

**Speech and  
Language UK**   
Changing young lives.

# Listening to unheard children

**A shocking rise in speech  
and language challenges**

#UnheardChildren

**September 2023**

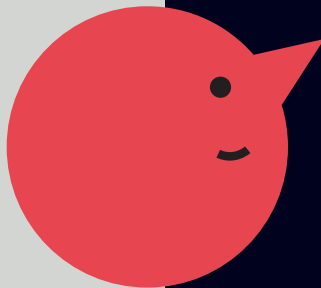
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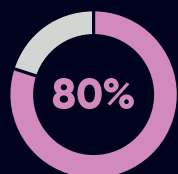
# Executive summary

## 1.9 million children need action now

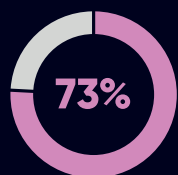
Teachers now estimate 1.9 million children<sup>1</sup> are behind with their talking and/or understanding of words – **the highest number ever recorded.**



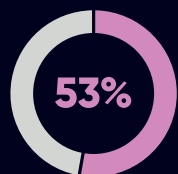
That's 1 in 5 children<sup>2</sup> who are struggling with talking and/or understanding of words.



80% of teachers<sup>3</sup> surveyed think children in their classroom are behind with their talking and/or understanding of words.



73% of teachers<sup>4</sup> surveyed think that children's speech and language is not prioritised by the Government.



An increasing number of teachers believe they don't have sufficient training to support pupils' speech and language in the classroom, at 53%<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> YouGov polled 1,002 teachers, 50% of which were primary teachers and 50% of which were secondary.

<sup>2</sup> 1.9 million out of a total number of 9,359,152 primary and secondary school-aged children in England, Scotland and Wales.

<sup>3</sup> Teachers were asked "Do you think any of the pupils you teach are behind with their talking and/or understanding of words?"

<sup>4</sup> Teachers were asked "How much do you think children's speech and language is prioritised by each of the following?"

<sup>5</sup> 53% of teachers surveyed believe that they have not had sufficient training. This has increased from 41% from our previous report in 2022.



Children who struggle to talk and understand words are:

**six times** more likely to fail English tests at age 11,

**eleven times** less likely to pass maths,

**twice** as likely to have a mental health problem, and

**twice** as likely to be unemployed as an adult.

These figures show the scale of the challenge in front of us.

We call on political leaders, education leaders and concerned families and young people to join us in working towards a country where every child has the skills they need to face the future with **confidence.**



# Introduction to this report

The whole country should be shocked by these statistics. The research we've commissioned shows that 1.9 million children are struggling with talking and understanding words. That's a huge increase of 26%<sup>6</sup> over the last two years. For the Government and the education system as a whole, these figures should be an urgent call to action.

Children who have speech and language challenges at school are more likely to fail in key subjects, more likely to be lonely, have mental health problems, end up in the criminal justice system and more likely to be out of work as an adult. Yet our polling shows most teachers do not feel they are given enough training and support to help children.

Tragically, given this huge number of children and the consequences for their future, teachers do not for the most part feel that the Government prioritises speech and language. 73% of teachers surveyed<sup>7</sup> think that children's speech and language is not prioritised much

or at all by the Government. This mismatch will have profound consequences for children's lives, as well as the future of our economy and society.

This is especially frustrating because there is huge evidence for the solutions, from specialist support for children with complex challenges to programmes that teachers and teaching assistants can run in schools and nurseries without specialist training. We have long proposed a range of ways to help children based on decades of expertise, now we need action.

As we approach a General Election, we hope that all political parties will put speech, language and communication skills at the centre of their education plans. If you remember one thing from this year's polling it should be this – 1.9 million<sup>8</sup> children in the UK are relying on us to act. After unprecedented challenges to our education system, they can't afford to wait.

“

**If you remember one thing from this year's polling it should be this - 1.9 million children in the UK are relying on us to act.”**

*Jane Harris*

**Jane Harris**

CEO  
Speech and Language UK



<sup>6</sup> **2022 - Speech and Language UK: 1.7 million young futures report**

The 1.7 million figure was calculated by using mid-point analysis of a YouGov survey of 1,000 teachers in June 2022 asking "Approximately, what percentage of your class(es) do you think are behind with either their speaking or understanding language?" Calculated to be 18% of pupils.

**2021 Speaking up for the Covid generation report**

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,002 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 28th May - 2nd June 2021. The survey was carried out online. Teacher estimates of the percentage of children affected were subjected to a mid-point interval analysis done by Speech and language UK. Using a pupil population estimate of England, Scotland and Wales of \*\*9,190,799 primary and secondary pupils, this equated to 1.5 million children. This combined total figure for England, Scotland and Wales was equated from:

England: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

Scotland: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2019/12/summary-statistics-schools-scotland-no-10-2019-edition/documents/summary-statistics-schools-scotland/summary-statistics-schools-scotland/govscot%3Adocument/summary-statistics-schools-scotland.pdf>

Wales: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-07/school-census-results-2019-764.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Teachers were asked "How much do you think children's speech and language is prioritised by each of the following?"

<sup>8</sup> We estimate that 1,869,491 primary and secondary school-aged children are behind with their talking and/or understanding of words.

# Speech and language challenges in full

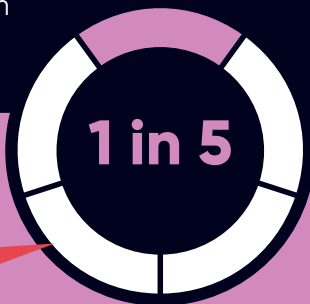
We worked with YouGov to poll 1,000 teachers across the UK. We aimed to find out more about the challenges facing children, families and teachers. Here are the results.

## How many children?

We asked teachers to estimate how many children in their class were struggling with speech and language challenges.

They estimated there are currently 1.9 million primary and secondary school-aged children behind with talking and/or understanding of words.

This number is up from 1.7 million from last year.



This is 20% of all pupils<sup>9</sup> - or 1 in 5 for 2023

<sup>9</sup> The total number of primary and secondary school-aged children in England, Scotland and Wales is 9,359,152.

## Is speech and language prioritised?

We asked teachers how certain institutions value speech and language skills in classrooms and the results were worrying. A majority of teachers thought that schools prioritised speech and language a lot or a fair amount, whereas teachers did not think the same of any other institutions. The majority of teachers agreed that the national curriculum, their local authorities, Ofsted and the Government, all failed to prioritise speech and language skills 'a fair amount'.

This feeling of misplaced priorities has grown, with teachers less satisfied than in previous years<sup>10</sup>. It is all the more worrying considering the recent pandemic which saw so many young children miss out on school and socialising and the subsequent rise in speech and language problems highlighted by our polling. We should be prioritising speech and language more than ever.

### How much do you think children's speech and language is prioritised by each of the following:

■ Prioritised a lot or a fair amount
 ■ Not prioritised very much or at all

#### Your school

83% replied that it is prioritised a lot or a fair amount



#### National curriculum

50% replied that it is not prioritised very much or at all



#### Your local authority

50% replied that it is not prioritised very much or at all



#### Department for Education

57% replied that it is not prioritised very much or at all



#### National Government

73% replied that it is not prioritised very much or at all



#### Ofsted

45% replied that it is not prioritised very much or at all



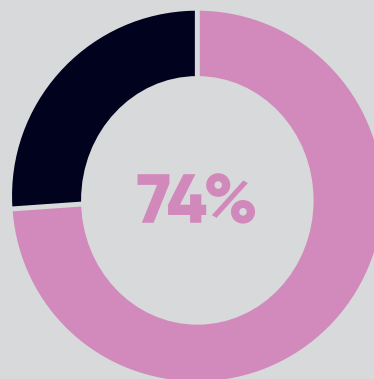
<sup>10</sup> 73% felt speech and language isn't prioritised a lot or a fair amount, compared with 70% in 2022.

We asked teachers the following:

### How has the pandemic affected children?

In general, how much more or less do you think these children will struggle with their talking or understanding of words, in comparison to those who started secondary school before the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, or do you think there will be no difference?

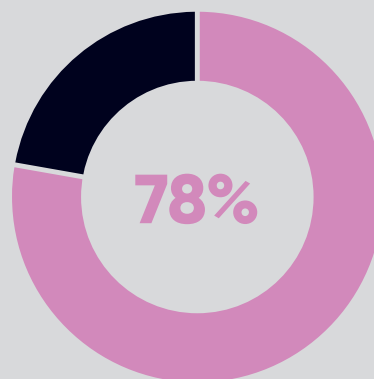
**2023: 74% of teachers surveyed believe that children will struggle to some degree.**



### What do parents know?

Do you think parents know about the importance of talking and understanding words for their child's wellbeing and learning?

**2023: 78% of teachers surveyed think that parents do not know about the importance of talking and understanding of words for their children's wellbeing and learning.**

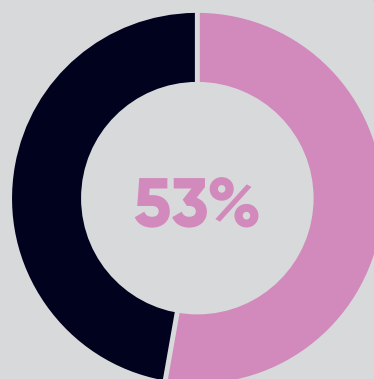


### Is there enough training?

Do you feel you have had sufficient training to do your job with regards to supporting pupils' speech and language in the classroom?

**2023: 53% of teachers surveyed believe that they have not had sufficient training.**

This has increased from 41% from our previous report in 2022.



# 1 in 5 children:

## How did we get here?

We work with schools and families all over the UK facing speech and language challenges and we asked parents and educators about what they're up against.

One primary school teacher interviewed said:

**“There is definitely an impact and an increase in nonverbal children who struggle with emotional dysregulation because they can't articulate their needs or how they feel. I'm seeing lots of children struggle with sentence construction/sounds/vocabulary. My experience is that this also impacts behaviour which in turn can impact the class. It's not just one or two children either... There is no funding for support and I firmly believe early intervention is what's needed on many levels.”**

Another primary school teacher interviewed said:

**“It's harder to get on the agenda. We've lost that connection to speaking and listening in the national curriculum.”**

Another teacher interviewed said:

**“People need to understand that you can't develop literacy without developing oracy.”**

One headteacher interviewed said:

**“My biggest worry, every day is that there are children who are slipping through the net and that they're going on to secondary school with considerable gaps in their learning.”**

Another headteacher said:

**“I think children being able to regulate how they feel so they are ready to learn is so important. And you can't do that without oracy skills.”**



One parent said:

“My child is now going to school and having another speech and language referral. That’s two referrals and four people in just about two years.”

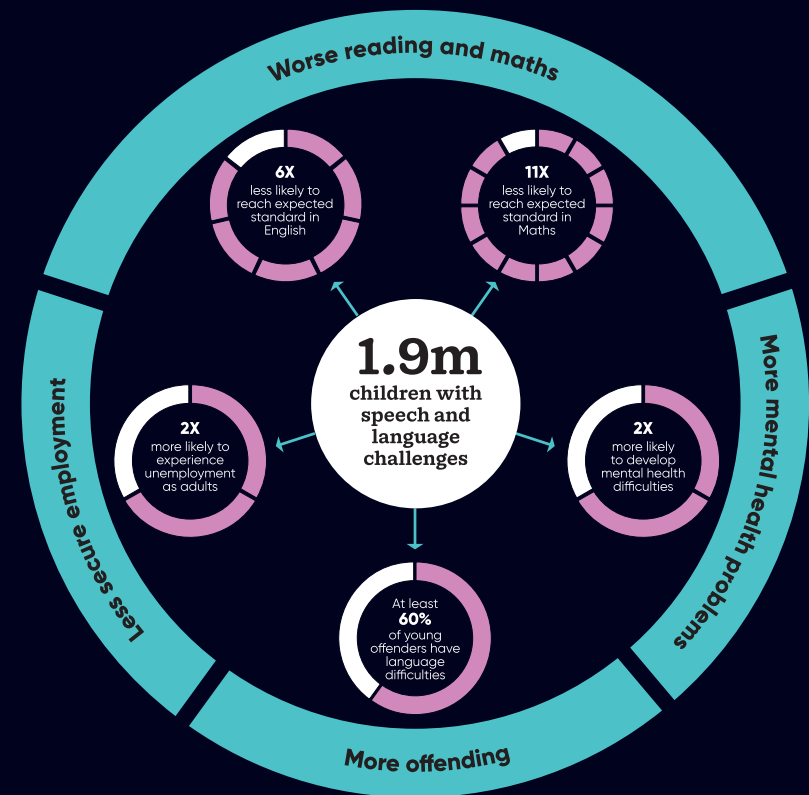
Another parent said:

“My son struggled with speech and language challenges since he started school at the age of five and we had a massive fight all along since then until now to get him an Education Health Care Plan, which is what you need if your child has got special educational needs.

Once your child struggles with going to school, which can be for many reasons, the professionals that work around that child they might not understand why the child is struggling to attend, as it’s not that the child doesn’t want to go to school it’s that they can’t. They might be in a school where their needs are not being met.”

# What does this mean for children?

For the 1.9 million children struggling to talk and understand words, this affects every aspect of their and their families’ lives. They are vastly more likely to fail in key subjects at school, more likely to be lonely and have mental health problems, more likely to end up in the criminal justice system and more likely to be out of work as an adult.





# Listening to the unheard children

## What action is needed?

**A lack of investment and prioritisation, combined with an unprecedented pandemic, has left more children struggling with talking and understanding words. We are determined to change that.**

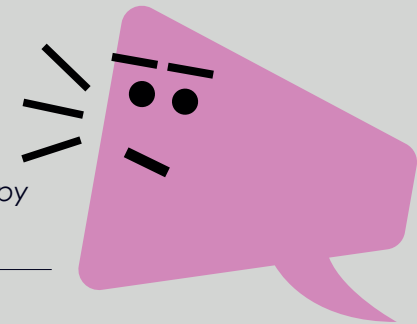
**We believe that every child should be able to get speech and language support when they need it so that they aren't left behind.**

**Not only will this benefit children, but it will benefit us all - building a better country with more people able to play active roles in their communities and the economy.**

**Here are nine solutions to transform the lives of 1.9 million children, their families, and our country:**

- 1** Introduce a new tool for schools to track talking and understanding words at Key Stage 1 and 2 in the same way that every school tracks literacy and numeracy skills.
- 2** Train all teachers and early years practitioners to spot which children are struggling with talking and understanding of words and know how to help or where to refer them to.
- 3** Produce guidance for teachers and schools about what evidence-based tools and programmes work for children with speech and language challenges, especially those that can be delivered by schools without specialist support.

- 4** Update Ofsted guidelines to include more ambitious language goals for educational institutions on speech, language and communication. For example, all good nurseries should have this and not just outstanding ones<sup>11</sup>.
- 5** Incentivise the new Integrated Care Boards to work with local authorities and make sure there is support on language skills from the start of new parents' journey; just as it is for feeding or vaccinations.
- 6** Change guidance for Family Hubs, which currently actively disincentivises any programmes for children on language and communication before the age of 3.
- 7** Ask the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to develop guidance on Developmental Language Disorder so that there is more clarity about what support the NHS should provide and what children with speech and language challenges and their families can expect.
- 8** Work with experts on proper workforce planning, making sure there is enough specialist support available for children with life-long challenges and bringing down the 25% vacancy rate for children's speech and language therapists in the NHS year-on-year.
- 9** Fund a more ambitious campaign to shift families' behaviour and prevent speech and language challenges developing, building on learnings from the Government funded *Hungry Little Minds* and alongside the BBC's *Tiny Happy People*.



<sup>11</sup> Early Years Inspection handbook - Grade Descriptors for Quality of Education: Outstanding: "Children consistently use new vocabulary that enables them to communicate effectively. They speak with increasing confidence and fluency, which means that they secure strong foundations for future learning, especially in preparation for them to become fluent readers."



Families tell us our teaching, tools and training transform lives. We have created programmes that transform up to 80,000 children's lives each year and built two "outstanding" Ofsted rated schools.

In the last year alone, we've trained over 7,000 professionals who work with children and young people and given advice to 1,500 families.

But we can't reach every child without people all over the UK - whether you're a parent, teacher or neither - standing behind our work.

**We need decision makers to finally listen to unheard children.**

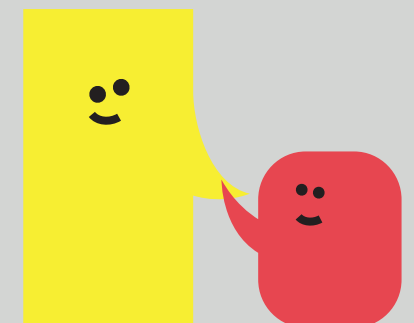
**Together, we can give more children confident futures, so let's get to work.**



Join our **email list** to get regular updates about speech and language challenges and solutions.

If you're a politician, from the media, or an educator, and you would like to discuss these findings, please email:

**[talktous@speechandlanguage.org.uk](mailto:talktous@speechandlanguage.org.uk)**



**References:**

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,036 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 22nd - 27th July 2022. The survey was carried out online.

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,002 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 13th - 17th July 2023. The survey was carried out online.

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