

Kids 'can't talk properly'

Stephen Drill | Herald Sun | September 13, 2009 12:00AM

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CHILDREN are increasingly starting school unable to speak intelligibly and principals blame work-obsessed parents.

School chiefs say it is making it harder for children to learn to read and write.

The Victorian Principals Association wants parents to talk to their children more before they start school and says the State Government should increase the number of speech pathologists in schools.

Increasingly, children are starting school unable to string together five or six word sentences and do not understand simple instructions such as "give me the large book", principals say.

Some students even started school without knowing how to use the toilet, teachers revealed.

VPA president Gabrielle Leigh said she believed that conversation had suffered because there were too many televisions in family homes.

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"Television used to be a communal activity where families would talk in ad breaks, but that doesn't happen as much now," Ms Leigh said. A lack of oral skills was a major problem in schools.

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"If students cannot understand the sounds of words then they cannot relate to written words," she said.

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Speech Pathology Australia has called for all children with language problems to have access to qualified help.

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President Dr Cori Williams said speech pathologists played a crucial role in developing language skills.

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Speech pathologist Andrea Houlihan runs a private practice, but has worked in schools for the Education Department and for the Catholic Education Office.

"Both services do a great job, but there are simply thousands of children who need speech pathology and the sheer numbers mean that many miss out on vital services," she said.

But Education Department spokeswoman Jane Metiikovec said there were more than 500 school service support officers, including speech pathologists, in Victorian schools.