

# Talking inside the box

The Every Child a Talker (ECaT) project ended in March 2011 after three years. **Michael Jones** reviews his involvement with three ECaT projects

ILLUSTRATION BY **Andrew Bannecker**

**T**he last Labour Government set up Every Child a Talker (ECaT) in 2008 as a response to major concern at the high levels of 'language impoverishment' experienced by many children and the effect this had on educational achievement and life chances (Hartshorne, 2006). Local authorities throughout England received funding to develop practical projects and strategies to make an impact on children's communication from birth to five years of age.

Each participating local authority appointed an early language consultant to lead the project. Up to 30 local pre-school settings in each authority, including





childminders, took part and each received funding to support their work to improve children’s communication. I have been in the unique position of leading projects in three different parts of England, as consultant in Luton, Bedford and Thurrock. This has involved working with 90 different settings, hundreds of practitioners and parents, and thousands of children.

**Developing confidence**

The projects aimed to develop the confidence of parents and the adults who work with and care for their children. Many activities have boosted parents’ confidence by helping them understand how children learn to talk and their vital role in children’s progress. The ECaT projects have supported practitioners in a similar way and this has increased their confidence in their own work and in discussing children’s communication with parents.

My three years’ working with ECaT can be distilled into one statement, “We need to focus on promoting children’s confidence as communicators; adults have more influence than anything else in ensuring that this happens.” Two fundamental principles in adult behaviour are crucial: an understanding of how to talk with children and the adult’s role in play and learning activities. We also need to be aware that talk between children and adults is going to be very different at home than in the early years’ setting. Children

generally initiate talk at home and there is more time for parents and children to spend quality time together. There is also a shared understanding of the context of what is being talked about. Children and adults talk about what they know and this enhances understanding. This is especially important when children are talking in their mother tongue at home.

In early years’ settings, children inevitably talk in groups and there is less time for adults to spend with individuals. One of the first things children need to learn is how to compete with other children to attract and maintain an adult’s attention, in order to attempt to have a sustained conversation. Children often talk with adults while taking part in activities that are unfamiliar and this can reduce their willingness to get involved in talking.

For a child in an early years’ setting to be a successful communicator requires significant confidence and skill. Most children take this transition from home to external setting in their stride and thrive as communicators but others find this stressful. Children lacking in experience because of social difficulties, those with additional communication needs or learning English as an additional language can remain vulnerable, continue to lack confidence, and have poor wellbeing, despite the fact they are often confident talkers at home. In most settings I have visited I have found children who respond by being very quiet. These children are

*“Talk between children and adults is going to be very different at home than in the early years’ setting”*



possibly the most vulnerable, as they can be easily overlooked or actively avoid talking with adults and other children.

### Little boxes

I made it my priority to support practitioners to improve children's confidence as communicators, particularly in groups. The key is to promote children's wellbeing by strengthening the link between the early years' setting and home. In many settings this has revolved around cardboard shoeboxes. One of the most popular activities to emerge from Luton is the 'Chatterbox'. Practitioners collect toys, objects and books related to a particular theme, put them in a shoebox and encourage the children to take them home to play and talk about them with their parents.

Tracey Spence, Luton's advisory teacher for children with speech and language difficulties, originally introduced this simple but very effective concept. Practitioners experimented with the idea and most settings developed schemes where children could take home boxes that ranged from 'Three Little Pigs' and 'birthdays' to 'socks' and 'diggers'. This last box had a profound effect on a boy with autistic spectrum disorder and his family.

Lucas became very attached to the box that contained a set of plastic diggers and two non-fiction books with photos of building sites. These were the first books he had shown an interest in, as up to that point his parents had assumed that storybooks would be best to develop his language and learning. Practitioners went on to produce similar boxes for

Lucas to take home. This small event had a huge effect. Lucas grew in confidence, with an associated improvement in his wellbeing and communication. His parents' understanding and confidence also increased. The practitioners' confidence grew as they had more successes and I encouraged them to share their experience with other local settings, and nationally through celebrating the scheme in magazine articles and online.

### Box clever

Providing children with resources to take home can be a very positive experience for language development at home, but may not impact on confident talking within the setting. Practitioners in Thurrock have taken a different approach, with quite impressive results. They continued with the box theme, but gave parents an empty



'My favourite things' boxes encourage young children to talk with each other about their interests



A mum and her son discuss the contents of an 'everyday objects' box at Stanford-le-Hope Pre school, Essex

*“The parents’ job was to help the child to fill the box with favourite toys and books”*



## TALKING INSIDE THE BOX

ECaT established in 2008 in response to high levels of 'language impoverishment'

ECaT projects aimed to develop confidence of parents and adults who work with and care for children

'Chatterboxes' enable practitioners, parents and children to communicate together

Successful innovations now embedded in good practice

box to take home. The parents' job was to help the child to fill the box with favourite toys and books that they could bring into the setting to show the other children and adults.

Other settings focused on helping the children decorate their boxes before they took them home. The range of boxes has been spectacular, from one crammed with a little girl's favourite Beanie Babies to an elaborate themed 'fire station' box complete with exterior made from Fireman Sam wrapping paper. Children are then encouraged to talk about the contents of their boxes individually and in small and bigger groups, to help boost their confidence.

One school has adopted 'My favourite things' boxes as part of its process of welcoming new children. This has had a significant impact on the children's wellbeing and has helped practitioners value the children's family interests and culture, and cement a positive dialogue between home and school. Yet another setting has developed 'Everyday talk boxes', which are simply boxes that might contain nothing more than a set of kitchen utensils. Because they contain familiar and unfamiliar items, they can generate a huge amount of chat and learning.

Setting up activities like Chatterboxes has been part of an important process of enabling practitioners, parents and children to communicate together. Equally important is that they help all involved to feel successful. This feeling should be an essential ingredient of all work to improve communication, so we can leave children, practitioners and parents thinking, 'That feels good: I want to do it again' and 'That feels good: I will know what it feels like next time.' These successful innovations are now embedded in good practice and this will be valuable in ensuring that progress in communication will be sustained. ■

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### References & resources

Hartshorne M. The cost to the nation of children's poor communication. *I CAN Talk Series*. Issue 3. 2006.

For more information, visit: [www.talk4meaning.co.uk](http://www.talk4meaning.co.uk)

For detailed information about ECaT, visit: [www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/153355](http://www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/153355)



Children often express their delight at opening a 'My favourite things' box