

Supporting children and young people with communication difficulties

Adapted from Feinberg Large, T; Frangou, E; Eichmann, K; Anger, N. (2017) Speaking the Same Language: Communication Skills in Mental Health Assessment, Risk Assessment and Safety Planning.

Body smart

Look for clues in the young person's own body language, and make careful and conscious decisions about:

- positioning (for example, proximity and posture and body direction)
 - consider sitting next too, not opposite – this can be confronting
- eye contact
 - 'just right' amount to show active listening, but be aware some young people find too much eye contact overwhelming
- joint attention – watch for where the young person is focusing their gaze and consider engaging around this interest (for example fidgets)
 - consider use of visuals as shared point of focus, taking pressure off eye-contact and interaction
- gesture and movement
 - use your hands to help emphasise key words, or to help direct the young person to important images and words for example by pointing - be careful not to overwhelm with too much movement, which may be distracting
- facial expression - to show understanding, warmth, care and openness, for example a gentle smile, nodding and eye-brows raised can show active listening and help cue the young person to take a turn
 - back-up your facial expression with clear words stating your thoughts, intention and ideas (as appropriate) – the young person likely has difficulties reading your facial expressions, or may be highly sensitive to them!
- voice (for example, tone, volume and quality) emphasise key words with intonation, but maintain predictable, consistent tone and volume
 - adjust tone and volume to be closer to that of the young person, for example if they are slow and quiet to talk, you may slow down and reduce volume.

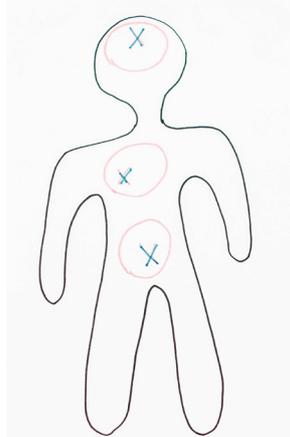
Language lite

Speak in short, simple sentences.

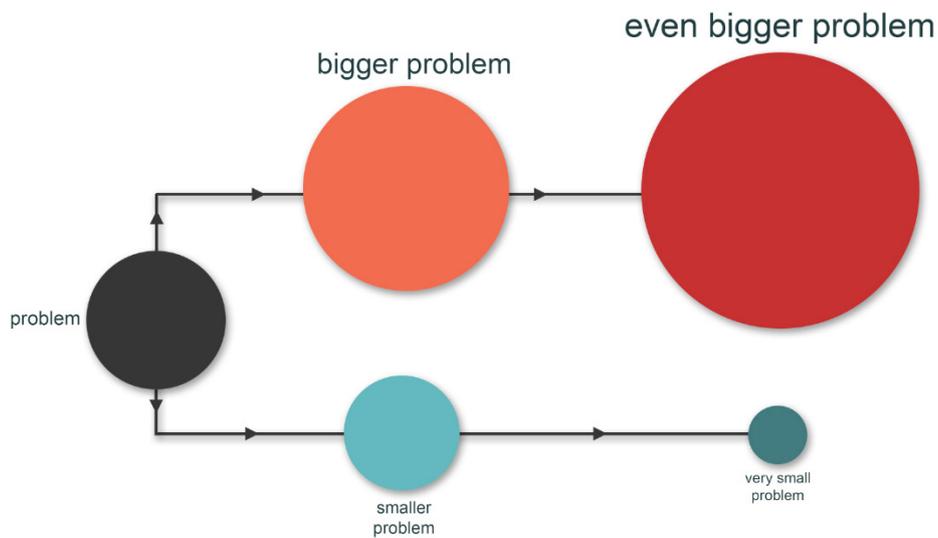
- Use concrete literal words, that describe 'here and now' (things you can see, touch, hear, feel), not abstract words (cannot be seen or touched).
- Be careful of multi-meaning words (for example safe, protection, support).
- Slow down the pace of your speech.
- Allow extra time for processing.
- State the topic first 'I want to talk to you about school'.
- Repeat without changing what you say.
- Check you heard correctly.

Picture it

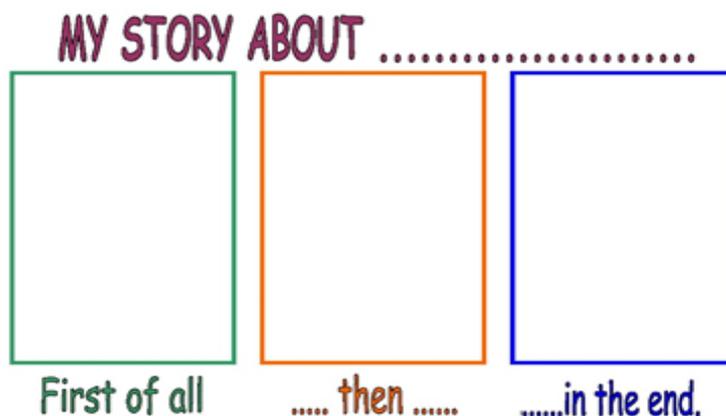
Use drawings and/or visual images to explain words and concepts. Photos, cartoons, pictures, diagrams are all helpful.



You can use size, position, shape and colour in drawings to represent concepts such as relationships, timelines, and changes. The circles in this image depict problems getting bigger/smaller:



'First Next Last' diagrams can help a young person place memories in order, and think through one specific part of an experience at a time, reducing the cognitive load.





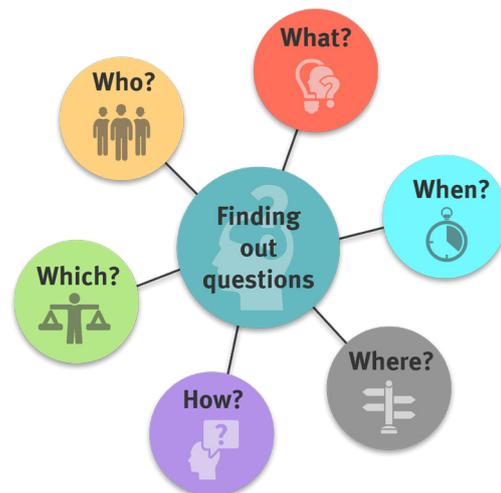
Did you know almost 50 percent of words have more than one meaning?

- Use simple words you know the young person can understand.
- Don't assume that a young person understands a complex word just because they use it!
- Always check whether the young person's understanding and use of a word is the same as your understanding- particularly with complex words (for example emotions, therapy jargon).
- Be specific – clearly identify and talk about specific events, experiences, or concepts (for example anxiety) and break these down using First Next Last. This helps the young person think through one specific part of an experience at a time, reducing the cognitive load.

Use 'finding out questions' to help young person talk about experiences or events.

Finding out questions are questions that start with 'wh', for example:

- Where were you when this happened?
- What did you see?
- Who was there with you?
- When did this happen?
- How did this make you feel?



Most young person are familiar with these questions. They are easier to answer as they ask for specific information, rather than broad or vague questions (for example 'Tell me about what has been happening'). By using these alongside the visual repeatedly and consistently, this becomes familiar and predictable.

Avoid using questions that begin with 'why' where possible. 'Why' questions often increase anxiety and frustration for children and young people with communication difficulties. These questions may draw attention to their limited skills in making links between cause and effect.

The 'Picture it' (for example, drawings/images) and 'Language lite' strategies also support the development of a shared language.

Word webs

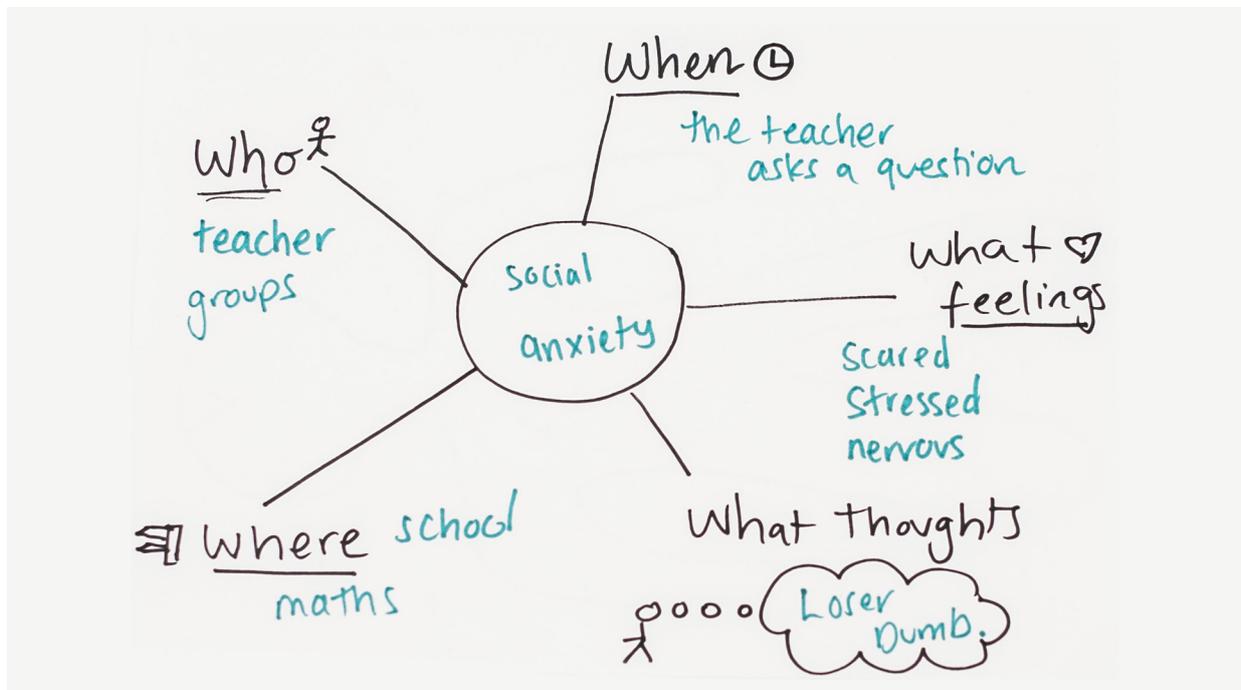
Use 'word webs' to help explore a difficult word or central idea. Many words used within a child and youth mental health context are complex or difficult to understand e.g., symptoms, diagnoses, treatment, safety etc.

A word web is a useful tool to support the development of shared language, and a shared understanding of what a particular word means e.g. 'safe'

- What are all the different things safe can mean?
- How do you use the word safe?
- What does Mum mean when she says safe?
- What about your teacher?

A word web can be used to develop a shared understanding about an emotion or symptom the young person is experiencing. You can use the 'finding out' questions (i.e., those that start with 'wh') in combination with the word web to explore 'feelings words' such as 'social anxiety', or 'worries'. As per the example illustrated below for social anxiety the young person is asked to consider:

- What feelings do you get when you feel social anxiety?
- What thoughts do you have when you feel social anxiety?
- Where does it happen?
- Who is there when it happens?
- When does it happen?



Word webs can also be used to generate and organise information. Words and thoughts that come up around a central idea/concept are brainstormed, and then reorganised into key themes e.g. school, going out, friends etc.