Language as a Missing Link for Children and Youth
Definitions, Symptoms, and Screening

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"WHEN CHILDREN DON'T HAVE LANGUAGE, THEIR BEHAVIOR BECOMES THEIR LANGUAGE."

—Judge Peggy H. Walker

The ability to communicate is fundamental to the social, emotional, mental health, and academic development of children. **Language is the vehicle** by which children communicate needs and ideas, develop and maintain relationships, and solidify understanding of concepts.

EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS
- Unless you know to look for them, expressive language deficits can be easy to overlook.
- Some children may appear to understand what others are saying but have difficulty using words to express thoughts or feelings.

RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS
- Receptive language deficits are only apparent when it is clear that children cannot follow directions or comprehend the information they hear.
- Often missed because some children are adept at watching others and simply following them.

RE-CONCEPTUALIZE BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS AS SKILL DEFICITS, AND REMEMBER THAT BEHAVIOR ITSELF IS OFTEN A FORM OF COMMUNICATION.

—Pamela Snow

LOWER LANGUAGE SKILLS ARE LINKED WITH HIGHER RATES OF AGGRESSION.
HIGHER LANGUAGE SKILLS ARE LINKED WITH HIGHER RATES OF ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT.

Youth with language skill deficits are **7 times** more likely to misunderstand Miranda warnings than their peers without language deficits. Youth involved with juvenile justice are **5 times** more likely than their non-offending peers to have language skill deficits.

SUCCESSFUL EXPRESSION OF REMORSE REQUIRES SUBSTANTIAL LANGUAGE SKILLS.
The words must be correct and the delivery, tone of voice, and facial expression must match.

GIVEN WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT PATHWAYS INTO THE JUSTICE SYSTEM, SCREENING OF LANGUAGE SKILLS SHOULD OCCUR:
- Among students **struggling to read**
- When **behavior problems** are first emergent
- When a child is **at risk of suspension** from school
- When **mental health difficulties** are apparent
- On first **contact with the justice system**
- In **planning interventions** following a conviction

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AGE	INDICATORS OF POSSIBLE LANGUAGE SKILL DEFICITS	SCREENING TOOLS
3 – 4 Years	The child is showing difficulty with…. ❑ Understanding and using more multi-word combinations including people's names, verbs, and nouns. ❑ Understanding & using more sophisticated grammar (e.g., pronouns, possessives, tense) ❑ Requesting a break and/or soothing items when distressed ❑ Using language to talk through transitions between activities ❑ Recognizing and describing emotional states of oneself and others	Preschool Language Scales-5 (PLS-5) (Age range: Birth through 7 years, 11 months)
4 – 5 Years	The child is showing difficulty with…. ❑ Using a range of creative language, including both simple and complex sentences ❑ Engaging in short dialogues, such as relating past events in simple sequences ❑ Using some politeness terms or markers (e.g., please, thank you) ❑ Determining causal factors for emotional states of self and others ❑ Using language to talk through more extended activities (e.g., multi-step instructions) ❑ Recognizing and repairing breakdowns in communication	Children's Communication Checklist (CCC)-2 (Age range: 4 – 16 years, 11 months)
Elementary Grades (6 yrs to 11 yrs)	The child is showing difficulty with…. ❑ Engaging in topic maintenance, by staying on topic for extended interactions ❑ Balancing comments and requests for information ❑ Adapting vocal tone to different listeners (e.g., adults versus peers) ❑ Providing essential background information based upon listener's perspective ❑ Initiating and maintaining conversations that are sensitive to the social context and the interests of others ❑ Using emotions of others to guide behavior in social interactions (e.g., selecting topics based on another's preferences, praising others, sharing empathy). ❑ Enacting social sequences in a representational manner by incorporating themes or modifications introduced by others (e.g., role playing and visualizing an event before it takes place)	CELF-5 Screening Test (Age range: 5 – 21 years and 11 months)
Secondary Grades (12 yrs to 21 yrs)	The adolescent is showing difficulty with…. ❑ Understanding and using nonverbal gestures, facial expressions, and gaze to express and follow subtle intentions (e.g., sarcasm and other nonliteral meanings) ❑ Understanding and using intonation cues to express and follow emotional states ❑ Understanding and using more sophisticated syntax to provide background information for one's listener ❑ Understanding and using more sophisticated syntax to show relationships between sentences in conversational discourse ❑ Understanding reading passages and using written expression to share experiences ❑ Problem solving and self-monitoring future, goal-directed, behavior (i.e., executive functioning) ❑ Perceiving one's actions within social events and predicting social behavior in others in order to self-monitor ❑ Effectively negotiating and collaborating within interactions with adults and peers	

This table was developed by Pileggi, Rubin, Farran & Weldon (2018) based on information from Gard, Gilman, & Gorman (1993), Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent & Rydell (2006), and Russell (2007).