

Introduction

“...A hundred. Always a hundred ways of listening, of marveling, of loving a hundred joys, for singing and understanding, a hundred worlds to discover, a hundred worlds to invent, a hundred worlds to dream...”¹

In the United Kingdom, over one million children have some form of speech, language and communication difficulty. Life outcomes for these children are very much dependent on the type of care and support they receive within their first three years of life. To address these difficulties, providers of early years care and education need to work with other agencies to improve speech, language and communication outcomes for young children through effective application of the early years curriculum and national and local initiatives.

Whilst communication may appear simple, its acquisition can be complex. The non-verbal messages which provide children with vital clues to support their language development can easily be missed or misinterpreted in the support they receive from their parents and other adults, either because the messages are not clear or because they are not present in their learning environments. Psychological and physical barriers also exist which make it harder for both children and adults to engage with early years providers.

Research has found that early intervention and support is especially relevant for those children who face intergenerational deprivation, yet these children may not receive adequate support because their parents may form part of the 5.1 million (15%) adults in England who have literacy difficulties.² Research also indicates that parents who are not confident with their literacy skills are less able to support their children’s language and literacy development, so early intervention and support for these children is crucial.³

Language Links works on the principle that the most effective learning is achieved through partnership and everyone learns more effectively through observation and interaction with an environment that is easy to ‘read’ and follow. In addition, where good practice is modelled and supported in an early years environment, then it is more likely to be copied and replicated in the child’s home.

A communication rich environment is one that will help:

- provide clear environmental clues to support language and literacy skills;
- inform environmental understanding and navigation;
- encourage confidence and independence;
- promote creativity, social interaction and the ability to solve problems;
- model and scaffold good practice;
- eradicate a ‘closed’ and unwelcoming ambience; and
- build confidence and skills in parents using English as an additional language and those with literacy challenges.

Language Links provides an environmental checklist and good practice guide to be used alongside the Early Years Foundation Stage framework. It will help identify and address areas of the learning environment that may be overlooked, such as inaccessible entrances, crowded notice boards and tired-looking home corners. This approach is particularly helpful to parents who are struggling with their own language and literacy challenges and will help early years providers to work towards creating optimum conditions for intergenerational learning; helping people of all ages learn together and from each other.

“Every time you hear language you develop pathways in the brain.”⁴

Brain development

The first three years of life are a period of rapid growth and a critical window of opportunity for children’s learning and development. What happens to a child during this time can directly influence the development of their brain, future learning and well-being.

Research has shown that environmental conditions, early attachments and experiences can help shape neural pathways in the brain, which determine the strength or weakness of the brain’s ‘architecture’.⁵ These ‘pathways’ develop and adjust in response to each new experience; each time an experience is repeated a pathway becomes stronger until the route is eventually etched into the brain, and by the time the child reaches the age of three the architecture of the brain has more or less been constructed.

Early learning

Formal education is not the start of a child’s learning, because learning starts from when the child is in the womb. Although most brain growth, development and learning happens after birth, the influence of early experiences on the developing brain begins within weeks of conception. At sixteen weeks, the foetal brain starts to receive ‘messages’ from the eyes and ears which are picking up signals from outside the womb. By the time the foetus has reached full term it has developed the ability to recognise familiar sounds and from birth may even show a preference for familiar ‘rhythms and sounds of language’⁶; so much so, that within hours of being born, many babies can pick out the familiar sound of their mother’s voice above a vast range of others.

“The entire human environment is critical in encouraging the relationships and strategies that make a difference for infants and toddlers as they learn to read their world. Words, stories, books, and print weave a fabric for everyday life that enfolds young children and nurtures them as talkers, readers, and writers.”⁷

Experiences

From birth, a child’s learning is a result of their interaction with people and the environment. Babies are primed to learn from these, both positive and negative experiences, and if events occur frequently enough the key messages from these experiences will be stored and ‘hard wired’ into the child’s brain.

From early on in life babies start to accumulate and store a vast bank of information and knowledge just by observing daily routines. The smallest details are noted: shapes and colours of toys, symbols and images on food packaging and magazines, lettering and logos on clothing, and conversations and behaviours of family members. These experiences provide the child with valuable clues about how the world works and how to interact with that world and the people around them.

Within six months of birth, a child starts to recognise sounds, and associates them with objects and ideas. With the support of a caring adult, the child then learns to translate these sounds into language (www.niace.org.uk/current-work/readability). The development of these early language skills is especially important because they underpin other interrelated and interdependent areas of development and learning, including reading and writing.

By the age of two, most children have already become competent observers, driven by their natural curiosity and desire to learn. They are able to process visual images and real objects in the environment and with adult support are able to make meaningful connections with language. As a result they become more confident and proficient communicators.

¹Edwards, C., Gandini, L. & Forman, G. (Eds.) (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children* Italy: Reggio Emilia.

²Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2012) *2011 Skills for Life Survey: A Survey of Literacy, Numeracy and ICT Levels in England* London: BIS.

³Bynner, J. & Parsons, S. (2006) *New Light on Literacy and Numeracy: Summary Report* London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.

⁴Wolf, M. (2008) *Proust and the Squid: The Story of Science and the Reading Brain*, London: Icon Books.

⁵National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) *The Timing and Quality of Early Experiences Combine to Shape Brain Architecture: Working Paper No. 5* Cambridge, US: Harvard University.

⁶Karmiloff, K. & Karmiloff-Smith, A. (2001) *Pathways to Language: From Fetus to Adolescent* Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press.

⁷Regalado, M., Goldenberg, C. & Appel, E. (2001) *Building Community Systems for Young Children: Reading and Early Literacy*. In Halfon, N. Shulman, E. & Hochstein, M. (Eds) California, US: UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities.



Environmental review

Rationale for a review

A well-organised and well-presented early years environment with supportive caring staff will enhance the educational pedagogy of the provision and provide a model of good practice that can be replicated in the child's home. The structure, composition and use of both the external and internal environments contribute to the model and act as a 'third teacher', (www.reggiokids.com/the_reggio_approach.html), conveying valuable clues and messages as to what things are and their function. An environmental review will help identify and address environmental factors and specific communication barriers in early years environments, especially for parents and children who are new to the provision.

The environmental review covers all the critical elements of the early years environment:

- outdoor areas and entrances: for example, signage, layout and outside playing area;
- internal areas: for example, layout, aesthetic qualities, notice boards, wall displays, noise and light; and
- resources: for example, children's literature, equipment and toys.

It is recommended to carry out a short preliminary activity ahead of the review: taking a walk around all internal and external areas of the early years environment, taking photographs from both an adult's and a child's perspective. These images will help answer the questions on the Environmental Checklist (Appendix 1). By answering all questions and reviewing the results, providers can determine what further action is needed and whether adjustments need to be made. It can be tempting to conclude that the environment is fine but it is critically important that the review is carried out honestly and objectively to avoid ineffective practice continuing. Where the findings of the review do not deem adjustments necessary, then a future review date should be set for the following year. The following chapters of this workbook provide guidance on making relevant adjustments. Undertaking the review effectively should not only provide benefits for parents and children's outcomes, but can contribute towards improved Ofsted ratings, as well as partnership working with other agencies, including local authorities.