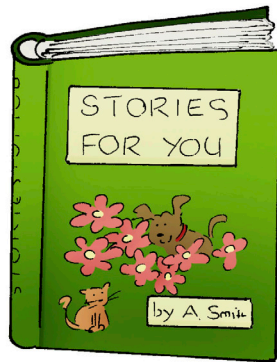


Narrative language skills

By 'narrative' we mean the way in which we 'map our thoughts' into language, either verbally or on paper, in order to convey information relating to an event. This information may relate to events in the past, present or future.



A pupil's ability to recount an event, orally or in written form, is dependent on having a 'message' to convey, the vocabulary and grammar to encode the message and a framework within which to organise, and sequence, that message.

In a sense narrative is the 'glue' that links the separate elements of language together and facilitates a pupil's ability to use language for the purposes of reasoning and explanation.

Whilst some pupils may not appear to have obvious difficulties with the separate elements of language, such as vocabulary and sentence structure, they may still experience difficulties in using language to express more complex ideas.

It is now well recognised that narrative development is important for school success, communicative effectiveness and social interaction.

Initially, children develop oral narrative skills but it is essential that they are then able to transfer these skills to written work.

It is a complex process that requires:

- Remembering what happened.
- Getting events in the right order.
- Picking out and repeating key information.
- Using the correct words.
- Using grammar.



Why are narrative skills so important?

Children are expected to use narrative skills every day. It's not just telling a story ... it's being able to talk about what happened during the day, explain an incident that happened in the playground, describe a day out etc.

As children get older, they are also expected to order their work, make arguments, hypothesise, use paragraphs to organise information etc.

Narrative skills have a huge impact on literacy development, and children with poor narrative skills may have difficulty in decoding and understanding text, using complex grammar and conveying ideas effectively.



How do I recognise a child with poor narrative skills?

A child with poor narrative language skills will frequently exhibit the following features:

- Using short sentences with limited detail.
- Being able to talk about the 'here and now' but not extend their narratives to past events.
- The events in their narrative accounts are jumbled.
- There are frequent mistakes and contradictions in their accounts of events.
- They use a lot of 'empty' words and phrases such as 'that thing'; 'do that'
- They have difficulties setting the context at the start of their narrative account. This can make it confusing for the listener.
- They may jump from topic to topic and, thus, lose the thread of their narrative account.



How can I help?

You may wish to carry out a teacher assessment of a child's narrative skills. The assessments available are both available as hard copies or iPad apps:

WIG8 The Squirrel Story for children 4–6 years of age.

WIG6 Peter and the Cat for children 7 years plus.

These assessments offer a clear description of the child's difficulties, identify areas to target and can be used to measure progress.

Please visit the Black Sheep Press website at www.blacksheepress.co.uk for more details.

Classroom Strategies:

The following strategies can support pupils with narrative language difficulties:

- Explicitly teach the component parts of a narrative account ... WHO ... WHEN ... WHERE ... WHAT HAPPENED/PROBLEM ... SOLUTION ... THE END.

Use visual cues and work sheets available in the Black Sheep Press Narrative Therapy packs.
- Encourage use of connectors ... 'and'/'if'/'because'/'but' etc. See **Black Sheep Press Conjunctions packs (LIP13, LIP14, LIP17)**
- Develop sequencing skills using sequencing cards (pictures with no text).
- Encourage the vocabulary of sequencing ... 'first'/'next'/'before'/'after'/'last'.
- As the child attempts to relate a sequence of events, revise and repair his/her narrative by saying it back in the correct way. This shows that you are listening to him/her and provides a good language model.
- Develop enjoyment of simple stories and, as part of peer support, encourage children to retell stories they have enjoyed. This might be from books they have read, films they have seen or programmes on television.

