



Title: *'Chat with Me' book series: 3 books that support parents to share books and extend conversations with their 2-3 year olds in Sure Start Areas in Belfast*

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Description

The 3 books 'Chat with Me'; 'Chat with Me at Christmas'; Chat with Me about Preschool' provide tools that make it easier for parents to interact with their children and to share books together. They also give parents ideas about opportunities to chat with their child throughout the day.

They are designed around research findings that 'contingent talk'¹ and 'conversational turns'² are key ingredients in positive parent child interactions leading to improved language development and enhancing parent/child relationships*.

(*Sure Start operates in the top 25% most deprived ward areas in Northern Ireland. Research clearly identifies speech, language and communication need as being a risk to children living in areas of social deprivation and so Sure Start SLTs aim to support parents to provide language rich environments.)

Each double page spread has the same layout: the left page is a composite picture of the part of the day described by the 4 lines of text. These 4 lines can be read if desired. They can also be sung. The right page contains detail relating to the main picture, providing more opportunities for conversation. On the back of each book a QR code links to a YouTube video of the book and accompanying song (the words in the book). A second QR code links to a Parent/Staff Guide explaining how to use the book i.e. don't worry about reading the words; notice what your child is interested in and chat about that.

There are also 4 short videos (less than 2 minutes) that explain how to get the most from the books.

Context

One of Sure Start's overarching objectives is to improve language skills of children in Sure Start areas and so help end the intergenerational cycle of language deprivation. In Sure Starts in BHSCCT area, around 70% of children entering the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds have delays in speech, language and communication. The role of the Sure Start SLT is to improve the language skills of children living in Sure Start areas by increasing the relevant knowledge and skills of those most proximal to the child i.e. parents, Sure Start staff, and members of the community.

Insights from parents in a previous coproduction highlighted factors that led to behaviour change i.e. the importance of a) giving parents tools to help them do things differently rather than just giving advice and b) giving something that makes it easier to get through the day. The books were developed to provide parents with a tool to

- Increase amount they share books with their children
- Increase parent/child conversation when sharing books together
- increase the variety of ways to extend the topic eg talking about the past of future
- Encourage parents to sing/make up songs with their children
- Provide ideas about things they could do with their children

They were also designed to provide a tool that supports staff in developing their skill to give children language they can learn from. This had been identified by the Sure Start SLT and Early Years staff as an area that staff find difficult, particularly for those who are already using sentences. Staff observations, reflections and progress monitoring data all suggested that it was more difficult for staff to extend the topic when children were already using sentences.

Method

Partnerships with an artist and a music therapist were established; the objectives were shared with these partners and the concept of a 'Chat with Me' book evolved. Sure Start parents of 2-3 year old children were contacted by trusted Sure Start staff and asked to share topics/activities that created the best conversations with their children. Parents' suggestions were grouped into themes to form the basis of the illustrations and text for the book. The lyrics/text were written by SLTs and Music Therapist in consultation with the artist who then created detailed illustrations with opportunities for conversation. Using research evidence³, 9 ways were identified that adults can provide language children can learn from. Each illustration needed to provide clear opportunities for these types of responses. Information on these 9 types of responses formed the basis of the parent/staff guide and of staff training.

The Music Therapist composed a melody so the text in the book could also be sung, reinforcing key Sure Start messages to smile, talk, laugh and sing anytime. On the back of the book, 2 QR codes link to

- a YouTube video of the book being sung
- a Page Tiger Parent/Staff Guide.

A trusted staff member introduces the book to parents along with explanations of key principles

- You don't have to read the words
- Notice what your child is interested in and chat about that

Following evidence of behavior change, it was decided to create 2 more books: Chat with Me at Christmas and Chat with Me about Preschool (to support transitions). The working group for the preschool book included the original core group and also a parent, a Sure Start Early Learning Coordinator and a Nursery School Principal. This ensured the book covered the most important messages about supporting a child's transition to preschool.

Outcomes

Aim 1 – Increase amount parents share books with their children

Aim 2 - Increase parent/child conversation when sharing books together

Aim 3 - increase the variety of ways to extend the topic eg talking about the past of future

Aim 4 - Encourage parents to sing/make up songs with their children

Aim 5 - Provide ideas about things they could do with their children

Parent outcomes are being gathered in 3 ways (as per RCSLT Framework: Measuring Outcomes outside individualized care, June 2021)⁴.

- a) Quantity of information shared
Approx 500 children received a copy of each book in the 21/22 year in Belfast area. Every library in NI also has a copy of each book.
Views at Nov 2022
Chat with Me song video on YouTube – 705
Chat with Me Parent Guide – 527
Chat with Me at Christmas song on YouTube – 273
Chat with Me at Christmas Kitchen Disco – 322
Chat with Me about Preschool song on YouTube – 275
Chat with me about Preschool Parent guide – 222

- b) Parent report of behaviour change as captured by parent questionnaire (**49 parents responded to the initial questionnaire. Further feedback was received from Parent feedback questionnaires following Parent Workshops or Parent Programmes**)
 - 98% said they share books more often since receiving the book
 - 98% said the books helped them to chat more when sharing books
 - 98% said the books had given them ideas about things to do with their child
 - 77% said they had used the Christmas Kitchen Disco to dance and sing with their child
 - parent comments give evidence of behavior change eg ‘when I read other books to my child now I just don’t read the words, I ask him questions and tell him things that we see in the picture’; ‘she never used to sit during a book and now we would read this nearly every night’.

- c) Individual examples of change as captured by staff observations and parent stories – feedback from a Family Support Worker
“A Grandmother was given a Chat with Me book. She has poor literacy and would tend to steer clear of books because of this.
When she came back to parent and toddlers she said that she really liked the book, she expressed that she was less intimidated with the book due to the colourful pictures and how expressive/real the pictures were so she felt that she could read her grandchild the story using her own words. She also said that it has given her the confidence to read other books to her grandchild using the pictures”

Aim 6 – Provide a tool that supports staff in developing their skill to give children language they can learn from.

Work in this area was delayed due to the impact of Covid – SLT support to staff had to focus on ‘back to basics’ and supporting signposting for the many children presenting with speech, language and communication need who were not known to any service. In a few Sure Starts, SLTs were able to do

some work on this aim and observations indicated more intentional planning for language/conversations when planning activities.

Key learning points

- Parents are most likely to do something if they are not just told what to do, but given a tool to help them do it (insight given by East Belfast parents in previous codesign group). The books provide a tool to make it easier for parents to have a conversation with their child.
- Involving parents e.g. getting ideas for the scenes in the books, makes a difference. The parents know what their children are interested in.
- Parents engaged with the book when it was given by a trusted person e.g. Family Support Worker or Early Years Practitioner. Greatest behavior change seemed to occur when the book was integrated into a Parent/Child Programme rather than just handed out.
- Effective partnerships are crucial – the artist and Music Therapist were selected because they were known to have an interest in and deep understanding of this area of work. They were key to the whole development process rather than simply being given a ‘brief’ to work to.
- Resources like these books have added value when they are part of an overall strategy and link to other messages that parents have received e.g. ‘Anytime is Chatting Time’; smile, talk, laugh, sing and share stories anytime.
- Parents need more specific support to make up songs with their child to help make tricky times easier and to enrich the language environment. A specific piece of work around this is now in progress.
- There is an appetite for these books. They have been purchased by Sure Starts across Northern Ireland and by many Nursery and Pre Schools. An Irish Language version has now been created and is used in all Irish medium Preschools in Belfast area.

References

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4. RCSLT (2021). Measuring outcomes outside individualised care. Available at <https://www.rcslt.org/members/delivering-quality-services/outcome-measurement/outside-individualised-care/>