

Speech and Language Therapy Service for Children, Barking and Dagenham

Supporting Your Child’s Understanding of Concepts

What are concepts?

Concepts are words which **describe** (e.g. colour, size, texture, shape), refer to **time** (e.g. yesterday, before, first) or refer to **position** (e.g. over, under, in). Children with language difficulties often find concepts difficult to remember because they are abstract - you can’t see them or touch them like nouns (e.g. apple) or actions (e.g. cutting).

Concepts are also difficult for children to acquire because they often have to be understood in context and may change according to the situation. You might label a dog *big* if it is next to a mouse. However the same dog might be called *small* if it is next to an elephant.

Which concepts should I teach?

The table below gives a guide on the order in which concepts develop. It is taken from the checklist from ‘Living Language’, by Anne Locke. The table starts with easier concepts and then moves onto more difficult ones.

You can choose concepts that you have noticed your child is struggling with or work on concepts which have been selected by the Speech and Language Therapist as being difficult for your child to learn.

Table A. General Guide to the order concepts can develop

| Pre- Level 1 | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | Level 4 |
|---------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Hot/ wet | Hard/soft | Cold/ dry | Rough/ smooth | |
| | Noisy/ quiet | Loud/ soft | | High/ low |
| Big Gone | Fast/slow | Empty/ full/ long/ small/ biggest | Tall/ thin/ bigger/ heaviest/ longest/smallest | Corner/ curve/ straight |
| More/ yes/ no | A bit/ all/ a lot | Another/ any | Few/ most | Deep/ shallow |
| Down/ in/ on/ up | On/ inside/ under/ over | Many/ as much as/ except | Every/ half/ nearly | Largest/ shortest/ tallest/ thinnest/ fatter/ thick |
| | Again/ now | Top/ bottom | Beside/ between/ middle | Equal/ less/ much/ plenty/ several/ whole |
| | One/ two | Around/ behind/ in front/ next to/ | Backwards/ far/ together | Above/ below/ across/ apart/ row/ sideways |
| | | After/ soon/ | Before/ later | Early/ late/ never/ sometimes |
| | | First/ next | Second, third, last | |
| Dirty | Good/ happy/ naughty/ sad | Bad/ hungry/ nice/ pretty silly | Cross/ frightened/ kind | Clever/ excited/ pleased/ unkind |

Revised from Ann Locke’s Living Language Programme (Locke, 1985)

How do I teach concepts?

Work on *one* concept at a time

Children with language difficulties sometimes find it hard to learn concepts when they are compared with their opposite (for example teaching *first* and *last* at the same time). Instead, teach one concept at a time without using the opposite concept. For example “This one’s *heavy*...this one’s *not heavy*”. You should only introduce another one when your child understands the concept.

Use real situations

For children who have difficulty understanding and using concepts, using real objects and situations works best. Make activities ‘hands on’ to help your child to **experience** the concept. Your child will need lots of practise with each new concept.

Isolate the concept.

Where appropriate, make sure all the aspects of the objects used are the same apart from the concept you are trying to teach: For example if you are teaching the idea of Big / little and you use a big and a little teddy ...make sure the teddies are identical except for the size. This will ensure the child is more likely focus on the idea of size rather than another distracting difference.

Heavy and light ...place the light and heavy objects out of sight in identical boxes...you could have bricks in one and a piece of paper in the other.

Empty & full: use identical containers

Activities

- **Objects**

Start with a box of objects and have your child follow directions with basic concepts. (“Put the spoon **behind** the cup”, “put the teddy **behind** the box”)

Extend: As they progress, ask your child to tell you things to do using the concepts. Remember, a child must have a good understanding of the concepts before they can use them in spoken language.

- **Feely bag**

Collect real objects that show the concept you are trying to teach (*smooth*: pebble, ball, marble). Put the objects in a bag, take turns to take an object out of the bag and talk about it using the key word (*smooth* for example) lots of times.

Extend: When your child is familiar with the new concept, see if they can find their own *smooth* objects. Also collect your own bag of *smooth* objects and compare with your child at the end.

- **Sorting**

When your child is familiar with 2-3 new concepts, collect a range of objects and ask your child to sort them into different groups (for example, *smooth*, *heavy*, *dry*).

- **Acting out**

Show the new concept by ‘acting it out’ with your child e.g. sit **on** or **under** the table; walk **towards** or **away from** each other. Talk about what you are doing using lots of repetition of the new words. The aim of these activities is to give your child direct experience of the concept so be creative!

- **Craft Activities**

Draw, paint, cut out pictures or make objects out of play dough to show your child visual examples of the concept you are targeting. For example, draw **tall** and **short** people; cut out pictures of **big** and **little** animals; paint a monkey at the **top** of a tree.

- **Reading a book**

A lot of books teach early concepts through text or pictures. When your child is reading a book talk about the pictures using the new concept e.g. “Do you think that man is **happy** or **not happy**?”; “Can you find the **tall** tree?”; “Can you find **all** of the birds?”; “Which room has the **most** people in?”

- **“I Spy...”**
Use concepts in your clues. You could say, "I spy something that is **empty**." For more practice, encourage your child to use concepts when it is their turn. This game is great to use one-on-one, as a group, or on long car trips.
- **Sequencing**
Choose a task where activities need to be done in a certain order (e.g. making toast or getting dressed). Do the activity with your child and emphasise concept words related to time you want to teach (e.g. first, next, then, after). Use photos of activities for your child to re-sequence (e.g. making the bed, making a cup of tea for example).