Improving Communication Skills

The ability to develop children’s communication skills in school is now part of the Ofsted inspection framework and the professional standards that all teachers must meet. There has also been a number of national Ofsted reports saying that outstanding schools are ones that put a big focus on speaking and listening.

**Make communication part of your school improvement plan.**

Communication and language underpin so many other school goals - whether it is straightforward attainment, closing the gap between more and less well-off pupils or reducing behaviour problems.

Oral language skills are one of the best predictors of how many GCSEs children will get, and the best predictor of all of whether children brought up in poverty will escape poverty as adults.

**Put in place a consistent, school-wide approach to teaching vocabulary.**

1. Each teacher identifies ‘Goldilocks’ words for the topic they are teaching - words that are not too easy and not too hard, but ‘just right’.

   Teach those Goldilocks words and regularly review them. What works here is helping children build a web of associations for a given word – what it sounds like, what it means, how it fits in a sentence.

2. Teach children how to be good listeners. This means much more than sitting still and paying attention. It means listening actively for meaning and asking for clarification if you don’t understand.

   Try going through with your class what makes a good listener: looking at the speaker, listening to all the words, taking turns to talk, thinking about the words, checking whether you have understood and asking for help if you haven’t.

3. Make sure children have plenty of time to talk. Role play areas are a great idea. They work best when the children help to plan and design them, and when the teacher or TA spends some time in the area, modelling the kinds of vocabulary and language structures they want to see the children use.

4. When you ask questions, choose some that call for more than a one word or ‘right or wrong’ answer. Use open rather than just closed questions – ones like “What do you know about ...?”, “What makes you think that?”, “How could we find out?”. Try using the ten second rule - wait at least ten seconds before expecting an answer to a question.

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