

Developing oral comprehension in preschool children with language difficulties: an examination of intervention components and their relevance for research and practice

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Abstract

Oral comprehension difficulties are prevalent in preschool children with language needs and are often a feature of language disorder, affecting 9.9% children at school entry (Norbury et al., 2016). Although comprehension is frequently the target of speech and language therapy intervention, there is a reported lack of research into interventions developing oral comprehension, with existing research having limited applicability to UK clinical practice. Checklists such as the Template for Intervention Description and Replication (TIDieR) are valuable tools for understanding interventions and supporting the application of research to practice, yet none have been used to describe interventions for children with language difficulties. Our study, reported in Shobbrook et al (2024), aimed to identify intervention studies effective for oral comprehension in preschool children with language difficulties using criteria aligned with common UK practice, and describe the components of these interventions.

A PROSPERO registered search identified 20 systematic reviews. Seventeen studies within these reviews described effective intervention for children from 1 to 5 years old with language difficulties. Data was extracted from each study against headings from the TIDieR checklist. Findings were analysed and reported using narrative synthesis.

Overall, studies demonstrated that intervention can be effective for improving oral comprehension in preschool children with language difficulties. Analysis of intervention components has relevance to both clinical practice and research. For practice, a wide variety of rationales, techniques, procedures, settings and intensities were associated with effective intervention. Amongst this variety, relevant aspects include: the importance of naturally occurring interactions as the context for language development; how parents are supported to deliver and adhere to parent-based interventions; and the value of supporting a rich vocabulary and inferential comprehension. Furthermore, the benefit of expressive language facilitation techniques within oral comprehension intervention is a prompt for clinicians to reflect on the way that receptive and expressive language are targeted if these areas are currently addressed in isolation. Implications for research were found in components that were unreported or under-described in the TIDieR checklist. These included specific details of the quantitative and qualitative aspects of dosage and how interventions were tailored to the profile and needs of individual children.