

Keep on talking!

The impact of ECaT on children's language development is evident in a project being run in a number of Hampshire settings. By *Michael Jones*

Many local authorities have maintained their commitment to supporting Every Child a Talker (ECaT) projects, some with reduced funding, and others with no additional funding at all (see box below). Hampshire County Council has continued to support young children's language development through its Keep on Talking project.

The scheme involves new settings in areas where EYFS Profile data for Communication, Language and Literacy highlighted a need for intensive support for children's language development.

I was lucky to be invited to provide training for the Early Language Lead Practitioners (ELLPs) who had been involved in the first year of Keep on Talking. This gave me the chance to

hear about the progress being made throughout the county and particularly in my favourite type of settings, where staff often have just 45 minutes every morning to set up an entire pre-school from scratch.

These 'packaway settings' are usually set up in church halls, village halls or community centres. The environment is often far from ideal, with inferior acoustics, poor-quality lighting and limited outdoor access or facilities. Yet practitioners daily transform these unpromising premises into exciting environments where children are able to develop and learn. The key to success seems to be teamwork and the limitless imaginations of the adults.

DEUX CHATS

One such setting is Deux Chats Pre-school in Aldershot, which was involved for a year in the original



Every corner at Deux Chats has been used imaginatively

Hampshire ECaT programme. The word that is often used to describe what happens here is 'transformation'. I arrived at a small empty church hall, situated on a busy road in the centre of town, at 8.15am, and by the time the children arrived practically every corner of the building had been transformed into a place that children would find stimulating.

The children and staff at Deux Chats have more need than most to be involved in ECaT because most of the children come from the families of Ghurkha soldiers who have recently settled in the UK from Nepal and

so are learning English as an additional language.

Manager Gina Dawson explains the history of the setting. 'We are a very well-established pre-school. We were used to doing our best to provide the children with stimulating experiences, but with the sudden influx of children from families with no English, we needed to completely rethink what we were offering.'

'We have also needed to adapt our practice and provision to meet the needs of the increasing number of two-years-olds attending. From our point of view, ECaT came just in time. The project has helped us transform our environment, the way that we interact with children, and how we involve families.'

Ms Dawson then gave me a whistle-stop tour of the premises before the children arrived. I took in an exciting covered book area, a construction zone with two large cardboard boxes waiting for the children to explore, and a percussion area. Everywhere there were interactive displays and evidence of the children's creativity. In the lobby, parents and children passed through an 'interest area' full of exciting objects to explore and talk about before they helped their children self-register.

There was an interactive display for parents, written in English and Nepali, explaining how children develop and learn in the setting and how parents can take part in activities with their children at home. During the morning I was impressed by how much the children laughed and

talked with the staff and to each other. Although the inside area is stimulating, Ms Dawson wanted me to focus most of my attention on a 1.5m wide strip of land running round one side of the building, and a slightly wider stretch at the back.

She described how they set about transforming the outdoor area. 'Basically we had a rubbish dump surrounding our building. We realised that we were very restricted by what we could do with our small concrete forecourt, so we raised funds to clear away all the debris, uproot the weeds and chop back the trees.'

Every square metre has an activity of interest, all of which cost no money at all. Enjoying pride of place is a 'bridge' made of five scaffolding planks that the children have to cross over and jump off if they want to get to the back of the hall. While I was there children were proud to show me their climbing and jumping skills, and they didn't stop talking!

GROWTH IN CONFIDENCE

The transformation of Deux Chats is mirrored at other settings involved in the Keep on Talking programme. Sharon Brayer and Chris Hodges from Busy Bees Pre-school at Bashley, near New Milton are very positive about what Keep on Talking has done for them. Their comments were echoed by many ELLPs from various types of settings.

'We used to feel guilty because we were taking time to chat with children. We now have the confidence to make conversation the heart of



• *The Keep on Talking Handbook* is produced by Services for Young Children, Children's Services Department, Hampshire County Council. For information email childcare@hants.gov.uk

• *Let's Get Talking! Exciting ways to support children with speech and language difficulties* by Michael Jones and Jo Belsten (Lawrence Educational) was inspired by activities developed through ECaT

• *Supporting Quiet Children* by Maggie Johnson and Michael Jones will be published by Lawrence Educational in October 2012

all learning, and we spend as much time as we can talking with children, and encouraging them to talk to each other,' explains Ms Brayer. 'We do this through the environment we have set up, the activities we plan and the way we interact with children and how we support them to talk together.'

Sheila Floyd, an early years district advisory teacher, is the full-time co-ordinator of the project. Her role, she explains, includes taking a strategic lead by supporting local advisory teams, who in turn support the settings. 'Through our participation in ECaT, we have developed a successful programme of training and support: working closely with speech and language therapy teams and other agencies, such as the music service. Members of the local advisory team visit settings regularly, and on my visits I have witnessed the tremendous growth in confidence among practitioners. They feel that they now have the skills to identify and support children at risk of language delay. They put talking at the heart of their practice to support all young children.'

'To ensure sustainability, we are keen to use the expertise of the ELLPs to support other settings in their development. Gina at Deux Chats is working towards becoming a Leading Foundation Stage Practitioner and regularly receives visitors.'

I was invited to attend a day of celebration of the first year of Keep on Talking. Esther Jones, Hampshire's quality improvement service manager, was invited to give out certificates. She was clearly delighted with the progress that settings are making.

'The original data from ECaT showed us the very significant impact that had been made on children's language and social development. As a seconded head teacher I can see that this is going to have a major impact on children's educational achievement,' she explains.

'We looked closely at data from across Hampshire where ECaT had not been implemented, and were able to make a very strong case for continuing the programme across the county. There is a clear commitment from the County Council to ensure that progress continues.' ■

Michael Jones was involved in ECaT over three years as an early language consultant. He provides training on language development in the early years. For more information visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk



'EVERY CHILD A TALKER' REVISITED

Launched in 2008, Every Child a Talker (ECaT) aimed to help practitioners create a developmentally appropriate, supportive and stimulating environment in which children could enjoy experimenting with and learning language.

Through the scheme, many settings across England were able to develop exciting approaches and practical activities that had a major impact on practitioners, children and families.

One of the key drivers of the

project was the significant amount of Government funding that was allocated to local authorities and passed on to participating settings. This allowed settings to invest in resources that they wouldn't ordinarily be able to afford and, most significantly, it allowed staff to take part in training, including visiting other settings to share good practice.

A major success of ECaT was the creation of the post of Early Language Lead Practitioner (ELLP) in each ECaT setting.

The ELLP was responsible for co-ordinating work on communication and ensuring that each child's progress was monitored. This data was used to assess progress within each setting, as well as locally and nationally. ELLPs were also expected to continue the work of the project in their setting and within local networks once ECaT had officially ceased.

When ECaT officially ended in March 2011, there was concern that the progress made in spreading

good practice would be lost. However, many local authorities have continued to support ECaT in their own way.

Every Child a Talker: Guidance for Early Language Lead Practitioners includes features of a communication-friendly setting, tips for talking and how to make the most of everyday activities to promote children's communication skills. It is still available at: www.education.gov.uk/search/results?q=Every+child+a+talker%3A+guidance