

Communication skills and complex trauma

Complex or **developmental** trauma can occur when children are abused or neglected.

This includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse, as well as neglect and witnessing family violence.

Trauma can affect children's development. Among other things, it can cause difficulties with their communication skills.

Types of communication difficulties

All children with complex trauma are different, but these are some common difficulties.

Understanding information

They may have trouble **understanding** what other people say.

This can happen when people use longer sentences, tell stories or give long pieces of information.

Children may find it hard to follow instructions, understand stories, understand an explained activity or follow conversations with friends.

As children get older, they might find it hard to understand information that is implied or not explicitly explained.

Using language to express themselves

They might have trouble **finding the right words** to describe what they want to say. This also includes using words in long sentences and stories to share information.

They might struggle to **express their feelings** or **explain an event**. They might have difficulty keeping a conversation flowing.

Building relationships

Making and maintaining **relationships** relies on communication skills.

Children use communication skills to initiate play with others, negotiate play ideas, share ideas, give advice and opinions, take another person's perspective, share jokes and work through conflict.

Children with complex trauma might find it hard to play or do group work with other children.

They might misinterpret the actions or words of others and find it difficult to repair a friendship when there is a misunderstanding.

Learning to read

They might have difficulties **learning to read**. They might try to avoid activities that require reading. They might avoid attending school or find ways to be out of the classroom as much as possible.

They might feel socially isolated if friends are using communication methods such as texting and online chat groups to connect.

They might not have the reading skills to access information they want and need about support services, medical information and interest areas as they get older.

Other issues

Children who have experienced complex trauma can also experience other types of communication difficulties not specific to their complex trauma experiences, such as stuttering, and different types of speech sound disorders.

Communication skills

Communication skills help children build relationships with others, learn at school and do things they're interested in.

Children who don't receive the help they need have increased risk of social isolation, poor achievement at school, poorer mental health and future contact with the criminal justice system.

The videos on the [UK Trauma Council website](#) have more information.

How family, friends and educators can help

Here are some things you can do to help:

- Use routines to help the child feel comfortable and ready to learn.
- Speak in shorter, less complex sentences to help the child understand.
- Break longer instructions into smaller 'chunks' and give the child extra time to think through information.
- Use everyday activities to explain and teach the meaning of words. For example, you could say, 'Choose a book from the shelf. That means come and take one.'
- Find ways to show information as well as say it. For example, you can use visual supports such as photos, videos, pictures, labelled diagrams or flowcharts in activities. You can also model activities or pair the child with another student who can model the activity. Taking photos or video of the child doing the activity can help them to talk about the activity with another person.
- Expose the child to stories and reading activities as much as possible. Listen to audiobooks in the car, read a book together as part of an everyday routine and write stories about things the child has done that day in a special journal. Support older children to try some of the technology in their computers and devices that will convert text to speech, so they can still access written information when reading is hard.
- Work with any professionals the child is working with to understand their unique strengths and support needs.

How speech pathologists help

You can also ask for the child to be referred to a speech pathologist.

Speech pathologists work with children who have communication difficulties associated with experiencing complex trauma.

They work with the child, their family and other people in the child's life to understand the child's communication strengths and support needs.

Speech pathologists can provide strategies to assist the child with their communication difficulties.

These include:

- environmental strategies that use visual communication aides in the child's different environments to help support their communication skills
- working with the child's communication partners to help them support and develop the child's communication skills.
- working with the child to help build their skills and confidence with different communication skills.

Many children who have experienced complex trauma need extra support around their communication skills.

Speech pathologists can assist children to develop these skills to build their confidence with connecting with others and becoming successful learners across their life.