

# Encouraging Children with Speech and Language Difficulties in the Nursery



**Local clinic name and telephone number:**

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**Therapist:**

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## LISTENING DIFFICULTIES

***“Katie can’t sit still and she doesn’t listen to what I say”***

### **Making sense of it:**

- Being able to listen to sounds and voices is an important pre-requisite for language.
- It can take some children longer to learn *how* to listen.
- Some children can find it difficult to listen, not because they have a hearing loss, but because they don’t listen carefully to the sounds they hear.
- However, it’s always important to find out whether the child has had a hearing test to rule out the possibility of a hearing loss.

### **Things to try:**

- Call out the child’s name and get eye contact and attention before asking him/her to do something.
- Praise the child when he/she does listen.
- Break up long instructions into manageable chunks.
- Sing songs and action nursery rhymes to help encourage listening and attention skills.
- Use puppets to act out nursery rhymes.
- Say nursery rhymes using different voices e.g. quiet, loud, happy, sad, etc.
- Make music with the children e.g. shakers, drums, bells etc. Can the children listen to you then copy?
- Hide musical toys in a box, next to an empty box. The children have to locate the sound.
- Play ‘Ready Steady Go’ games (e.g. Build brick towers, children take turns to wait for command before knocking the tower down).
- Listen to sound lotto tapes, find the picture that matches the sound.
- Read ‘lift the flap’ books with repetitive story lines, the children take turns to lift the flaps. Encourage them to join in saying the words.
- Use a multi-sensory approach (e.g. interesting visual materials and textures to handle)
- Allow fidgety children to hold something (e.g. bean bag, squeeze ball) when on the carpet.

## UNDERSTANDING DIFFICULTIES

***“William doesn’t seem to understand what I’m saying and he can’t follow instructions”***

### **Making sense of it:**

- To understand, children need to be able to listen, understand the main words, and remember what was said.
- Some children have delayed receptive language development – this means their understanding of spoken language is at a level you would expect of a younger child.
- This delay can mild, moderate, or severe.
- Delayed receptive language can occur on it’s own or alongside other difficulties, e.g. sensory impairment, physical difficulties or learning difficulties.
- Some children have disordered language development, this mean’s their understanding of spoken language is developing in an unusual manner. E.g. the child may have a good grasp of some concepts such as colours or letter names, yet be unable to follow simple instructions.
- Disordered language development may occur alongside delayed receptive language development, sensory impairment, physical/learning difficulties, and autistic spectrum disorders.

### **Things to try:**

- Think about *how* you are talking, *what* you are talking about, and what you are *doing* as you are talking.
- Try to speak slowly and clearly.
- Emphasise the important words.
- Keep what you say quite short so that there’s not too much for the child to take in.
- Use lively facial expression and intonation to make what you say look and sound interesting.
- Use pointing and other gestures as you speak to help the child to understand.
- Make what you say as clear and specific as possible.
- Talk about what happens as it happens – try to stay with the here and now rather than yesterday and tomorrow.
- Use lots of repetition of the same words and phrases in your everyday routines. Children need to hear new words lots of times in context to understand them.
- Try to teach new words in categories e.g. body parts, clothing, animals.
- Make language learning interesting by using varied and motivating play materials.
- Develop the children’s ability to understand instructions by playing games which include taking turns to follow and give spoken instructions. Begin with short instructions then gradually make them longer.

*One important word: “Find the **ball**”*

Two important words: "Put the ball in the box"

Three important words: "Put teddy in the little bag"

Four important words: "Put the red ball in the big box"

## **EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES**

***"Emily uses a lot of baby words like bic-bic for biscuit, and says dog for all animals"***

***"George doesn't seem to know many words – he often ends up just shrugging his shoulders as though he's saying 'I don't know'."***

### **Making sense of it:**

- In order to use spoken language, the child needs to be able to have listened, understood and remembered.
- Some children have delayed expressive language. E.g. Emily may speak as a much younger child would, using fewer and more immature words. Delayed expressive language may occur alongside delayed receptive language and/or delayed speech development.
- Some children have disordered expressive language development. This means the child's expressive language is developing in a more unusual manner. E.g. The child may find it difficult to find the correct words or put words in the right order. Disordered expressive language development can co-occur alongside delayed receptive or expressive language or speech.

### **Things to try:**

- Be aware that the child may have a restricted vocabulary (not know as many words as other children).
- Avoid imitating any immature words that the child uses. It's important that the child gets to hear the words said correctly.
- Help the child to expand on what (s)he said by repeating back what they said and adding a little more. E.g. Child: "car". Adult: "yes it's a big car".
- Correct the child's errors in a positive way. E.g. Child: "brush him hair". Adult: "He's brushing his hair".
- Create opportunities for learning language in the everyday nursery situation. It is essential that new language is used in natural situations and does not remain in 1-to-1 or small group situations.
- Be repetitive in your teaching of new vocabulary. Children with expressive language difficulties need even more opportunities to hear and learn new words before they will be able to use them.
- Devise a checklist for a particular child/group according to the category of words they need to know or choose a number of words based on their curriculum. Devise interesting and motivating activities for them to learn the words.
- Make language learning fun!

## SPEECH SOUND DIFFICULTIES

*“I find it really difficult to understand James’ speech and I’m not sure how to react, I don’t want to undermine his confidence”*

### **Making sense of it:**

- In order to say speech sounds, the child needs to be able to listen and perceive the sounds correctly, and be able to produce the sounds correctly.
- Some children have delayed speech development. This means that the child’s speech sounds are immature and/or unclear. Sounds may be missed off the ends of words or other sounds substituted. Delayed speech development can occur on it’s own or alongside delayed/disordered language development. It can also occur alongside sensory, physical or learning difficulties.
- Some children have disordered speech development. This means the child is using unusual sound substitutions. Disordered speech development can occur on it’s own or alongside delayed speech development/other difficulties.
- Often children will grow out of minor speech sound immaturities. Children with significant speech delays/disorders may wish to attend speech therapy.

### **Things to try:**

- You will probably understand the child in context, but find it more difficult when (s)he is telling you new information. Try asking simple questions to narrow the options down to make it easier for you to understand. Often other children are very good at understanding children with speech difficulties.
- Don’t avoid speaking with the child because you are uncertain that you will understand. Try to keep calm with a reassuring, positive facial expression.
- Do model clear speech without overtly correcting the child. E.g. If child draws sun and says “dun”, you say “that’s a lovely sun” with extra emphasis upon the ‘s’.
- If the child is attending speech therapy, do ask the parents what the child is working on, and offer to help if you can. The Speech and Language Therapist will usually be happy to send information/activities.

## FLUENCY DIFFICULTIES

***“Charlotte often stumbles over her words, she starts to say the same sound/word over and over again. I don’t know how to help her...”***

### **Making sense of it:**

- Many children of Nursery age go through a patch of ‘normal non-fluency’. Children are sometimes dysfluent (stammer) due to a rapid surge in their language skills. Their mouths cannot keep up with their thoughts!
- It is advisable that children experiencing dysfluency are referred to the Speech and Language Therapist so that appropriate advice can be given.

### **Things to try:**

- Reduce demands on the child. If there is an increase in dysfluency, take that as a sign that demands are outstripping their abilities for speaking at that particular time.
- Give the child sufficient time to respond – avoiding rushing them with your words or body language.
- Don’t ask the child to ‘slow down’. Instead, encourage this by slowing YOUR rate of speech.
- Go down to the child’s level, maintain a positive and reassuring facial expression, give the child’s hand a reassuring squeeze from time to time.
- Try to keep calm yourself so that the child doesn’t feel under pressure to try and speak quickly.
- Try to keep natural eye contact. Be aware that most of us tend to look away when we’re feeling uncomfortable.
- Reduce the number of open questions you ask the child. Try giving choices instead: “Do you want to play in the paint, or the sand?” instead of “What are you going to do?”
- Do try playing alongside the child, just commenting upon what you or they are doing, without any expectation of a response. Children are more fluent when there isn’t any pressure to speak.
- Try to listen carefully to *what* the child is saying, rather than *how*.
- Try to allow the child to finish what he/she is saying, don’t finish their sentences.
- Make lots of opportunities for songs/rhymes. Dysfluent children often experience good fluency when singing/speaking in unison.
- Remember none of us are fluent all the time!

- Most children who are dysfluent at this age will grow out of it, providing the problem is managed appropriately.

## RELUCTANT SPEAKERS

***“Owen will not speak to the other children or the teacher at Nursery. His Mum says he talks at home, but we have never heard him speak at all”.***

### **Making sense of it:**

- Some children are quiet and reserved, and may feel overwhelmed by the nursery situation.
- Other children may refuse to speak as part of a behaviour problem, or they may have learned they gain extra attention when not speaking.
- Others have a psychological difficulty – they are afraid of speaking.
- The role of non-speaking, once established, is very difficult to climb down from.

### **Things to try:**

- Maintain a positive, reassuring facial expression.
- Try to convey that you enjoy being with them, and you like them for themselves rather than their speech.
- Treat them the same way as the other children. Don't make special concession for not talking.
- Avoid letting them think you regard them as “the child who doesn't speak”.
- Avoid begging, bribing or challenging them to speak.
- Be calm and unemotional when the child refuses to speak, try to move on before they become anxious.
- Be aware that some children can find their silence rewarding – it may foster special attention, or excuse them from tasks they don't like. The aim is to reverse this and show children they are missing out on something nice by not participating.
- Avoid using direct questions. Instead, try to make opportunities for them to comment. (“I wonder...”, “I bet...”)
- Avoid looking directly at the child after providing the opportunity to speak.
- Turn your ear towards the child so they can whisper their answer at first.
- Try to provide opportunities for the child to speak out of the spotlight.
- Focus on facilitating an enjoyable, relaxing nursery environment where you can gain the child's trust and demonstrate positive approval.

## SOCIAL COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

***“Tanya seems bright enough, she knows her colours and some numbers but she often seem confused when I’m telling the class what they have to do. She often repeats what other people have said to her. She doesn’t play well with the other children, it’s like she wants everything on her terms, she loves being on the computer but she doesn’t want anyone else to have a go. She can’t sit still on the carpet”.***

### **Making sense of it:**

- Some children can find it difficult to make sense of the subtitles of social communication. They find the social rules very confusing and don’t understand why it’s important to sit down now, listen to the teacher take turns with toys etc.
- Some children learn language by copying the language they hear, thus you will hear them “echo” what others have said.
- Some children have really good memories for facts or words which reflect their interests, this can lead people to over-estimate how much they are able to understand. Following group instructions can be an area of difficulty.
- Some children find it difficult to see other children’s point of view and not realise how they might feel eg if not allowed a turn on the computer.
- Some children can tend to develop obsessional interests. The interest can sometimes provide a sense of security in a confusing situation.

### **Things To Try:**

- Being aware of the child’s difficulties and seeing situations from his/her sense of view is always the best starting point. Avoid perceiving the child as naughty or rude.
- Do be ready to interpret and explain situations to the child. He/she may not understand non-verbal clues such as tone of voice and facial expression. The situation may need explaining clearly at a level that the child can follow.
- Establish consistent daily routines within the nursery. These will give the child security as he/she will gradually learn the order of things. Avoid sudden changes in routine since these can feel very threatening to the child.
- If the child is tending to “echo” or repeat the same words over and over try to respond only when it is appropriate within context. If the language is used “out of context” then respond to the child’s attempt to communicate with you rather than the actual words he/she has said.
- Try to give the child a warning when activities are coming to an end rather than stopping abruptly. (Eg Timers can be a useful reminder)



- Some group instructions may need repeating/simplifying on a 1-1 basis, use visual/pictorial support where possible.
- Be aware that some children may learn colour words, letter and number names by rote. Extra opportunities may be needed to learn other areas of vocabulary such as names of common objects within the nursery or action words.
- Help the child to develop turntaking, playing and sharing skills. Adults will need to facilitate this by explaining who's turn it is, then \_\_\_\_\_ then \_\_\_\_\_ and using egg timers for extra visual support.
- Begin with activities which have very "short turns" then gradually build up the length of the "turn time".
- Be aware that some children do need their own personal space and may need time away from the other children.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP WORK**

### **ENCOURAGING LISTENING & UNDERSTANDING SKILLS**

#### **General Aims:**

- To provide a stimulating language environment.
- To encourage listening and attention skills.
- To encourage turn-taking and sharing skills.
- To encourage the children's understanding of spoken instructions.
- To build the children's confidence in language and communication.

#### **General Principles:**

- Groups should include no more than four children, so they do not wait too long for their turns.
- Create a positive, non-threatening communication environment, where all contributions are valued. Give the children lots of praise and encouragement.
- Follow the same structure for all sessions, but use different ideas and activities. Children tend to feel more secure when they can predict what's going to happen.
- Incorporate role reversal wherever you can - allow the children to have a go at being the 'teacher' and telling the adult/other children what to do.
- Give as much support as is needed to each individual child. Gradually reduce the support as the child becomes more confident.
- Include songs and nursery rhymes whenever you can, sometimes children learn language more easily this way. Don't forget to make your speaking voice interesting by using a variety of intonation patterns.
- Use lively facial expression, gesture and body language.
- Group sessions should last around 20 minutes. For maximum progress, the group should take place three times a week.

#### **Structure of the Group Sessions:**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Listening activity**
- 3. Understanding activity**
- 4. Story**
- 5. Close**

See overleaf for activity suggestions.

| Activity                     | Description  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Introduction-<br>Hello song  | Adult sings "Hello James, how are you, here I am, here I am, how do you do". Child waves, and plays musical instrument to respond.   |
| Introduction-<br>Circle time | Adult holds teddy and says "Hello Teddy" before passing on to the child seated next to her. Encourage child to say hello to teddy but don't pressurise, allow giving cuddles instead.  |
| Listening-                   | <b>Work through 1 or 2 of the following activities each session, allowing each child 2-3 turns. Include role reversal- "Being the Teacher"</b>   |
| Beanbag Game 1               | Children sit in a circle. Adult names child she is going to throw the beanbag to, children have to listen and look to see if it is their turn. (Role reversal- children then take turns to call out other children's names and throw the beanbag). |
| Roll Car Games               | Variation on above. Substitute throwing a beanbag for a rolling car.   |
| Skittles                     | Children take turns to listen to adult call out "Ready, steady, go" before rolling the ball.   |
| Musical Instruments          | Adult plays a sequence of 2 or 3 musical instruments, children take turns to listen and copy.  |
| Animal Sounds                | Adult puts out up to 5 animal toys, making the sound for each one. Children then listen to the adult make one of the sounds and then they point to the animal that makes that sound.   |
| Everyday Noises              | Adult demonstrates 4 or 5 everyday noises, e.g. shutting door, knocking on window, crumpling paper, stirring spoon in cup, rattling keys etc, Children take turns to close their eyes and guess what the noise is.                                 |
| Formboards                   | Shake out pieces. Children take turns to listen for the adult to call their names, then be told which piece they have to find and fit into the puzzle.   |
| Picture Lotto                | Variation of the above. The child waits for their name to be called, chooses a picture, names the object and then matches it to the lotto board  |
| Posting Game                 | As above but the children listen for own name and then name of object pictured before posting in box.  |
| Fishing Game                 | Attach large paperclips to object pictures. Children take turns to listen for their own name, then the picture they need to 'catch' before fishing for it with a magnet fishing rod.   |
| Beanbag Game 2               | Place large object pictures on the floor. Children take turns to listen for their name then throw the beanbag on to the requested picture. E.g. "Throw it on the car"  |
| Sound Lotto                  | Children take turns to listen to a tape and select the appropriate picture to match the sound.   |

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| <b>Understanding-</b>  | <b>Work through 1 or 2 of the following activities each session, allowing each child 2-3 turns. Include role reversal- “Being the Teacher”</b>   |
| Puppet Game<br>(Remembering up to 2-3 items)   | Adult puts out 6 items of pretend food and names them. Adult holds the puppet and tell a child a sequence of 2 items to “feed” to the puppet. Replace the items to maintain a choice of 6. Repeat with 3 items if the child is coping.   |
| Box and Bag Game<br>(Understanding 2 important words)                                      | Adult puts out box and bag, then lays out a range of common objects/toys whilst naming them. Children take turns to follow instructions: e.g. “put the <b>ball</b> in the <b>bag</b> ”etc.   |
| Table and Chair game<br>(understanding 2-3 important words- including actions)             | Adult sets a child-sized chair a little distance away from a child-sized table, then demonstrates teddy dancing/sleeping/sitting/jumping on the chair/table. Children take it turns to listen to and follow instructions: “make teddy jump on the table”, “make teddy <b>sleep</b> on the <b>chair</b> ” etc. If the child copes with this try extending it to 3 important words by introducing a choice of soft toys e.g teddy/dinosaur/rabbit then give instructions “make <b>dinosaur jump</b> on the <b>chair</b> ” etc. |
| Washing and Brushing Game (understanding 3 important words- including actions)             | Adult sets out a sponge, soft hairbrush, dolly and rabbit. Children take it in turns to listen to and follow instructions e.g. “ <b>Wash dolly’s hands</b> ” “ <b>Brush rabbit’s ears</b> ” etc.   |
| Rolling and Throwing Game (understanding 3 important words- including actions)             | Use softball and beanbag. Children take turns to listen and follow instructions e.g. “ <b>Roll</b> the <b>ball</b> to <b>Sarah</b> ” “ <b>Throw</b> the <b>beanbag</b> to <b>Kieran</b> ” etc.   |
| Simon says game<br>(understanding 3 important words- including actions)                    | Adult demonstrates simple actions then gives each child instructions to follow e.g. “ <b>Katy wave</b> your <b>hand</b> ” “ <b>Matthew stamp</b> your <b>feet</b> ” “ <b>Sarah nod</b> your <b>head</b> ” etc.   |
| In/On/Under Game 1<br>(understanding 3 important words- including simple positional words) | Adult sets out several toy animals, a box and a table whilst explaining that the children are going to put the animals in different places and demonstrating in/on/under. The children take turns to listen and follow instructions e.g. “put the <b>cow under</b> the <b>table</b> ” “put the <b>sheep in</b> the <b>box</b> ” etc.   |
| Big/Little Game 1<br>(understanding 3 important words- including simple size words)        | Adult sets out several pairs of objects, one big, one little whilst commenting “That;s a big car, here’s a little car” etc emphasising the words big and little. Also set out a box and a bag. The children take it in turns to listen to and follow instructions e.g. “Put the <b>big car</b> in the <b>box</b> ” “Put the <b>little brick</b> in the <b>bag</b> ” etc.   |
| On/Under Game 2<br>(understanding 4 important words- including simple positional words)    | Adult sets out doll’s house size daddy, mummy, baby and a larger size table and bed. Explain and demonstrate making daddy/mummy/baby jump/lie down/sit on the table or bed. Children take turns to listen to and follow instructions e.g. “Make <b>daddy lie under</b> the <b>table</b> ” “Make <b>baby jump</b> on the <b>bed</b> ” etc.  |

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| Big/Little Game 2<br>(understanding 5 important words-including simple positional words)              | Adult sets out the materials described in the in/on game 2 but also includes a smaller bed and table. Explain and demonstrate making daddy/mummy/baby jump/lie down/sit on the big/little table or big/little bed. Children then take it in turns to listen to and follow instructions e.g. "Make <b><u>baby sit on the big table</u></b> " "Make <b><u>mummy lie under the big bed</u></b> " etc |
| Colour Game 1<br>(understanding 2 word instructions which contain colour words red/yellow/blue/Green) | Adult sets out red/yellow/blue/Green lego bricks and counters. The children take it in turns to listen to and follow instructions e.g. "Get the <b><u>red brick</u></b> " "Get the <b><u>yellow counter</u></b> " etc   |
| Colour Game 2<br>(understanding 3 word instructions which contain colour words)                       | Adult sets out coloured bricks and counters as in the previous activity and also a bucket and box. Explain that the children will be putting the bricks/counters into the bucket/box and demonstrate. Children take turns to listen and follow instructions e.g. "put the <b><u>blue counter in the bucket</u></b> " "Put the <b><u>red brick in the box</u></b> " etc                            |
| Colour Game 3<br>(understanding 4 word instructions which contain colour words)                       | Adult sets out coloured bricks and counters and bucket and box as in the previous activity and also include a chair. Children take turns to listen and follow instructions e.g. "put the <b><u>blue counter on the chair</u></b> " "Put the <b><u>red brick under the chair</u></b> " etc   |

### **Story**

**Select a different short story each week but do repeat the story each session within the same week, this enables the children to increase their participation as they become familiar the story. Lift the flap stories are ideal for encouraging listening and turn taking skills. Gradually, over the next few weeks, work through the ideas suggested below, gradually building up the children's ability to listen and answer "wh" questions.**

1. Encourage the children to listen, look and take turns (e.g. to lift flaps)

2. Read the story to the children then ask appropriate "***who?***" questions. Support and prompt the children as necessary. Look and check the story with the children.

3. Read the story to the children, then ask "***who?***" and "***where?***" questions. Support and prompt, look back to check the story with the children.

4. Read the story, then ask, "***who?***", "***where?***", "***what happened?***" questions. Support and prompt, look back to check the story with the children.

5. Read the story, then ask, "***who?***", "***where?***", "***what happened?***", "***what happened at the end?***" questions. Support and prompt, look back to check the story with the children.

6. Tell the children a familiar story, ask questions as above. Now explain that you are going to tell the story again but that this time you are going to make some mistakes. The children need to listen carefully and tell you when you make a mistake. At first, include strong deliberate errors (e.g. if the story is about a dog, say cat. If the story is about going to the shops, say park. If everything happens during the day, say night. Etc.) As the children grow more familiar with this activity, begin to make your errors a little more subtle. Can they still spot your mistakes?

7. Introduce the idea of making up simple stories using prompts such as puppets, Playmobil, doll's house materials, etc. Adult can start the story, children take turns to add on.

**Close session**

***Praise all the children for good listening and good talking. Explain that you are now going to close the session with one of the following activities:***

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Pass the Squeeze</b> | Everybody holds hands. Adult passes a squeeze to a child sitting next to him/her, who passes it on to the next child, and so on until the squeeze comes back to the adult.  |
| <b>Pass the Smile</b>   | Variation on the above, except this time it's a smile.  |
| <b>Copy the Action</b>  | Variation on the above, except this time the adult performs a simple action, e.g. nod/shake head, clap hands,/touch nose/ears/knees, stamp feet, etc. Extend by carrying out a sequence of 2 or 3 actions for the children to copy. |

**LISTENING & UNDERSTANDING GROUP**

From:

To:

| <b>OBJECTIVE: Listen to others in a small group</b> |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Able to respond to own name                         |  |  |  |  |
| Able to wait for adult signal 'go'                  |  |  |  |  |
| Able to copy sequence of 2-3 sounds                 |  |  |  |  |
| Able to discriminate between 2 or more sounds       |  |  |  |  |
| Listens to other children as they take their turn   |  |  |  |  |

| <b>OBJECTIVE: Responding to simple instructions</b>                 |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Auditory memory of 2-3 items  |  |  |  |  |
| Follows instructions with 2 important words                         |  |  |  |  |
| Follows instructions with 3 important words, including action words |  |  |  |  |
| Follows instructions with 3 important words, including in/on/under  |  |  |  |  |
| Follows instructions with 3 important words, including big/little   |  |  |  |  |
| Follows instructions with 4 important words, including big/little   |  |  |  |  |
| Follows instructions with 4 important words, including big/little   |  |  |  |  |
| Follows instructions with 2 important words, including colours      |  |  |  |  |
| Follows instructions with 3 important words, including colours      |  |  |  |  |
| Follows instructions with 4 important words, including colours      |  |  |  |  |

| <b>OBJECTIVE: Listening to stories and answer 'wh' questions</b> |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| Able to listen and take turns                                    |  |  |  |  |
| Able to answer 'who?' questions                                  |  |  |  |  |
| Able to answer 'where?' questions                                |  |  |  |  |
| Able to answer simple 'when?' questions                          |  |  |  |  |
| Able to answer simple 'what happened?' questions                 |  |  |  |  |
| Able to identify story errors                                    |  |  |  |  |
| Able to contribute a simple idea to an adult-generated storyline |  |  |  |  |

### **General Points to Note**

- Is the child participating well within the group activities?
- Is the child offering spoken contributions within the group setting?
- Does the child seem confident in his/her own communication skills?