



Explaining speech, language and communication needs to siblings

Helping a child to understand their brother/sister's speech, language and communication difficulty really does depend on their ages and what type of speech language or communication difficulty the sibling has. Some speech, language and communication difficulties will resolve with quite simple strategies, some with therapy but some will be more complex and long lasting needing ongoing support.

It's a good idea to answer children's questions as you go along and as they come up, there is no perfect time to answer their questions or explain.

Remember, you know your child best and will know how much information to give them.

Here are some typical questions and issues that may come up for siblings and some information on how you can respond.

I know what he's saying, I can tell you...

Siblings often seem to have a way of understanding what their brothers/sisters are saying. And they may sometimes be able to 'translate' or tell you what they want. It's important that children who are having difficulties with communication, such as making speech sounds, learning to use sounds or words, or using a different way of communicating, like signs or symbols, have opportunities at home to speak for themselves or practise their communication skills. It's important that siblings are aware that it's good that they understand each other but that their brother/sister needs learn to do this for themselves.

You could try saying something simple like:-

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“I know you do and that’s great but let’s give Eddie a chance to do it himself.”

Or

“It’s important that Eddie learns to do this himself, let him have some time to try”

Why won’t Eddie play with me?

Don’t worry, all children sometimes don’t want to play with their brothers/sisters or have different interests and this is perfectly acceptable.

Children with communication difficulties sometimes find it difficult to play with their brothers/sisters, maybe because they have not yet developed some of the skills that are needed such as turn taking, waiting, or imaginative skills. Or it may be that they struggle with skills such as cooperation, collaboration and differences of opinion or their poor language skills mean that they don’t understand or can’t participate. Or simply get so involved in their own play they don’t notice brothers/sisters.

You may need to explain to your child that their brother/sister doesn’t have the same interests as them or enjoy playing the same things as them but that there are activities that they can do together sometimes. Perhaps your speech and language therapist will have given you activities to develop your child’s play and your other children can join in these or you could make every day activities like shopping into games. For some ideas you could contact I CAN enquiry service.

You could say something like:-

“Eddie finds taking turns tricky, that’s why he takes your go. Let’s help him shall we?”

Or

“Eddie would love to play with you but he is not good at imagining. He loves cars, shall we see if he wants to play with those?”

Or

“Would you and Eddie like to go and play at the park or go swimming?”

Why doesn’t Eddie talk to me much?

Some children with speech, language and communication difficulties may be very chatty but others may not enjoy communicating with others or may struggle to understand language and so they don’t respond when spoken to or they give answers which are not clear. Some children may have expressive difficulties, this means that they struggle both with using language to talk and, with older children, also in written language.

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If a sibling has noticed that his brother/sister doesn't talk to them much, or if they want to talk with their brother/sister but their sibling doesn't want to, it may be helpful to explain that not using too many questions is helpful and giving choices for example :

"Eddie struggles to understand lots of words and can't answer all your questions. Shall we think of some sentences you can use?"

Or

"Your brother struggles to talk and may only reply with one or two words but that's ok isn't it?"

Or

"If you speak slowly and clearly Eddie will find it easier to follow what you are saying"

Eddie won't share

All children have difficulties sharing sometimes, this is very common. Try to explain that their sibling doesn't do this on purpose or because he is naughty but just hasn't yet learned how to share. Perhaps you could try setting up opportunities for your other children to demonstrate sharing such as turn taking games? It may help to use a timer for each child's "go". If you see a speech and language therapist they will be able to suggest ideas for games or activities to do at home or you can contact I CAN enquiry service.

You may want to say something like:

"Eddie finds it hard to share because he doesn't understand how to take turns, or that he will get his toys back. He really likes that dinosaur"

Why don't I have pictures?

It is quite common for nurseries and schools to use pictures to support children's learning and some speech and language therapists will suggest using signs or symbols to support children with communication difficulties at home, to make it easier for them to communicate and be understood.

If brothers/sisters are interested in these that is really great. Alternative ways of communicating should be used at home and by everyone a child comes into contact with. This will be their way of communicating and others will need to know how to join in and answer using the system a child uses for communication.

You may want to say something like:

"Eddie looks at the photos so he knows what to do next. He doesn't always remember. It's like mummy's shopping list – so we can remember"

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Quiet Eddie! I want to hear the story

Some children with communication difficulties can find it difficult to listen, pay attention to tasks or listen to talking for very long. They will need activities to be short and change often to keep them engaged and will need spoken language to be short sentences. Brothers/sisters can find this frustrating, especially if their sibling is interrupting bedtime story, homework or game playing. It may help to explain that their brother isn't doing this on purpose but that they cannot pay attention for long and need support to do this. It may help siblings to know that there will be places in the home or times of the day where they can be quiet and not interrupted.

Explain that:

“Eddie finds listening to talking difficult and can only do this for a short time. Shall we make up some short stories/games?”

Or

“I will read you a longer story later when Eddie is busy doing something else – is that alright?”

Why can't my friends understand him?

Some children with communication difficulties can struggle to be understood. There are many reasons for this: it could be because they cannot make some sounds, because they can't put sounds together clearly in sentences, because they struggle to understand what is being said, or they may use an alternative way of communicating.

Explain that most people in the family can understand him because you spend a lot of time with him and know what he wants. To new people it may take time to understand him, or to understand what he is saying. You may want to suggest that your child and his friends spend more time with him or you if your child is older you might like to help them explain what difficulties their sibling has to their friends. This could be something very simple for example:

“Eddie struggles with some speech sounds”

Or

“Eddie uses gestures – shall I teach you some?”

My brother is so annoying

Most brothers/sisters find each other annoying sometime and it's natural to have these feelings.

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For older siblings it's important to listen to these feelings and give them time to talk about what's upsetting them. You might not be able to change anything but it's important to listen.

I CAN have the I CAN Help Enquiry Service, an information line run by qualified speech & language therapists. If you have any questions about the speech and language skills of a child or would find it useful to talk about simple strategies to support communication, call 020 7843 2544 to book an appointment for a call back at a time convenient to you.

You can also e mail your questions to help@ican.org.uk

Useful websites

www.afasic.org.uk

www.talkingpoint.org.uk

www.sibs.org.uk

www.nas.org.uk

www.contactafamily.org.uk

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