



“Speech and Language Therapy supporting Prevention and Early Intervention in North Ayrshire (SPIN)”

Name and job title of Authors: Lynne McGloin; Shona Fletcher

Email: spin@aapct.scot.nhs.uk

Description

The evidence shows that early support for speech, language and communication can have impact on children and families strengthening wellbeing and learning regardless of socio-economic factors. Early communication and language skills are responsive to early support leading to the possibility of improved health and employment outcomes for individuals and reduced costs to society as a result.

In April 2014, North Ayrshire Council, Scotland funded two whole-time-equivalent Speech and Language Therapist posts to specifically focus on developing and embedding strategies to support the development of speech, language and communication skills in pre-school children. This funding has been used to deliver universal and targeted activities and interventions that build capacity in Early Years Establishments, with practitioners, parents and communities, working alongside the specialist Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) team.

The SPIN team promotes community-wide strategies which build the capacity of parents and the children’s workforce, allowing the specialist SLT team to focus more time on the children who need to access specialist services. This is underpinned by the principles behind Realising the Ambition (2020)¹ that every child will have the best possible start in life with AHP services using an asset-

based approach to aid prevention through universal services and supportive nurturing environments at home, nursery and school.

Introduction and Context

Speech, language and communication is the most commonly identified developmental concern at both 13-15 month and 27-30-month child health review in Ayrshire & Arran. (HEYS dashboard, 2013-14 data)²

Communication is the number one skill in life. The ability to communicate is fundamental to learning, to relationships, and to life chances. More than 10% of all children and young people, or over 1.4 million in the UK have communication difficulties¹; too many of whom are not getting the support they need (Bercow, 2018)³.

Current evidence indicates that the risks associated with language difficulties can be mitigated by early identification and intervention.

Children whose language difficulties are resolved by 5½ years are more likely to go on to develop good reading and spelling skills and keep pace with peers, achieving on a par with children without a history of language disorder by the end of schooling (Conti-Ramsden, 2009)⁴.

The aims of the project were to: upskill and build capacity in all those who are in closest proximity to the child; help both families and practitioners create communication friendly environments to nurture language development and making sure that children and families receive the right level of support at the earliest stage.

Supporting children's communication development is everyone's responsibility, and the role that Early Childhood Centres (ECCs), and those who work in them have in helping all children to reach their communicative potential should not be underestimated. It is vital that staff who work with children are aware of the importance of Speech, Language and Communication (SLC), its link to learning and how they can support it.

This universal early year's approach is changing the way services are delivered across North Ayrshire, with significant impact on early years staff and the early years environment. The work of the project therefore impacts on younger children's speech, language and communication skills at an age where improvement is most likely to occur.

Method

Early Years Practitioners are uniquely placed to support language and communication development in young children. By working together with early years staff, we can provide language rich environments which support all children. The SPIN team launched an initiative to recruit a 'Communication Champion' (CC) from each early years establishment across North Ayrshire - a CC being an early years practitioner who would receive additional training from speech and language therapy and drive forward initiatives to promote the development of language and communication skills within their establishment.

Examples of regular initiatives led by CCs and supported by the SPIN team include:

- Developing 'Communication Boards' that display top tips on speech and language development for parents
- Supporting practitioners to run small group activities and targeted support for children with identified delay or difficulty
- Supporting practitioners to record and track progress on speech, language and communication goals
- Building language and communication development into parent activities

The SPIN team offer a wide range of training opportunities that are open to all staff working within the early years sector with coaching opportunities also available to support staff to embed strategies that promote speech, language and communication skills.

The SPIN approach has parent work at the centre of it. Parent work has been adapted to meet the needs of all families across North Ayrshire and includes

Hanen It Takes Two to Talk parent programme, parent workshops, drop in sessions, community events and small targeted groups.

SPIN work alongside the specialist SLT team to offer universal services to parents and carers. A SLT telephone helpline, webinars and virtual drop-in sessions are available for parents/carers to access advice and information from the SLT service

Outcomes

SPIN is actively promoting and encouraging a move towards self-management as well as facilitating more appropriate referrals to the SLT service. This Communication Champion network approach builds capacity in the children's workforce as it promotes sustained professional development that changes adults' interactions with children and helps them provide communication-supportive environments (Gascoigne, 2012)⁵

In terms of training for Early Years staff, attendance rates are high and confidence in supporting children's speech, language and communication skills is increasing. In North Ayrshire (February 2022) 98% of Early Years Establishments have a nominated Communication Champion. Active Communication Champions report high levels of impact on their own and other's practice, and on the children's skills. The number of Champions has remained consistent since 2016 and there are ongoing systems to track activity and impact of the communication champion role.

"Over the duration of the group staff observed positive changes in parent & carer/child interactions. During discussions with individual parents/carers they spoke confidently about the strategies they were using with their child and the impact it was having. Staff felt well supported by the SPIN team and it was great to see staff and parents/carers using the same approaches." (Deputy Head, North Ayrshire Early Years Centre, describing their observations after SPIN delivered a parent/carer programme).

"Staff training has positively impacted on the children's language development and communication skills. We will continue to use key strategies to ensure that the children in our Early Years Centre are supported effectively. It's such a worthwhile thing to do." (North Ayrshire Communication Champion).

“I have been surprised throughout the course how small changes to daily life and basic adaptations to how I communicate with my son have made life easier for us all as a family and is proving to help him progress with both his speech and understanding.”. (A parent, who attended Hanen It Takes Two to Talk parent programme).

Key Learning Points

As SPIN moves into its eighth year of existence there have been many changes; both intrinsic and extrinsic. The SPIN team, by the nature of its being has to be flexible, adaptable and able to listen to and work with many different partners.

During Covid restrictions when the Early Childhood Centres were closed the SPIN team adapted to the needs of the Centres. The team offered CCs monthly virtual drop ins via Microsoft Teams giving the CCs an opportunity to speak to a member of the SPIN team for advice about how to support children’s speech, language and communication in their establishments and often the conversations were to provide reassurance that they were doing the right thing.

Face to face trainings for Early Years practitioners and parents were adapted to being delivered virtually covering topics such as: early language strategies, phonological awareness, Autism Spectrum Disorder and attention and listening.

The SPIN team have been involved in developing virtual drop in sessions and the telephone helpline to ensure that advice and information is open to all with a concern about a child’s speech, language and communication in North Ayrshire. This is regularly used by parents/carers and professionals to access advice and support. These initiatives also help the wider speech and language therapy team manage requests for assistance and are well placed to signpost families to the most appropriate levels of support.

Key learning points are:

- Many parents/carers and practitioners found virtual trainings more accessible as the team covers a large rural geographical area

- Virtual training meant that more places on courses were available
Attendance rates were higher and more consistent especially for parent/carer programmes
- The early years workforce is fluid and the SPIN team has to be flexible in its approach to maintain a strong Communication Champion network
- Although delivering area wide initiatives it is important to recognize that each establishment and their families have individual strengths and challenges particularly with the introduction of 1140 hours of childcare for 3 and 4 year old in Scotland.

Long-term impact:

In order to measure long term impact of this approach, an annual audit is completed by Communication Champions to measure their level of activity and impact on practitioners, children and families. As of 2026, 96% of Early Years Establishments have an active Communication Champion, showing sustainability of the model.

Helpline and drop-in data is gathered on a monthly basis to track levels of demand and geographical patterns to allow resources to be aligned to demand and need.

References

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