Children are unable to express themselves clearly or confidently, and are disadvantaged by limited vocabulary and immature grammar.
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.

Sharon Ferguson and Aleha Muktadir, 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... 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...
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.

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/slcnaction
  Can be accessed at www.ican.org.uk
  Can be accessed at www.surestart.gov.uk
- For more information about Every Child a Talker visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk/everychildatalkerproject

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

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