



Debate on the Inter-ministerial Group on Early Years Family Support 16 July 2019

1. Executive Summary

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) welcomed the establishment of a cross-government working group to improve Early Years Family Support.

We agree with Andrea Leadsom MP that:

The first 1,001 days, and getting it right in the early years period, has such far-reaching consequences for children's mental health, self-confidence, ability to learn and propensity to get into a gang or a life of knife crime or addiction. It is absolutely vital.¹

Communication skills are fundamental and foundational in all of these areas. It is essential, therefore, that early language and communication are prioritised as part of any plans to improve Early Years Family Support:

- Communication is a fundamental life skill, which directly impacts on children's school readiness, their academic achievement, wellbeing and life chances.
- The first year of a child's life is crucial for language development; if the child's language and communication environment in the first 1,001 days is lacking their development will be impacted and certain skills may be permanently affected.

At a local level, a more joined-up and long-term approach to commissioning provision in the early years is needed, which takes into account the costs and outcomes for the whole system and society in the longer term.

Speech and language therapists play a crucial role in supporting early language and communication, including through working with children directly and their families, training early years practitioners and other education, health and care professionals.

2. Communication is crucial

Communication is a fundamental life skill. Evidence clearly demonstrates the impact of early language development, and the consequences of not supporting children's early language, on a range of outcomes in childhood and later in life:

- **School readiness:** Children's vocabulary and ability to talk in two-to-three word sentences at the age of two is a strong predictor of school readiness at four.²
- **Educational attainment:** Language skills at age five are the most important factor in reaching the expected levels in English and maths at age 11, more important than poverty or parental education.³
- **Wellbeing and life chances:** Children with poor vocabulary skills at age five are three times as likely as their peers to have mental health problems in adulthood, and twice as likely to be unemployed.⁴

It is particularly important that language and communication is prioritised during a child's first 1,001 days, given that the first year of a child's life is a crucial time for language development.⁵ The development of language skills depends on exposure to both verbal and

non-verbal communication in the first few years, when large amounts of input helps children to acquire the complex rules of language. If this input is lacking then certain skills may be permanently affected.

Early language and communication must also be prioritised as part of the solution to addressing the gaps in outcomes associated with social disadvantage. Language development (alongside memory development) is disproportionately impacted by poverty;⁶ income based gaps are already present at 18 months with higher-income children processing language at a significantly faster rate than their lower income peers.⁷ By the time children start school, around 50% of those in areas of social disadvantage have delayed language or other identified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).⁸

It is important to recognise that while family income is associated with language development, it does not determine it. Activities that improve a child's home communication environment, such as the early ownership of books, trips to the library, and parents teaching a range of activities, are all important predictors of expressive language development at age two and at school entry.⁹ Efforts to 'catch up' during the pre-school years are not as impactful as providing an enriched home learning environment from the start.¹⁰

Evidence also indicates that the numbers of children with delayed language or other SLCN in the early years is increasing:

- Findings from a 2017 survey by the Institute of Health Visiting show that 74% of health visitors have seen a rise in the number of children with delayed speech or communication in the past two years.¹¹
- 86% of school leaders believe the issue of school readiness has become worse over the past five years; speech, language and communication was their issue of greatest concern.¹²

3. Current challenges

Access to speech and language therapy in the first 1,001 days

A report from the Children's Commissioner for England – *We need to talk – access to speech and language therapy* - published in June 2019 found enormous levels of variation in reported spending on children's speech and language therapy, with more than half of areas reporting a real-terms reduction in spending over the last three years.¹³

In a 2017 survey of speech and language therapists,¹⁴ 43% of respondents said that speech and language therapy support was not being commissioned for children aged 0-2. When asked to expand upon the reasons for this, respondents highlighted reductions in funding for early intervention and preventative work.

"Our early years service has been stripped back to the point where it is difficult for the under threes to get seen by a speech and language therapist. Previously we were commissioned to provide a preventative early years service rather than targeted, however this is no longer commissioned... I expect to see a greater need for targeted [speech and language therapy] in the 3-11 age group as their needs are not being addressed as early as possible". *Speech and language therapist*

National and local investment

The evidence is clear that early identification and intervention to support children's speech, language and communication is a well-evidenced, cost-effective approach shown to result in longer term economic benefits.¹⁵ However, as we reported last year in *Bercow: Ten Years On* (a review of provision in England for children and young people with SLCN) commissioners are too often forced to focus on the short term, rather than planning based on longer term impacts and costs. In order to make the case for investment locally,

commissioners need to be convinced that their spending will result in financial savings within their own budget and commissioning cycle – telling a local authority commissioner that their investment in the early years will result in savings for the health, education and justice systems over the next 10-15 years is unlikely to be persuasive. We need to take a more joined-up and long-term approach which takes into account the costs and outcomes for the whole system and society in both the medium and long term.

National and local leadership

Bercow: Ten Years On found a lack of leadership and absence of a cohesive approach for children and young people at a national level, impacting on the priority given at a local level.¹⁶ In places with strong and committed local leaders, who drive shared responsibility and buy in, children and young people with SLCN and their families were better supported; this good practice should be replicated nationwide.

4. Examples of good practice

Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership

This is part of the first wave of integrated care systems. As part of their five year plan to improve health and social care, they have committed to delivering integrated commissioning and provision across all early years services, including a focus on speech, communication and language. With key input from the consultant speech and language therapist, they have worked with Greater Manchester Combined Authority to develop an Early Years Speech, Language and Communication Pathway and Specification. The Pathway has introduced an additional recommended language assessment at the age of 18 months, prior to the statutory two year check, to enable earlier and more accurate identification of SLCN. The specification ensures that communication and language is embedded in all aspects of planning, including working with parents, and involves a rolling programme of training to develop the workforce competencies in speech, language and communication.

Stoke Speaks Out

This is a multi-agency initiative to tackle the high incidence of delayed language in Stoke-on-Trent. In 2002 a study by the Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Partnership Trust Speech and Language Therapy Department indicated that a large proportion of children were entering nursery with delayed language skills. With strong local leadership, this city-wide strategy offered training and support for all practitioners working with children under seven and their families.

By 2010, six years after the launch of the programme, the percentage of children entering nursery with delayed language had reduced from 64% to 39% of children. A return-on-investment analysis of Stoke Speaks Out, conducted by the New Economics Foundation, has demonstrated the contribution that the programme makes to improved school readiness for children at age five; their analysis suggests that Stoke Speaks Out provided a positive return on investment so that for every £1 invested in the programme, £1.19 worth of value is created.¹⁷ This ROI is based on the achievement of one key outcome, improved school readiness at age 5, and the associated fiscal savings. In the long term, including long term outcomes such as the reduced likelihood of being not in employment, education or training, the ROI suggests that Stoke Speaks Out could create savings of £4.26 for every £1 invested in the programme.

Flying Start

This is part of the Welsh Government's early years programme for families with children under four years of age living in disadvantaged areas of Wales. The programme has

included speech, language and communication as one of its four key elements, which has involved:

- Seconding a speech and language therapist into Welsh Government to write the programme guidance on speech, language and communication;
- Employing speech and language therapists as a core part of every Flying Start team in Wales.

This relatively small investment is having a huge impact on the outcomes of young children in Flying Start areas. In 2015 Bridgend Flying Start speech and language therapists won an NHS Wales award for their work in reducing delayed language in two and three year olds. Out of over 600 children screened on starting nursery, 73% were assessed as having significantly delayed language which would impact on future learning development. After the interventions, delivered by nursery staff and planned and supported by speech and language therapists, 68% of the children with the most delayed language had improved.¹⁸

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