said, **extending their language** by adding a word or more of the sentence. E.g. If they say 'I love chocolate', you can say 'yes you love chocolate because it tastes nice'.

Children often need support using sentences with all three Subject, Verb and Object (SVO). Extend their sentences by adding the one they omit, e.g. If they say 'mummy's washing', say 'mummy's washing the plates'.

Provide sentence frames with examples of how to use more complex language, e.g. 'if we go to the park, then we'll have to put our boots on'.

Encourage your child to use questions by using them yourself and modelling correct answers, e.g. 'who's that at the door? It's Nana' 'why is your sister crying? Because she dropped her drink'.

Give specific praise e.g. "You used a really long sentence when you told me about your lunch – well done!" Use a **reward chart** to reinforce this.



Activities to Develop Expressive Language at Home

Sentence building. Build up [three part sentences](#) containing subject, verb and object. Prompt your child to use all three with questions. When completing activities, reading books or even watching TV together. The Colourful Semantics approach is good to use here. **For older children...** do similar activities and add words into the sentence such as adjectives (soft, spherical, miniscule), or where/when it is happening. Use more challenging sentence constructions such as [these](#).

Connectives. Link two sentences together with [connective words](#). Take a picture or an activity, model and encourage your child to develop a sentence using these words. **For older children...** make it harder by trying to use more than one connective in a sentence! Completing this alongside homework or talking about topic work can challenge your child further.

Use prepositions. Using prepositions as a connector word is a great way to increase sentence length and develop vocabulary too. This is easily done with items in your house, e.g. 'the cat is sitting *beside* the long curtains'. You can use these [list of prepositions and picture activities](#).

Hiding game. Choose two or three toys or pictures to begin with and put them on a table. Cover them with a piece of cloth, and uncover these one by one. As the list of items gets longer, ask your child to name the items in a sentence form, e.g. "a boat, a red car and that's a doll". As your child gets more confident, you can show your child all the toys and then hide them behind your back or cover them up, which will help improve your child's memory too.

Describing games. Play games that involve you taking turns with your child to describe items. It can be done with objects you find around your house, e.g. spoon: 'This is a spoon. This spoon is hard, it is shiny and silver. I use a spoon to eat'. **For older children...** Games like 'Guess who' or 'Heads up' can be played using sentences, e.g. glasses: 'They go on your head, we use them because they help us to see if we find that hard'. This game has a big focus on vocabulary too.

Let's talk emotions. Use [emotion cards](#) to develop your child's ability to express their feelings. Give examples of sentences to say how you feel, e.g. "I feel excited", and extend these sentences using words 'because or when', 'it made me feel sad *because* I fell over' 'I feel happy *when* I am at the park'. **For older students...** use an [emotion wheel](#) to explore synonyms (words that mean the same thing, e.g. sad, miserable), and talk about how they can use these words within their descriptive writing at school.



Barrier games. Create a game with your child, that other siblings can play too. Place a physical barrier between each child and yourself (a folder, a cereal box) so they cannot see each other's work. Use ideas from these [barrier games](#), or give them colouring pens and paper, then tell them what to draw, e.g. 'draw a red circle and a blue triangle'. Once they are confident in this, encourage the child to 'be the teacher' and have a go giving you instructions. Use 'where' and 'what' prompts if needed. Try to extend your child's sentence length by 1-2 words. **For older children...** you can use the same game, but use harder pictures to describe & draw, e.g. their favourite superhero / dream outfit / an item in your house. You could also use Lego instead of drawing, e.g. 'put the square red brick on top of the green rectangular brick'.

Sequencing game. Sequencing skills are important to lots of areas of language. Children with delayed expressive language have trouble organizing their language e.g. when telling you about what they did on their day out, the order of events is muddled. This can make conversation hard to follow. Start with [familiar three step sequences](#), emphasising 'first, next, last'. When they can do this, practice them describing an activity, and then telling a story using the first/next/last prompt.

Word classes. This can be used with **older children....** Check your child has a good understanding of the main word classes – noun, verb, adjective, conjunction and include adverb, pronoun for a challenge. Ask your child to come up with one word for each word class, and ask if they can put them together to make a sentence? They will likely need to include smaller words, e.g. 'is' '-ing' 'a' 'the'. Make it a game and ask adults / siblings to decide if the sentence makes sense or not – is it silly or is it sensible?

All about me. Use this [all about me poster](#) and fill it in with your child. Discuss what they've written and encourage them to speak in sentences. Use 'why' questions to prompt the use of 'because'. **For older children...** You can use this [poster](#) or simply talk about themselves/their friend/favourite character.

News Time. This game provides a set opportunity in the day to speak and for adults to use the strategies above. You can use a hairbrush or a specific object that acts as a 'microphone'. This is passed around the family. The person holding the 'microphone' is the only one allowed to speak about their day everyone else must be quiet and listen. **For older children...** they could explain something they have learnt or experienced that day. Visuals (pictures, school book) can be used to help if needed.

