

RCSLT MANIFESTO BRIEFING - CHILDREN



CHILDREN - Ensure that every child is school-ready by having the best possible speech, language and communication skills to help them achieve their full potential, make friends and enjoy learning.

WE ARE CALLING ON OUR POLITICAL PARTIES TO:

- Empower parents and carers to give children in Northern Ireland the best start in life through universal public health messages about the importance of and ways to develop appropriate speech, language and communication skills.
- Ensure that children with complex difficulties get access to the services they need to ensure early diagnosis and effective support of their speech, language, communication and feeding skills.

THE BACKGROUND

Early language development is crucial to the development of children's literacy skills, and is a key indicator of their educational success. The ability to communicate shapes children and young people's health and wellbeing, and also their outcomes in later life. However as many as 50% of children from deprived backgrounds commence school with poor language skills. If their difficulties are unresolved at 5:5 years of age these children are at significant risk for literacy difficulties. 'A language problem in Key Stage 1 becomes a literacy problem in Key Stage 2, becomes a behaviour problem in Key Stage 3' (Jean Gross, Communication Champion).

A government review of speech and language therapy services for children and young people in England highlighted that... 'early identification and intervention are essential to avoid poor social and economic outcomes in later life. The evidence that early intervention brings benefits, and its absence incurs costs, is there for all to see. The task is to act on that evidence systematically, in delivering policy and allocating resources.'



IN NORTHERN IRELAND

- In 2010 a study in the Colin area of Belfast found 41% of children had a language difficulty.
- In 2014 a project called 'Now you're talking Fermanagh' found 57% of nursery school children in the three most deprived areas outside of Sure Start wards (therefore not in receipt of early intervention programmes) had speech and language difficulties.
- Early language programmes such as the case study example below, should be seen as part of the core educational offer for all children, and funded accordingly.

2 Rhymes by 2: An early language partnership approach in Downpatrick (2014)

Local studies revealed that 46% of children in Downpatrick were found to be entering P1 with a language delay. The 2 Rhymes by 2 programme is a community-wide initiative run in a partnership between the Health and Social Care Trust, the Public Health Agency (PHA) and Sure Start. It is designed to engage parents and involves health visitors, speech and language therapists (SLTs), family support workers and other Sure Start staff.

It used a series of key messages to help parents recognise the value of communication and support its development from birth to 2 years. Parents were provided with information in 'bite sized' chunks at regular intervals in different ways, i.e. face to face, DVD, leaflets, a booklet, text prompts and Facebook. There is a focus on the frequency of parental engagement in nursery rhymes and language development. To ensure that the programme was accessible across the community it was launched with a media, poster and advertising campaign on the local buses and in appropriate facilities.

Results from the programme's evaluation, undertaken by the University of Sheffield, indicate positive changes in parents' interaction with their babies along with increased parental empowerment and awareness of their role in communication development.

THE ECONOMIC BENEFIT

- An SLT early intervention strategy would have profound benefits for the NI economy saving up to £24.2million per year.

For further information and a full list of references please contact: