

Early language consultant Michael Jones describes how the Every Child a Talker project is building children's confidence as communicators.

Every child a talker



Childminder Sue Sheldrick leading singing and rhyming fun at a 'Practice and Play' session for childminders at ARC Children's Centre, Luton

It is one of life's miracles that by the age of three, most children have learned everything they need to know about talking, and many will be well on the way to being fluent in two languages. This remarkable process starts from birth, and takes place mainly through children being involved in play and fun experiences with adults, and later with other children

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 with expressing their feelings, and a greatly reduced ability to explore abstract ideas and express themselves imaginatively. Their access to the world of books and the school curriculum may also be severely restricted, leading to reduced life chances. These children do not have specific speech and language difficulties, but appear to be lacking in experience, and have particularly missed out on the detailed

chat with adults that is so important for language and social development.

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 of age. 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, the National Strategy has been supporting the implementation of projects in many towns and cities throughout the UK, in three waves, based on EYFS scores for Communication and Language Development. By April 2010 all areas of England will be expected to have some involvement in ECaT.

Each local authority that takes part is expected to appoint an early language consultant. This role includes coordinating activities, leading training and modelling good practice.

Twenty pre-school settings have been initially chosen to take part. Each setting's first task is to select a practitioner to become an early language lead practitioner (ELLP). The ELLP supports 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.

ECaT settings are encouraged to reach out to groups in their local community who work with young children and their parents, including childminders. In an exciting development, some local authorities have chosen individual childminders to be ELLPs, with the expectation that they will link with their colleagues to support their work developing children's communication.

Luton's project, which has been judged by the National Strategy 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 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 specific needs. As a result all practitioners and parents will be able to identify with the activities, and feel included.

So what might ECaT look like in a pre-school setting and for childminders? There isn't a pre-designed set of activities: ELLPs are expected to base their ideas on the needs of their group or local community.

However, many settings have shared their good practice, so that they are involved in similar activities. Some have set up 'language libraries', where parents and childminders can borrow items that can be enjoyed at home. The resources have been specifically chosen to promote language



and communication, including storybook and toy packs, CDs of songs and rhymes, or interactive toys such as puppets.

ECaT is as much about developing babies' and toddlers' communication as it is about supporting older children's language. Using sign language with young children is an idea that has really caught on in Luton settings. It is particularly useful with very young children, who have plenty of ideas but have not yet developed meaningful speech.

Many parents who see how involved their children are when signing in the setting become inspired to use sign language at home. This has a positive impact on parent-child relationships, as well as communication.

Case study 1

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. Three-year-old Yolanda is a perfect example of how ECaT is working to support childminders, parents and practitioners.

Yolanda speaks Spanish at home, and English with her childminder and at her pre-school. Yolanda's father explains that he particularly chose a childminder for Yolanda so she could develop socially and linguistically within a small family group. 'My daughter does not yet speak English as well as her friends, but then again they can't speak Spanish,' he explains. 'I hope and believe that it should be possible that by the time Yolanda starts school she will be speaking English as well as the other children. I hope she can improve her Spanish too. I think that the idea of starting Yolanda with a childminder first has given her the confidence to do well at pre-school.'

Yolanda also attends a weekly 'Practice and Play' drop-in session for childminders and the children they care for, at the ARC Children's Centre. Childminders Sue Sheldrick and Karen Smith lead the group, which gives childminders the opportunity to network with each other and meet with local NCMA representatives.

In my role as early language consultant I have led fun activities with the children, to stimulate language development, and to model practical ideas for the adults to try out themselves. I also provide evening training sessions on language development for groups of childminders.

Sue has found involvement in ECaT very beneficial: 'Being involved in ECaT has boosted our confidence,' she says. 'Particularly by reminding us that children learn language through talking with them during everyday experiences and fun activities, as well as through stories, rhymes and songs.'

Case study 2

It is the concept of confidence that was echoed by Suffolk childminder Kerry Sustins.

Kerry is one of three childminders in her county who were chosen to be ELLPs. 'It was a great honour to be picked for this role,' she says. 'At first I was quite concerned, because I am also studying for my foundation degree. However I find that being part of ECaT has given me lots of ideas... and plenty to write about in my assignments! Really it reinforces that working within the EYFS provides children with all the support and encouragement they need to be confident learners.'

Kerry has also received some funding to try out new ideas with three children she cares for. One of her most exciting activities is to give them a digital camera, to take their own photos. 'The children love choosing what photos to take, and when they are printed off we have great fun talking about the pictures. Even the little eight-month-old gets involved, and she loves looking through the viewfinder and can recognise photos of herself.'

Kerry feels that the children have grown in confidence as talkers and communicators, and that this is a major factor in speeding up their language development.

Kerry was part of a group of ELLPs from Suffolk who recently invited me to address their termly meeting. I was accompanied by two nursery practitioners from Luton, who

described how they lend families a puppet and a digital camera to take home for the weekend.

The children and their parents take photos of the puppet being involved in family life. When the camera comes back to nursery, the adults and children print off the photos and make a book about the puppet's weekend adventures. This has been a great stimulus for talk, and has reinforced the message that children learn language through everyday activities: as long as we talk to them about what they are doing!

In the same way as the Luton practitioners, Kerry will be expected to share her experience and ideas with other childminders. Having seen the Luton ELLPs address an audience and share their practical ideas, she now feels less daunted at the prospect of talking in a group.

'Let's put it this way,' explains Kerry, 'if children grow in confidence by practising talking in a friendly and supportive atmosphere, then it is just the same for adults. Being part of ECaT has been a huge boost to my confidence, and I will be very pleased to pass on what I have learned.'

I am going to leave the last word on ECaT to Melanie Field, childcare advice and support officer for Luton. 'The trusting relationship that childminders can build with parents, carers and children provides the security a child needs in order to explore language as they enjoy resources and experiences that are centred on their individual interests.'

'Childminders do a wonderful job and I am pleased that the role of childminding, as an important part of the childcare workforce, is being recognised.'

Further information

- For more information about Every Child a Talker, visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk
- To find out more about using sign language with young children visit www.signingbabies.co.uk

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