

Cue response

This article appeared in *Special Children* 187, February/March 2009

The Government has set up a multi-million-pound scheme to tackle the unacceptably high levels of language impoverishment among pre-school children in England. Michael Jones reflects on how children become successful communicators, and reports on how 'Every Child a Talker' is being implemented.

How do children learn to speak, and why do some learn to communicate quicker and more effectively than others? I have been asking these questions for the last thirty years, and have finally been given the answers. Nikita, ("I'm just a mum with two young kids") told me, "You just open the fridge and talk about what's in there. And you sit with the children and watch TV as well." Peter, ("I'm just a local dad"), puts it down to, "interacting with the kids. If they ask you a question, then you take time to answer. You show them things that are interesting to you, and hope they will be interested too."

Is it really that simple? On the face of it, yes it is. But Nikita and Peter's assertions are underpinned by a very powerful belief: that the key to language development and effective communication lies in adult behaviour. This includes acting on the understanding that children need to have stimulating experiences, and that adults need to respond to children, as well as teach them.

If it's that simple, then why are so many young children in England starting school with levels of language development that are so low they are at risk of academic and social failure? Nikita and Peter have equally powerfully held beliefs about why some children are less able to express themselves than others: because their parents do not spend enough time talking with them. Again, is it really that simple? Is it really a question of time spent?

Talking to children, or interaction?

At this point I reflect on my own experience. As a young Speech and Language Therapist I believed that the more I spoke with children then the richer their language would be. I put this into practice when working with very young children with severe speech and language delay, when I ran a pre-school language unit in North London in the mid 1980s. My main approach was to engage children in practical activities, including going shopping, cooking, visiting the park and play activities such as with sand and water. Most of these activities were chosen and led by me.

I considered myself to be very successful, and was delighted when a researcher asked if she could video me working with a group of five children. However, when the researcher's findings were published in an academic journal, I was horrified to find that my work was cited as being highly unsuccessful! In a 20-minute activity, making vegetable soup, not only did I do most of the talking, but most of my language consisted of asking questions like, "What's that?" and saying, "Good boy" when a child gave the right

answer. I was shocked into realising that it is not just time spent with children that promotes effective communication, but the *quality* of the interaction. This experience set me on a quest to find out about effective approaches to interacting with children that I could use myself, as well as to help parents. After a year at university, researching interaction between parents and young children, I was convinced that what adults need to do, more than anything else, is to *respond* to what babies do and, as they develop, to what they say. This applies to all children, including those with significant additional communication needs.

Children communicating together

So is it all down to adults? If this is the case, then why do we need good quality pre-school provision? Why not just work with children individually? Here lies the other key to language development: young children are highly motivated to learn from each other, and gain enormous pleasure and enjoyment from each others' company. The path of social development is not always smooth, and initially children are very dependent on adult interaction. However as children mature they choose to spend most of their time playing with, talking to and learning from their peers. The keys to helping young children become effective communicators seem to lie in adult knowledge and beliefs about their children's development, how adults behave, and the quality of children's experiences, including experiences with other children.

Language impoverishment

Recent reports have been highly influential in spurring the Government into action, to tackle the high levels of language impoverishment. These include ICAN's 'The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication' and the Bercow Report. They assert that 10% of all children may have a long-term 'persistent' communication difficulty, and as many as 50% of 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. In particular, when parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning.

How do these transient difficulties come about? 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.*"

Every Child a Talker

Government ministers and policy makers are so concerned by these findings that they have invested millions of pounds in setting up an intervention programme that is known as 'Every Child a Talker' (ECAT). 51 cities, towns

and boroughs with the most serious levels of language impoverishment have been identified, and are eligible to take part in the first wave of the two-year scheme. The aims are to raise children's achievement in early language, by improving practitioners' skills and knowledge, and increasing parental understanding and involvement in their children's language development. Children between the ages of birth and four years, and the adults who live and work with them, will be the main targets for support.

The process begins with the appointment of a local Early Language Consultant, who leads the programme in each city or town. 20 pre-school settings that require most input are selected, and an Early Language Lead Practitioner is chosen from among the staff in each setting, to coordinate the programme. Local ECAT initiatives are supported and monitored by Regional Advisers, who are already working under the aegis of the National Strategy.

The Early Language Consultant will provide intensive training, support and advice to targeted settings, and works in partnership with other professionals supporting early language. This includes aligning support for early language across the Local Authority. Each Local Authority will set up a body of interested Key Partners, who will support and guide the project, and ensure that progress made, and initiatives created, will continue beyond 2010. Typically Key Partners will include Speech and Language Therapists and other health professionals, as well as professionals working with young children and parents. Each of the 20 ECAT pre-school settings will form a partnership with another setting, so that ideas can be shared and practice improved throughout the town.

Every adult involved

But what does ECAT look like? Does it have a set format that should be followed rigidly? How ECAT looks in reality will largely depend on local needs. In Luton, for example settings have set up a range of activities to develop staff knowledge and skills, so that there will be an enduring impact on practice. Practitioners are visiting other settings to compare approaches, are buying resources, and taking part in in-house and external training events. Projects that maximise opportunities for children to talk are many and varied. These include developing story time and group activities, focusing on outdoor play, developing use of imaginative language through 'small world' play, encouraging children to talk with each other, and expanding children's vocabularies.

Parents are becoming involved in training and outreach work; for example attending workshops. Fathers and adult carers, including grandfathers, are particularly being targeted for support, through groups that often meet on a Saturday. These 'dads' groups' give men and their children the opportunity to play together. Pastures Way Nursery School and Children's Centre has set up a Saturday group called 'Dads and Co', focusing on dads and children exploring computers together. The dads gain support and ideas from each other, and explore effective and enjoyable ways to encourage their children's language development.

Other Children's Centres and nurseries are setting up 'language libraries'. Like toy libraries, parents can borrow resources that can be enjoyed by the whole family, using resources that are specifically designed to promote language and communication. These might include storybook and toy packs, CDS of songs and rhymes, or interactive toys, such as puppets. One nursery is setting up a puzzle library with the specific intention of promoting vocabulary development and parent and child interaction. Children will be shown how to use puzzles in the nursery, and encouraged to take them home 'to show mummy and daddy what to do'. Other settings are looking closely at the way they develop children's love of rhymes and songs, to promote language and listening skills, with a particular emphasis on the phonological awareness that is vital for reading and spelling.

High hopes

Gillian Davidson, Manager of Lewsey Children's Centre in Luton, has high expectations of her staff, and high hopes for ECAT in the setting and for the wider community. "What the staff do with the children during the day needs to be of the highest quality. We work hard here and have very good links with parents. However we are always looking to improve, and ECAT has come along at exactly the right time. We are a relatively new Children's Centre, and we want to ensure that our practitioners have an in-depth knowledge of language and communication. This includes providing children with a wide variety of experiences, and knowing how our use of language influences children's communication."

Lewsey Children's Centre is focusing on improving all their children's vocabulary. As Gillian explains, "Without a rich vocabulary, children will not be able to become effective readers and writers. We can help children to expand their vocabulary through everyday activities. A typical example is talking with children about what they are wearing as we help them to get dressed to go outside: to know that what they might call a 'top' is actually a fleece, or a jumper, or a cardigan." They also use stories, songs and rhymes and other adult-led activities to generate interest in words.

And what about the parents who use the Children's Centre? "What parents do at home is vital, and our role is to help them to understand what a worthwhile job they do at home. As a member of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, my philosophy is that parents are their children's first educators, but parents don't always see themselves in this light. Children learn language through chatting about what they do as part of everyday life. A walk to the shops or a trip into town on the bus is exactly what a little child loves to talk about, and will have a more lasting impact than an expensive toy. We sometimes need to convince parents that this is so."

So if children are to be effective communicators, parents and practitioners need to work closely together, and develop a shared understanding of what each has to offer. The starting point is for everyone to understand children's potential as communicators, and how we adults can unleash that potential. It's as simple as looking in the fridge and talking about what's in there.

Michael Jones is a researcher, writer, and Luton's Early Language Consultant

Michael would like to thank Sue Thomas, Luton's Strategic Lead for ECAT, for her support in the writing of this article.

The Bercow Report (2008): A review of services for children and young people (0-19) with speech, language and communication needs
www.dcsf.gov.uk/slcnaaction

ICAN Report (2006) The Cost to the nation of Children's poor communication
www.ican.org.uk

National Evaluation of Sure Start (2007)
www.surestart.gov.uk

This article was published in *Special Children* 187(February/March) 2009