Analyse the importance of early identification of speech, language and communication delays and disorders and the potential risks of late recognition.

Language occupies a very special place within human minds, because the use of language governs our thoughts and the way in which we process information. The way we store information is also language-based, and how it is organised in our brains so that we can pull it out when it is needed. Clearly, our abilities to express ourselves is also very reliant upon language, because as humans, we use language to express a huge number of things, not least to show how we feel, what we want, what we don't want, and to explain why.

Factors that affect speech, language and communication development.

**Early language problems**

The signs of a language delay may be relatively clear very early on. A baby who does not 'babble' may have hearing impairment; hearing problems may mean that they never really hear words properly, or the words may not sound like we think they do. Some conditions, such as autism, have a similar outwards effect, where the baby does not babble or imitate the parent's noises. Some children with autism never gain speech at all, while some come very late to it.
Some children use dummies or similar items for comfort past the age of 12 months, and this can cause difficulties with language because they often do not try out sounds and babbling noises as much as children who do not have dummies. Dummies can also result in an over-development of the muscles at the front of the child’s mouth, and this may have an effect on the placement of their teeth, which can also cause an impediment to the correct formation of words. If a child is unaware that they are producing words incorrectly, this can have a knock-on effect to their writing and spelling skills, as well as their ability to express themselves adequately.

*Language problems at school*

Children who have problems communicating with others because of a language delay or disorder often have difficulties at school. This can be due partly because their ability to understand what is being communicated by the teacher or by other children may be affected; but it can also be because the way they organise their thought processes is not useful. They may also struggle to express themselves, and this can make it hard to form relationships with other people right into adulthood. As mentioned in an earlier section in this unit, an inability to express oneself adequately can lead to frustration, which is not a good state for learning, and can also disrupt other children in the class.

As children move up the school, their curriculum relies on their abilities to think in more rational and abstract ways. This means that in order to succeed at school (and eventually at work), they need to be able to access their memory, and apply concepts to new situations. It is easy to see why those who have difficulties with language from an early age can be disadvantaged if interventions are not put in place.

*Why early recognition is important*

The earlier the recognition and diagnosis of language delay, the more straightforward it will be for SLTs and other professionals to target the needs of the child and provide useful support. This is one of the reasons that milestones – while they are not an exact science – are useful, because they flag up potential issues.

When children who are very young experience frustration with their expression, they are unlikely to be able to identify why they feel like they do, so support workers and classroom assistants who work with them may find that they display challenging behaviour at times. If you support children with language and communication
difficulties, you should be sent on training that is designed to help you work with them in a useful way, as well as being given strategies that will assist your work with them.

Early recognition is not really about making things easier for the professionals; it's about helping the child, who is the real focus. The early years are a time of fast development for these tiny humans, and their ability to learn will never be so open and accessible as it is at this age. Children with communication problems have a much more limited world to access, and therefore opening it up and giving them better opportunities at an earlier stage by helping them access language better is a hugely positive thing that can be done for them.