



Early Years Communication and Language Pathway in Manchester

Description

The Early Years Communication and Language pathway aims to use the WellComm Speech and Language Toolkit¹ to identify children's language levels and create supportive early language environments. Using the toolkit, preschool children across the city are offered a language screen and targeted activities, alongside parent and child interaction training, to support children at risk of language difficulties.

By targeting preschool children, the aim is to increase school readiness and decrease the risk of poor literacy, behavioural difficulties, mental health difficulties, criminal activity, and unemployment that are associated with poor early communication skills.

The pathway includes an essential training programme to increase the knowledge and skills of professionals working within early years to identify and support children with language difficulties.

In 2017, 1472 children were screened and 45% of children identified as being 'at risk' and receiving intervention made sufficient progress to indicate that their language skills were age appropriate.

Context

The Early Years Communication and Language pathway aims to improve school readiness so that communication and language skills attainment in Manchester are in line with the national average.

The new pathway aims to provide targeted services to support children before they require specialist speech and language therapy intervention.

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)².

Early identification in the preschool years is key therefore to improving long term outcomes for children in Manchester.

A multi-agency training programme is central to the communication and language pathway so that all early years' agencies have access to the same information and skills development. See The Lost Boys' report by Save the Children⁵ Law J, et al. (2017) Language as a child wellbeing indicator⁶

Method

The pathway was based on the general guidelines developed at a Greater Manchester level and commissioned by each local authority.

The pathway has been developed after extensive review of best practice from the current evidence and has since been supported by the recommendations from the Bercow Report⁷. The pathway has four main components: **Training, Identification, Intervention, and Review.**

Training:

The team has trained health visitors, outreach workers, and early years practitioners across Manchester to embed early identification, using the WellComm language screen, and evidenced based intervention for language difficulties.

Identification:

The WellComm screening tool, developed by Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust, is designed to be used with children from 6months to 6years of age.

The screening tool identifies children as **Green** (language developing appropriately), **Amber** (mild to moderate difficulties), and **Red** (severe difficulties). WellComm screens are offered if concerns are raised at children's health checks at 9 months and 2 years and also when they enter an early years setting. Parents may request a WellComm screen at any local children's centre.

By training a variety of professionals who have regular contact with children, there is a higher probability that more children will be offered a screen and provided with the appropriate support before they start school.

Intervention:

Children are offered either targeted or specialist speech and language intervention based on their WellComm score:

- **Specialist service:** Children 18 months and over identified as **Red** through their WellComm screen are referred to Speech and Language Therapy services for specialised intervention;
- **Targeted service:** Children identified as **Amber** are offered parent-child interaction (PCI) training and specific language activities identified through the WellComm language screen;
- **Following training** Language audits of early years settings are carried out to ensure that provisions continue to offer quality language environments.

Review:

All targeted children are offered a review to determine language progress. Sharing of data

by partner agencies around review outcomes allows a measure of the overall impact of the pathway on targeted children across the city.

Review information is used to determine if individual children are responding to intervention and inform further input.

Outcomes

Training

The impact of the training programme for Early Years professionals showed professionals ranking themselves as 'very confident' on over 70% learning objectives following training, compared to less than 15% before the training.

In three years, 2187 professionals have accessed training. 69% of Early Years settings, who currently provide 2 year funded places, have attended WellComm screen training.

WellComm Screening

Of the children who received an initial screen, 66% of children were identified as needing input. At review, 45% of targeted children progressed indicating age appropriate language skills; 28% of children remained with some difficulty; and 27% of children were identified as having a more significant difficulty.

Early Years Settings

There has been an increase in the awareness of language development norms amongst practitioners. Previously, many practitioners and carers had low expectations due to the high number of children with poor language skills they regularly encountered.

As one local nursery manager share with us;

"We were astonished by some of the simple activities that the children could not complete." She reported that at her nursery, they "have managed to close the gap by 11.1% in Communication and language, which we feel is all down to the work we have completed with the WellComm. We have now screened every child in the nursery and got parents more involved"(Echoes Nursery).

This example demonstrates the effectiveness of the pathway at raising expectations and attainment when it is fully embedded and supported by local professionals.

Key Learning Points

The Manchester Early Years Speech and Language Therapy team is 3 years into a long-term project and are still embedding the pathway into practice. Due to the multiagency approach and the scale of the project across the whole city, it will take time to see the impact of the pathway on national measures of early communication skills such as the EYFS results.

Working with multiagency practitioners increases the chance of a child with speech language and communication needs being identified, but it poses challenges in terms of quality control and embedding practice into busy workloads.

Data collection across multiple agencies is a challenge and impacts on the evaluation of outcomes from the pathway. Current data does not capture all the activity being completed within the pathway. It is important to constantly work with other agencies to improve methods of data collection.

References

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3. Law J, et al. (2009) Modelling developmental language difficulties from school entry into adulthood: literacy, mental health, and employment outcomes. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 52(6): 1401-16.
4. National Statistics (2017) Early years foundation stage profile results: 2016-2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results-2016-to-2017>
5. Save the Children (2016) The Lost Boys: How boys are falling behind in their early years. https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/.../reports/The_Lost_Boys_Report.pdf
6. Law J, et al. (2017) Language as a child wellbeing indicator. EIF Reports. <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/language-child-wellbeing-indicator.pdf>
7. Communication Trust (2018) Bercow: Ten Years On. <https://www.bercow10yearson.com/>