

Make every child a talker

Michael Jones explores a project based on Every Child a Talker, a national initiative to address 'language impoverishment' by promoting practitioner knowledge and skills, and strengthening links with parents.



Michael Jones

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IT NEVER ceases to amaze me that by the end of their first three years, most children have learned virtually everything they need to know about communicating, and many will be well on the way to being fluent in at least two languages.

These children will be using their language skills to become effective learners, and will be well-placed to succeed in school and beyond. By far the most important ingredient in this process is the interaction that takes place between children and adults, as they share experiences together.

Unfortunately, many young children in the UK are starting school with high levels of impoverished language. They are unable to express themselves clearly or confidently, and are severely disadvantaged by limited vocabulary and immature grammar.

This can lead to difficulties when trying to express their feelings, and a greatly reduced ability to explore abstract ideas and to express themselves imaginatively. Their access to the world of books and the school curriculum may also be severely restricted, leading to reduced life chances.

The levels of impoverished language were recently highlighted in several highly influential reports. I CAN's *The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication* along with the *Bercow Review*, are often cited as the key reports that spurred the government into taking action.

The reports identify that 10 percent of all children may have a long-term 'persistent' communication difficulty, while as many as half the children in some parts of England may have more 'transient' additional communication needs.

While the children with persistent needs will require ongoing support, those with transient needs are likely to catch up, as long as they have appropriate intervention before they start school.

What causes children to have these 'transient' language difficulties? Another report, *The National Evaluation of Sure Start*, makes this very clear: 'Children growing up in impoverished circumstances

are generally exposed to language that differs both qualitatively and quantitatively from the experience of more fortunate children. A social class gradient in language skills is already emerging by the time a child is two-years-old, and the gap widens substantially by the time children reach statutory school age.'

Put bluntly, many children are not spoken with enough by their parents, and the conversations and experiences they share are very limited.

The government's response has been to create the *Every Child a Talker* scheme (ECaT). ECaT is a two-year centrally-funded initiative, focusing on children from birth to four-years-old. It aims to increase practitioner knowledge and skills in supporting children's language and communication, with particular emphasis on working closely with parents, and developing ways of working with children that will have a long-lasting impact.

Since September 2008, National Strategies has been supporting the implementation of projects in many towns and cities throughout the UK. ECaT's particular strength comes from the fact that settings are actively encouraged to develop projects that reflect the needs of their particular organisation and local community, rather than following a prescribed set of activities.

The first action to be taken by a local authority is to appoint an Early Language Consultant (ELC). This role includes coordinating activities, leading training, modelling good practice and supporting initiatives in settings and throughout the borough.

Next, 20 pre-school settings are invited to take part in the project, with the expectation that they will at some stage 'buddy up' with neighbouring schools and settings to promote good practice across the town, city or county.

Each setting's first task is to select a practitioner to become an Early Language Lead Practitioner (ELLP). This important role involves supporting colleagues to develop practice that will maximise language and communication for all children in their setting, as well as specifically focusing on those with additional needs.

Luton's initiative, which has been judged by National Strategies to be outstanding, took a bold first step and renamed the project 'Every Child a Talker: Every Adult Involved'. This highlights that the way adults interact with children is crucial to

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Sharing a laugh and a chat: Parents, children and practitioners enjoying time together at Gill Blowers Nursery during Nursery Rhyme Day

improving language and communication skills, and is the central focus of all activities. Luton also emphasises that the project is for all children and parents, rather than only focusing on those families and children with identified needs, which means that all practitioners and parents will be able to identify with the activities and feel included.

As the ELC for Luton, I work in settings to develop practical activities that have an immediate impact on practice and children's communication.

I work closely with my colleague Sue Thomas, senior consultant in Early Years and Childcare, who supports ECaT by bringing together the wide range of professionals and groups who are already providing services that promote children's language and communication. These include the Speech and Language Therapy Service, early years advisors, the Library Service, family workers, the Pre-school Learning Alliance and the National Childminding Association.

Our aim is to put strategic measures in place that ensure that long-term progress can be sustained long after ECaT has finished. Sue is also responsible for

implementing *Letters and Sounds*, which promotes children's listening skills, and particularly makes the link between speech sounds and later reading skills (phonological awareness).

So what might ECaT look like? Settings, such as Denbigh Pre-School have used some of their ECaT funding to set up a 'language library'. Like a toy library, parents can borrow items that can be enjoyed by the whole family.

The resources have been specifically chosen to promote language and communication. These include storybooks and toy packs, CDs of songs and rhymes; or interactive toys, such as puppets. They also encourage children to borrow puzzles, with the specific intention of promoting vocabulary development, and parent and child interaction.

Children are shown how to use puzzles in the nursery, and encouraged to take them home 'to show mummy and daddy what to do'.

Sharon Ferguson and Aleha Mukhtadir, the ELLPs at Denbigh Pre-School, both feel that there is now a stronger partnership with parents: 'Parents and children are enjoying sharing the books and toys



ELLPs support colleagues and parents in settings to promote early communication

they choose to take home. We find that ECaT has motivated all of us to take a fresh look at our practice.'

ELLP Katy Neill and her colleagues at Gill Blowers Nursery used part of their ECaT funding to focus on the use of rhymes and songs. Their aim was to develop children's language, listening skills and cultural awareness, and to act as role-models for parents.

Katy explains: 'ECaT came at absolutely the right time for us, as we had just taken part in training from Sue Thomas about *Letters and Sounds*. We approached a local recording studio, and set up a visit where the children could record six of their favourite nursery rhymes. This was an amazing experience in itself, as we travelled there on a big yellow bus that we hired from Luton Borough Council.

'Our original idea was to give each family a copy of the CD, but our arrangements snowballed into

organising a Nursery Rhyme Day. Many parents joined in activities with their children, such as making a nursery rhyme character, decorating a 'rhyme bag', and joining in singing with popular local entertainer Renu Elston.'

ECaT is as much about developing babies' and toddlers' communication as it is about supporting older children's language. ELLPs are supporting colleagues and parents in settings, to promote early communication.

Play with 'Treasure Baskets' is particularly popular, where children are encouraged to explore everyday and exciting objects, and natural materials, such as collections of shiny things, keys, corks and pine cones. Many parents who see how involved their children are when playing with everyday objects in the setting become inspired to encourage this type of play at home. This has a positive impact on parent-child relationships, as well as communication.

There are many homes in Luton where more than one language is spoken. We encourage parents to help their children become fluent in their mother tongue at home. This advice is based on evidence that children who have a strong grounding in their first language can go on to learn English well, and may achieve better at school than those children who have a weaker grasp of their mother tongue.

An important feature of ECaT is the monitoring of children's progress in 'Listening and Attention', 'Understanding of Language, Speech Sounds and Talk' and 'Social Skills'. The good news from Luton is that excellent progress has been made in all these areas since the introduction of ECaT.

The actual process of collecting the data has also helped improve practitioners' subject knowledge of the developmental stages within speech, language and communication.

Parents and practitioners were also asked at the beginning of ECaT about their confidence in understanding how language develops and how they can help children's speech and language.

These questions have been revisited and results show that Luton has come a long way in supporting practitioners and parents in their understanding and practice, for the benefit of children currently in settings and in the future.

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Key points

- By the end of their first three years, most children have learned virtually everything they need to know about communicating
- Children use their language skills to become effective learners
- By far the most important ingredient in this process is the interaction that takes place between children and adults, as they share experiences together
- Unfortunately, many young children in the UK are starting school with high levels of impoverished language
- *Every Child a Talker* is a two-year centrally-funded initiative that aims to increase practitioner knowledge and skills in supporting children's language and communication, with particular emphasis on working closely with parents, and developing ways of working with children that will have a long-lasting impact

Useful resources

- *The Bercow Review (2008): A review of services for children and young people (0-19) with speech, language and communication needs*
Can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/slcnaaction
- I CAN report (2006) *The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication*
Can be accessed at www.ican.org.uk
- *National Evaluation of Sure Start (2007)*
Can be accessed at www.surestart.gov.uk
- For more information about *Every Child a Talker* visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk/everychildtalkerproject