

Early Learning and Childcare: Speech and Language Therapy - Your Thoughts

Participant data

Responses were received from 245 individuals with at least 2 responses received from each of the 32 Local Authorities in Scotland.

Complexity of children with communication needs

Most respondents reported that they are seeing an 'increase' or a 'significant increase' in the number of children with communication needs or the complexity of children with communication needs within their setting (n=219, 89%). Only 3 respondents (1%) felt that there had been a 'decrease' or 'significant decrease' in the number or complexity of children with communication needs in their settings with a further 23 respondents (9%) reporting 'no change.'

When asked to provide further information about this, many commented on seeing more children in their settings with delayed speech and language development in a range of areas including interaction skills, understanding of language, verbal communication, vocabulary and speech sound difficulties.

The main theme that emerged from responses proposing a rationale for the increasing numbers and complexity of children's communication needs was the COVID-19 pandemic and impact of lockdown on children's communication and interaction skills, with reference to children's interaction, confidence, attachment, independence and resilience.

Related to this, many respondents also commented on:

- Reduced support from other professionals due to COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on waiting time for support and later identification of needs.
- The difficulty many parents had in supporting their children during lockdown whilst balancing home working, home schooling of older siblings and their own wellbeing and mental health.

A final theme that emerged in the comments was around the increased use of technology and its impact on children's communication and interaction. Comments queried a potential over-use of devices with young children and a reduction in parent-child interaction alongside this.

Respondents who had noted an increase in the complexity of children's communication needs reported that this negatively impacts on peer interaction, behaviour, participation, learning, friendships and wellbeing.

Support for children with communication needs in Early Years settings

Just over a third of respondents reported feeling 'confident' in supporting children with communication needs (n=87, 35%) whilst nearly half reported only feeling 'somewhat confident' (n=109, 44%). Very few respondents (n=9, 4%) reported that they would describe themselves as 'completely confident' in supporting children with increasingly complex communication needs and similarly, very few reported they are 'not confident' (n=10, 4%).

Responses related to what a setting would do if they had concerns about a child's communication centred on four main themes – discuss concerns with parents; discuss concerns with colleagues; make appropriate onward referrals; and begin to implement strategies to support the child in the setting. Both general and specific strategies were referenced.

Support from Speech & Language Therapy

Just over half the respondents reported that their setting receive support from a Speech and Language Therapist (n=135, 55%). Around a third of respondents reported no support (n=92, 37%) and the remainder of respondents were unsure about support in their settings.

Of those who did report that they receive support, frequent support was rarely reported with less than a tenth of respondents receiving weekly or fortnightly support respectively (weekly: n=16, 8%, fortnightly: n=19, 9%). Over a quarter of respondents reported no contact (n=56, 27%) with a further 20% reporting that contact with their Speech and Language Therapist was only every 6 months.

When a setting did receive support from a Speech and Language Therapist, two-thirds reported that this was 'valuable' or 'highly valuable' (n=145, 66%). Settings receiving more frequent support tended to rate the support received as 'highly valuable' more often than settings that received less frequent or no support - over two-thirds (68%) of settings who received weekly or fortnightly support rated this as 'highly valuable' compared to only 40% of those receiving monthly input, 29% of those receiving 6-monthly input and 14% of those who were not currently receiving any support. No respondents felt the support from Speech and Language Therapy was of no value.

What else would help support children with communication needs in Early Years settings?

190 respondents provided a response about what else might be beneficial in supporting children with communication needs in Early Years settings and three main themes emerged:

Access to training

- Training for Early Years staff and parents; general training to develop awareness of communication needs and more specific training to support individual or groups of children with communication needs.

Speech & Language Therapy input

- Access to more regular Speech and Language Therapy input in settings
- Speech and Language Therapy staff to be based in Early Years settings
- An acknowledgement that staff based in Early Years settings need to be given time to fully engage in SLT assessment and intervention for the children they support
- The need for input to be more timely and to support earlier identification of needs

Staffing

- More staff required in Early Years settings to support children with communication needs
- Increased 1:1 time needed for children with the most complex communication needs
- Higher staff to child ratios to enable better support
- The need for communication champions or someone with additional responsibility for children with communication needs to be based within Early Years settings

Final comments

Several respondents left a final additional comment. Many comments echoed early topics with the main theme being the significant impact of COVID-19 on children's communication needs.

Some comments praised the Speech and Language Therapy support their setting had received but many comments repeated the earlier theme around the level of Speech and Language Therapy input, commenting that more time and input is needed, but that there is a need for post-COVID recovery plans to consider joint working between EY settings, parents and SLT.