

Receptive Language (understanding words and language)

What is receptive language (understanding words and language)?



Receptive language is the ability to understand words and language. It involves gaining information and meaning from routine (e.g. we have finished our breakfast so next it is time to get dressed), visual information within the environment (e.g. mum holding her keys means that we are going to get the car, a green light means go), sounds and words (e.g. a siren means a fire engine is coming down the street, the word ball means a round bouncy thing we play with), concepts such as size, shape, colours and time, grammar (e.g. regular plurals: cat/s, regular past tense: fetch/ed) and written information (e.g. signs in the environment like “no climbing”, written stories).

Some children who have difficulty understanding oral language (words and

talking) may appear to be understanding because they may be able to pick up key words and get visual information from the environment or from gestures.

Why is receptive language (understanding words and language) important?

Receptive language is important in order to communicate successfully. Children who have understanding difficulties may find it challenging to follow instructions at home or within the educational setting and may not respond appropriately to questions and requests. Within the school setting, difficulties in understanding may lead to attention and listening difficulties and/or behavioural issues. As most activities require a good understanding of language, it may also make it difficult for a child to access the curriculum or engage in the activities and academic tasks required for their year level of school.

What are the building blocks necessary to develop receptive language?

- **Attention and concentration:** Sustained effort, doing activities without distraction and being able to hold that effort long enough to get the task done.
- **Pre-language skills:** The ways in which we communicate without using words and include things such as gestures, facial expressions, imitation, joint attention and eye contact.
- **Social skills:** Determined by the ability to engage in reciprocal interaction with others (either verbally or non-verbally), to compromise with others, and be able to recognize and follow social norms.
- **Play skills:** Voluntary engagement in self motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment where the activities may be, but are not necessarily, goal oriented.

How can you tell if my child has problems with receptive

language?

If a child has difficulties with receptive language they might:

- Have difficulty attending and listening to language.
- Not pay attention within group times at kindergarten and school.
- Not follow instructions that others the same age would be able to follow.
- Respond to questions by repeating what you say instead of giving an answer.
- Find it difficult to listen to stories.
- Give unusual answers to questions.

*These difficulties may vary depending on the child's age.

What other problems can occur when a child has receptive language difficulties?

When a child has receptive language difficulties, they might also have difficulties with:

- **Attention and concentration:** Sustained effort, doing activities without distraction and being able to hold that effort long enough to get the task done.
- **Behaviour:** The child's actions, usually in relation to their environment (e.g. a child becoming disruptive within the classroom because they are unable to "access" or understand what the teacher is saying or talking about).
- **Literacy:** Reading and writing.
- **Social skills:** Determined by the ability to engage in reciprocal interaction with others (either verbally or non-verbally), to compromise with others, and be able to recognize and follow social norms.
- **Sensory processing:** Accurate registration, interpretation and response to sensory stimulation in the environment and one's own body.
- **Executive functioning:** Higher order reasoning and thinking skills.
- **Expressive (using) language:** The use of language through speech, sign or alternative forms of communication to communicate wants, needs, thoughts and ideas.

- **Planning and sequencing:** The sequential multi-step task/activity performance to achieve a well-defined result.
- **Auditory Processing:** Ability to hear sounds, distinguish between similar sounds or words, and separate relevant speech from background noise.

What can be done to improve receptive language?

- **Eye-contact:** Obtain the child's eye contact before giving them an instruction.
- **Minimal instructions:** Refrain from giving too many instructions at once.
- **Simplify the language** you use with the child so it is at a level that they can understand (i.e. usually just above their expressive language level or how much they are saying).
- **Chunk verbal instructions** into parts. Instead of "Go and get your lunchbox and your hat and go outside", say "Get your lunchbox." When the child has followed that instruction, say "Now get your hat" then "OK, now you can go outside".
- **Repeat:** Ask the child to repeat the instruction to ensure that they have understood what they need to do (e.g. "Go and get your bag then sit at the table. What do I want you to do?").
- **'First/then':** Use this concept to help the child know what order they need to complete the command (e.g. "*First* get your jacket, *then* put on your shoes").
- **Clarify:** Encourage the child to ask for clarification if they forget part of the instruction or have trouble understanding what they need to do. Encourage them to ask for the command to be repeated or clarified (e.g. "Can you say that again please?").
- **Show:** Physically show the child what to do when giving them an instruction so that they can 'see' what the concept within the instruction looks like.
- **Visual aids** (e.g. pictures, gestures, body language, facial expression) can be used to assist the child's comprehension and recall of the instruction.
- **Describe:** In everyday activities describe to the child what they are doing (e.g. when the child is packing up their toys you might say: "Put the toys in the box" or when dressing/undressing you might say: "Take your shoes

off/Put your shoes on”).

- **Emphasise the word** you want the child to learn about and repeat the concept in a variety of situations or settings so that the child sees the different ways in which a concept can be used (e.g. “Lights *on*” vs. “The book is *on* the table”).
- **Play:** For the young child engage in play on a regular basis, model how to play with toys, follow the child’s lead and talk about what they are doing with the toys.
- **Reduce background noise:** Turn off background noise in the home (e.g. television, radio, music) when engaging with the child to reduce/minimise distractions.
- **Face-to-face:** Get face to face with the child when talking.
- **Visuals** such as signs or pictures can be used to facilitate and support a child’s understanding.
- **Books:** Look at books which interest the child and talk about the pictures and the story. Get the child to predict what might happen next or explain why something might have happened in the story.

What activities can help improve receptive language?

- **Name items** together when completing tasks, such as looking at a book, in the car, looking outside, while playing or when shopping.
- **Day to day activities:** When going shopping and visiting places, such as the park, zoo or museum encourage the child to talk about what you did and saw and possibly even draw or act out what happened.
- **Model new words:** Play activities with the child that they really enjoy and throughout the game model new words and phrases.
- **Explain new concepts** in different ways (e.g. looking at the concept of “wet”: use water to wet things and talk about things that are wet and dry; look at pictures of things that are “wet”; if it rains, or the child is in the bath, talk about the concept of being “wet”; make up sentences and stories about being wet/dry).
- **Simon says:** Take turns with the child in following and giving instructions. Also, gradually increase the length of the command that is provided (e.g. ‘Simon says touch your toes’; ‘Simon says first touch your toes, then clap your hands’; ‘Simon says before you shout hurrah, count to

10'). Additionally, reinforce body parts (e.g. pat your head, pull your ear) and simple verbs (e.g. jump, shake) when playing the activity.

- **Obstacle course:** Put together an obstacle course in the house or outside in the backyard. Take turns with the child in following and giving instructions. Gradually increase the length of the command that is provided (e.g. run to the sandpit; first run to the sandpit then crawl over to the bikes).
- **Feely bag game:** Place different everyday items/objects (e.g. toothbrush, car, cup, block) into a bag. Take turns with the child in taking an item out of the bag. Encourage the child to:
 - Reach into the bag and try to guess what the item is before taking it out.
 - Describe characteristics about the item once they have pulled it out of the bag (e.g. colour, shape, use/function).
 - Answer questions about the item that they have pulled out (e.g. Is it round? Can you eat it?).
 - Guess the item that you have pulled out of the bag by asking you questions (e.g. Is it round? Can you eat it?).
- **Books:** Look at picture books with the child. Take turns in asking each other questions about the pictures (e.g. Who is in the picture? What is the girl/boy doing?). Try to think about what might happen next in the story and different possible endings.

Why should I seek therapy if I notice difficulties with receptive language in my child?

Therapeutic intervention to help a child with receptive language difficulties is important to:

- Strengthen and develop the child's ability to:
 - engage effectively in a classroom/academic setting (e.g. following instructions appropriately, completing academic tasks).
 - communicate appropriately with their peers (e.g. having a conversation about shared topics of interest using specific language, asking and answering questions).
 - communicate appropriately with adults and unfamiliar individuals

(e.g. retelling events, sequencing ideas, answering questions appropriately).

- Improve a child's ability to understand and respond appropriately to questions.
- Develop a child's understanding of concepts.
- Improve reading and writing skills.
- Develop alternative forms of communicating (e.g. sign, picture exchange communication system, voice output devices) if verbal language is not developing.
- Help reduce frustration in a child who struggles with comprehending in the home or school environments.
- Facilitate expressive language development.

If left untreated what can difficulties with receptive language lead to?

When children have difficulties with receptive language, they might also have difficulties with:

- Forming friendships and engaging in positive social interactions with peers.
- Completing tests, exams and academic tasks in higher level education.
- Applying for jobs in both an interview and written application and answering questions during job interviews.
- Developing reading and writing skills.
- Following and giving directions to find unfamiliar or new places.

What type of therapy is recommended for receptive language difficulties?

If your child has difficulties with understanding words and language, it is recommended they consult a Speech Therapist.

If there are multiple areas of concern (i.e. beyond just understanding words and language) both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy may well be

recommended to address the functional areas of concern. This is the benefit of choosing Kid Sense which provides Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy.

Contact us today to make an initial enquiry or book an assessment for your child
on 1800 KID SENSE (1800 543 736)

