Verbal Comprehension

Is your child not comprehending the teacher’s lesson?

Is your child:

• Struggling with reading and writing?
• Unsure of the right words to express ideas?
• Not understanding what teachers or other adults are saying?
• Forgetting new vocabulary or spelling words?
• Having meltdowns over writing homework?
• Getting lost when introduced to new materials in class?
• Not following directions?
• Needing to ‘see it’ rather than hear it explained aloud?
• Having problems completing assignments in class?

LET’S TALK ABOUT IT

Your child may say that he or she gets lost in class. He may say that he hates it when people talk too much. She may say that she just doesn’t understand what is going on in class. Your child may feel like ‘word work’ is ‘a lot of work’. Some children simply do not have a way with words.
Children with poor vocabulary or word knowledge have problems with verbal comprehension. They may struggle with new concepts in school. Children with poor comprehension may know the meanings of words but struggle to provide the definitions. They may have trouble explaining which words go together or share a common category. For example, cats, dogs, and horses all go together because they are all domesticated animals. This skill is called categorical knowledge. Your child may have trouble finding a similar word to explain her ideas due to poor knowledge of synonyms or grade-level vocabulary.

If your child is struggling with vocabulary or general comprehension, he or she is likely to have difficulties in school, particularly in language arts. Children who read fairly well, but who do not understand what they read, could have comprehension problems. If your child cannot tell a story back to you after reading it or cannot answer questions about a book that you read together, he or she is struggling with comprehension. It may also be that your child learns a lot on topics of interest but gleans very little from content learned in school. Alternately, although your child might understand and remember non-fiction, factual, and black-and-white materials, he or she may struggle to read fiction books that have a more open-ended and abstract nature.

Children with poor verbal comprehension generally have a harder time writing. Your child may have trouble writing because the concepts in his brain just don’t quite make it onto the paper. It may be that he or she can think of the words but is not quite sure how to spell them or how to construct complete sentences. This skill is called encoding ability or written expression. It is often the case that a child with verbal comprehension problems can share many creative ideas verbally but struggles to express them in written form.

Problems in comprehension may or may not impact social skills. In younger children, verbal comprehension may not be as important because conversation is less essential to social interaction. A young child can play and interact on the playground without talking too much. However, as your child gets older, he or she will be expected to understand what other kids say and to follow a fluid conversation by making comments, sharing emotions, and drawing meaningful conclusions. Your teenager may need the ability to discuss a favorite movie or a song with a friend. If your child has poor comprehension skills, he or she may not be able to follow along in the discussion or maintain the social interaction.

**CLINICAL DESCRIPTION**

Clinically, these problems are referred to as deficits in Verbal Comprehension. On an IQ test, the Verbal Comprehension Index measures vocabulary, semantics, and word knowledge. Some of the tests that assess for these skills ask children to give definitions, to compare how two words are alike, or to provide information that is learned in school.

The Cattel-Horn-Carroll theory of intelligence (CHC theory) views this form of intelligence as ‘crystallized’ [1], referring to the information learned from school, parents, or
friends. Well known intelligence expert Dawn Flanagan describes crystalized intelligence as,

“Your own personal library of everything you know” [4].

This 'crystallized' information is stored in the long-term memory and is highly sensitive to cultural factors, exposure to material, and practice.

Children from vocabulary-rich environments tend to have stronger skills in verbal comprehension. Babies with family members who speak to them and point out words throughout the day generally become more adept at vocabulary and word knowledge.

However, even with enrichment at home, words may not be your child’s favorite thing. It may be that the part of the brain responsible for word knowledge is just not as strong as it could be. Hereditary and environmental factors can impact our brain’s functioning in multiple areas. If your child struggles with word knowledge, he or she is likely to have learning problems. In school, verbal comprehension may cause poor reading skills, trouble finding the words to express ideas, frustration on writing tasks; poor spelling and vocabulary, or forgetting previously learned words and concepts.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD STRUGGLES WITH COMPREHENSION**

The good news about deficits in verbal comprehension is that these skills are highly impacted by exposure. That is, if your child struggles with vocabulary and word knowledge, it may be that he or she just needs more explicit practice.

*Activating background knowledge:* Teachers can introduce new topics by showing pictures, maps, or information about places the child already knows about or has been to before. These cues will trigger the brain to relate something unknown to something known. Providing connections to background information and giving context to new learning can help children grow in their comprehension.

*Visual learners:* Visual learners tend to really appreciate pictures, images, and visual models. In class, non-verbal prompts are best [2]. For example, the teacher can point to what to do next or physically model how to do a task. Providing checklists, graphic organizers, and visual schedules can also aide in comprehension for a visual leaner.

*Kinesthetic learners:* have to ‘feel it’ to get it. Teachers can give manipulatives, objects, and experiential opportunities to help them learn best. The teacher might tap your daughter’s paper, hand her materials, or pat her on the back. These physical, non-verbal prompts can be much more effective and less distracting than verbal directions.

Kinesthetic learners tend to learn better when they can integrate motor movements with their learning. Doing a ‘walk and talk’ or doing jumping jacks for each spelling word may help. Kinesthetic learners may learn new spelling words by writing them in the sand. Some kinesthetic kids learn best while hiking around outdoors. Knowing that your child
is a visual or kinesthetic learner, rather than a verbal learner, can go a long way to help make learning fun and to avoid frustration.

SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

If your child is struggling with a similar symptom, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.

- **Auditory processing**: problems with accurately hearing sounds within words can lead to poor verbal comprehension
- **Intelligence**: lower general cognitive ability is likely to impact comprehension
- **Expressive language**: poor expressive language skills may indicate problems in verbal comprehension
- **Receptive language**: poor receptive language skills is generally related to poor verbal comprehension scores on an IQ test

POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

Children who have significant problems in this area **may** have any of the following potential disabilities. *Note, this information does not serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the ‘Where to Go for Help’ section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- **Developmental Coordination Disorder**: challenges with fine motor skills, likely including poor handwriting
- **Autism Spectrum Disorder**: deficits in social communication and restricted interests or behaviors. Often, there are problems with comprehension, even if high IQ.
- **Dyslexia or Specific Learning Disability in Reading (Educationally Identified Disabilities)** - challenges with reading comprehension can relate to low verbal comprehension
- **Dysgraphia or Specific Learning Disability in Writing (Educationally Identified Disabilities)** - challenges with writing may result from poor verbal comprehension
- **Dyscalculia or Specific Learning Disability in Math (Educationally Identified Disabilities)** - challenges with mathematics may develop due to poor verbal comprehension
- **Intellectual Disability (Educationally Identified Disabilities – may be diagnosed clinically as well)** - individuals with low IQ scores often have difficulties with verbal comprehension, particularly for more abstract information
WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- **CLEAR Child Psychology**: to obtain a *customized profile* of concerns for your child or to *consult ‘live’* with a psychologist
- **Psychologist or neuropsychologist**: to consider symptoms in a mental health context
- **School psychologist**: to potentially test IQ or to consider academic issues (generally only in the context of an IEP evaluation – parents cannot necessarily request an IQ test from the school psychologist)
- **Physical therapist and/or Occupational Therapist (OT)**: to look at fine and gross motor
- **Speech Language Pathologist (SLP)**: to assess issues with receptive or expressive language

These professionals may recommend or administer the following *IQ tests* for this symptom:

- **DAS-II**: test of cognitive ability that includes a verbal scale
- **KABC-II**: test of intelligence that includes a measure of verbal comprehension
- **SB-5**: test of intelligence that includes a measure of verbal comprehension
- **WISC-V**: test of intelligence that includes a verbal scale

Learning specialists, special education teachers, or psychologists may administer the following *academic tests*:

- **GORT-5**: test of reading comprehension and reading fluency
- **TOWL**: test of written language
- **WIAT-III**: test of achievement that includes a measure of comprehension, reading & writing
- **Woodcock Johnson-IV**: test of achievement that includes a measure of comprehension, reading, and writing

LEARN MORE


Amazon: [https://www.amazon.com/Assessment-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-Psychological/dp/3319255029/](https://www.amazon.com/Assessment-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-Psychological/dp/3319255029/)

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