Small Talk

Identifying communication problems in maltreated children – Literature Review

(2014)

Acknowledgements

Abstract

The Small Talk project was a research project that aimed to ascertain if it was possible to identify which children, already vulnerable due to their experiences of abuse or neglect, would benefit from a speech, language and hearing assessment. In particular, the project aimed to develop a problem-identification tool for use by practitioners in child and family services who were not speech pathologists to identify possible communication problems of children who have experienced maltreatment. This literature review accompanies the Small Talk Report which describes the research project in more detail (Frederico, Jackson, Black, Joffe, McConachy, & Worthington, 2014).

After defining some of the key terms, this review summarises the literature in relation to healthy communication in children including a neurodevelopmental and attachment perspective. There is discussion regarding Australian Aboriginal children and language as important contextual information. Following on, there is a description of some of the common speech, language and hearing problems experienced by children. There is discussion of the prevalence of communication problems, the multiple consequences that can arise and the speech pathology and audiology service system response available.

After a description of the child protection and out-of-home care system, there is a description of a small number of studies on the prevalence of speech, language and hearing problems for children in this system. There is exploration of the research regarding the impact of child maltreatment on communication difficulties and regarding the literature on communication difficulties for Aboriginal children.

This review explores the literature on attempts to identify children with communication difficulties, including a detailed examination of screening tools and some cautions regarding their utility and effectiveness.

Finally, this literature review considers the different assumptions that underlie the Small Talk project and whether they are supported or challenged by the available literature.

Contents

Introduction

This literature review accompanies a report on the findings from the Small Talk project (Frederico, Jackson, Black, Joffe, McConachy, & Worthington, 2014). The Small Talk project aimed to develop a means of identifying which children, who had experienced abuse and neglect, would most benefit from a speech, language and hearing assessment to facilitate timely services and interventions to redress or prevent communication difficulties. In particular the project aimed to develop a problem-identification tool for use by practitioners in child protection, out-of-home care, family services, Indigenous services and therapeutic services to identify concerns about the development of communication in children who have suffered maltreatment.

An initial literature review was undertaken in the early stages of the Small Talk project to assist in scoping the issues and providing guidance in the development of the pilot tool. The literature review in this document is the culmination of both the literature that informed the project along the way and a more recent review to help interpret the findings from this study, particularly to help consider implications for practice.

This literature review begins with an overview of the development of communication for children in general and what can happen when children experience abuse and neglect. It brings together theory and research from speech pathology, neuroscience, psychology and social work. Given most of the children in the child protection population have experienced trauma and disrupted attachment, trauma and attachment theories were also explored, especially in relation to the development of communication. Due to the over-representation of Aboriginal[1] children in the Australian child protection and care system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2013), this review also considered research regarding speech, language and hearing for Aboriginal children.

Finally, this review examines the available screening tools and other approaches, considered potentially useful in identifying speech and language difficulties in children and the implications of this for the development of the Small Talk problem-identification tool.

Definitions

Normal communication includes all means by which information is transmitted between the sender and the recipient. The means of communication are verbal and non-verbal; oral and written; formal and informal; or intentional and unintentional. Human beings, unlike other animals, mainly communicate using a system of symbolic communication referred to as language, which may be spoken, written, or signed. (Ndung'u & Kinyua, 2009, para. 1)

Communication is the process by which we share thoughts, feelings and ideas through verbal, gestural and written modes. Successful speech and language development is fundamental to enabling individuals to effectively live in society. It is also fundamental to how children grow. Hearing and auditory processing are also important in the process of communication.

There are a number of key terms with particular meaning in the field of speech pathology that are relevant for this project. These include: receptive language (understanding words and sentences within language); expressive language (producing words and formulated sentences to make comments and share thoughts, including oral language or verbal communication); speech (producing and coordinating speech sounds including consonants, vowels and syllables, including the spoken word); pragmatics (rules of talking and communicating with others); discourse and narratives (having conversations, relating or talking about events and telling a story) and phonological awareness (recognising and manipulating different sounds in words; e.g. rhyming and identifying the particular sound that is at the beginning of a word) (Nelson, Nygren, Walker, & Panoscha, 2006; Law, Boyle, Harris, Harkness, & Nye, 1998).

The actual language, such as English, French or Watha Wurrung, is another important element to consider in communication and is particularly relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Following is a more detailed description of some of the specific terms that are at the centre of understanding speech and language:

Receptive language is the ability to understand what is being said and requires attentiveness, concentration, comprehension and timely processing of information. This is where the child's ability to hear auditory signals is key. Integral to a child's ability to understand and respond to communication is his or her ability to hear clearly and to process those sounds so they make sense, referred to as auditory processing.

Expressive language is the ability to convey thoughts, feelings and ideas through spoken or written words. The emphasis in the Small Talk project, especially given the young age of the children, is on oral language.

Speech relates to sounds used to convey language orally, including fluency and voice characteristics (such as pitch and volume) and requires a coordination of breathing, vocal chords and the muscles of the mouth and tongue. Voice adds a unique quality to a person's speech that can be recognised by family and friends over distance or on the telephone (Angell, 2009). Voice can add an element of emotion to a speaker's message that sometimes words fail to convey.

Pragmatics relates to the ability to use language appropriately, including the quality and quantity of information provided and how relevant that may be. As such it requires awareness of the context and encompasses appropriate use of non-verbal behaviours such as eye gaze and facial expression, as well as conversational skills such as turn-taking.

Phonological awareness, which begins pre-literacy, encompasses skills at a sentence, word and syllable level such as identifying rhyming words and sound awareness. It includes the ability to discriminate, identify and manipulate sounds in words (Owens, 2012). A typically developing 4-year-old child can discriminate words in sentences, and syllables in words, and be familiar with rhyme. They will usually have an awareness of books and print and have some knowledge of the alphabet (Hulitt, Howard, & Fahey, 2010). Once at school children learn to recognise letter names and the sounds as they progress into middle school, and reading becomes more fluent as word recognition improves.