THE IMPORTANCE OF SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DURING THE EARLY YEARS

What is the issue?

Communication and language skills are the foundation for children’s learning and key to their life chances. In some parts of the UK - particularly areas of social disadvantage, over 50% of children start school without essential communication skills. These skills are the vehicle for learning, making friends and succeeding in life.

The early years are a crucial time in children’s speech, language and communication development.

- 75% of a child’s brain growth has occurred by the age of 2 and by 22 months a child’s development can predict outcomes at the age of 26
- By the age of 5, a child’s vocabulary is a strong predictor of their educational success and outcomes at the age of 30

The revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) 2012 framework - designed to ensure children are ready for school - recognises communication and language as one of the three prime areas for learning and development.

A 2012 Ofsted report highlights that despite the improvement in early years provision since 2008, too many children are still entering school without the basic skills the need to be ready to learn.

The report from Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills: Early years shows on average 34% of children are not working securely in communication, language and literacy by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage – that's 200 000 children per year!

How do children learn to communicate?

Right from birth, adults are key in supporting the development of language skills. Much of this help comes from a close, trusted adult who responds to babies’ and toddlers’ attempts to communicate and who provides a stimulating environment.

Children learn and develop well in enabling environments, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers.

Children begin to understand words before they can say them. They then learn how to say these words and how to put them together to make sentences.

Children develop speech, language and communication skills at different rates. Some develop quickly, while others may take longer and some may need additional support.

Children need to:

- Learn to understand words, sentences and conversations. This is often called ‘receptive language’
- Learn how to talk using words and sentences. This is often called ‘expressive language’
- Know how to use their language socially. For example, listening as well as talking, or talking to a teacher differently than to a friend. This is often called ‘pragmatic language’
- Say speech sounds correctly so they can be understood by others
How does I CAN support children in the Early Years?

I CAN has a range of evidenced-solutions to support the development of communication for children in their early years. These include:

- **Early Talk 0-5** - I CAN’s highly successful communication and language programme, aimed at the early years workforce in partnership with parents. *Early Talk 0-5 years* training courses and accreditation programmes have been independently evaluated as enhancing the learning environment for all children, with a long-term positive impact on staff and practice.

- **Nuffield Early Language Intervention** - An evidenced-based oral language intervention programme for children in nursery and reception classes. The intervention includes self-contained programmes for children in nursery settings and in the reception class of primary school. It is the only language intervention programme for this age group that has been evaluated using a robust randomised controlled trial.

- **Early Language Development Programme (ELDP)** - Aims to boost the language skills of all children aged 0-5, particularly those at risk of language delay. The three year programme uses a cascade training format to give parents and practitioners the skills and knowledge to support the development of speech, language and communication in the early years.

- **A range of short courses** including:
  - Hanen: It Takes Two to Talk
  - Hanen: Learning Language and Loving It
  - Parents in Partnership for Supporting Communication in Under 3’s
  - Working with Under 3’s – Positive approaches to Supporting Communication Development

- **A range of resources to support parents and practitioners** including:
  - **Early Talkers boxset** – Beautifully illustrated activity cards and fun activities for parents and practitioners that support babies, toddlers and young children in learning to talk.
  - **Progress Check: Communication and Language** – For early years practitioners to share with parents of children between 24 - 36 months. The resource gives parents information on their child’s language and communication developments in attention and listening, understanding, talk and speech sounds and social communication. It also helps practitioners meet the EYFS requirement for written information to parents of children between 2 and 3 years.
  - **Ready Steady Talk activity book** – Great games to help children get ready for pre-school and beyond. Highly recommended by early years professionals, this fun-filled activity pack helps children develop speech and language skills.

Where can people go for help?

Information and advice can be found at:

- [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)
- [www.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk)
- [www.ican.org.uk/earlytalk](http://www.ican.org.uk/earlytalk)
- [www.ican.org.uk/nuffield](http://www.ican.org.uk/nuffield)
- [http://eldp.talkingpoint.org.uk](http://eldp.talkingpoint.org.uk)

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