A better start through early language and communication development

Jean Gross CBE, 2016
Aims

• The importance of language for life chances
• National policy context
• The essential ingredients to give our children a better start
Poor communication skills impact on...

**Educational achievement**

- Vocabulary at 5 a powerful predictor of GCSE achievement

**Behaviour/vulnerability**

- 2/3 of 7-14 year olds with serious behaviour problems have language impairment

**Mental health**

- 40% of 7 to 14 year olds referred to child psychiatric services had a language impairment that had never been suspected

**Employability**

- 47% of employers say they can’t get recruits with the communication skills they need

**Criminality**

- 65% of young people in young offender institutions have communication difficulties

**Disadvantage Cycle**

- Children from low income families lag behind high income counterparts by sixteen months in vocabulary at school entry
Take two five year olds (Law, et al, 2010) ...
Breaking the cycle

Vocabulary at 5 has been found to be the best predictor of whether children brought up in poverty are poor themselves in adult life.
... it’s what you do not what you earn that matters

The child’s communication environment (the early ownership of books, trips to the library, attendance at pre-school, parents teaching a range of activities and the number of toys and books available) was a more important predictor of language development at two, and school entry ‘baseline’ scores at 4 than socio-economic background

Roulstone et al (2011) Investigating the role of language in children’s early educational outcomes

DFE RR134
Vocabulary acquisition
The Effects of Weaknesses in Oral Language on Reading Comprehension Growth (Hirsch, 1996)

Following a line graph showing the difference in reading age level compared to chronological age for children with low and high oral language skills in kindergarten.
Children who find communication hard find life hard.
Numbers reaching school age are rising

In England, the number of pupils identified as having speech, language and communication needs in annual DfE school census has increased by 72 per cent between 2005 and 2011
TV as background noise

The amount of time television (adult and child programmes) was on in the home when child was under two predicted achievement at school entry. As this time increased, so the child’s score at school entry decreased.

Roulstone et al, 2011
Investigating the role of language in children’s early educational outcomes, Research Report DFE-RR134
Does improving language actually change long term outcomes?

- Nursery/YR children who took part in an oral language intervention (Nuffield Early Language Intervention) showed significantly better reading comprehension in Y1 than control group (Fricke, 2012)
When do we need to take action?

Language development at 2 (understanding and use of vocabulary and use of two or three word sentences) strongly predicts children’s performance on entry to primary school.

Is good early years provision the answer?

Progress in language between 3 and 5 was strongly predicted by language skills at 2.

For children whose parents have no or lower qualifications, poor early communication skills will likely persist through the pre-school (3-5) period.

Growing up in Scotland, 2011 research findings
Other predictors of vocabulary development 3-5 (after controlling for parental education) were stronger parent-child attachment at 10 months, greater consistency of parenting (rules), attendance at ante-natal classes and breastfeeding.

Growing up in Scotland, 2011 research findings
Progress in language 3-5 most affected by home environment, while progress in problem-solving more affected by external factors such as type of pre-school education. Growing up in Scotland, 2011 research findings.
'Any strategies for improving school readiness via the pre-school setting need to include, for more disadvantaged children, strategies which seek to influence the child’s home environment and parenting experiences at the same time... to ensure that children’s cognitive ability is maximised... such strategies should focus on the quality of the parent-child relationship and frequency of home learning activities’

Growing up in Scotland, 2011 research findings
‘Sensitive periods’ in early brain development

- Binocular vision
- Central auditory system
- Habitual ways of responding
- Language learning
- Emotional control
- Peer social skills

Sensitivity

High

Low

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Aims

• The importance of language for life chances
• National policy context
• The essential ingredients to give our children a better start
• HV expansion and Healthy Child Programme
• Public Health Outcomes framework
• Integrated review at two
• Two year old offer
• School readiness ????
• Early Intervention Foundation
• Read On Get On
• Life Chances Strategy
• The vast majority of the synapses the billions of connections that carry information through our brains develop in the first 2 years.
• Destinies can be altered for good or ill in this window of opportunity.
• One study found that by the age of 3, some toddlers might have heard 30 million more words in their home environment than others. That is a staggering statistic.

• The more words children heard, the higher their IQ, and the better they did in school down the track.
So mums and dads literally build babies’ brains.

We serve, they respond.

The baby-talk, the silly faces, the chatter even when we know they can’t answer back.
• As we scale up the Troubled Families programme, we’ll ensure that parenting skills and child development become central to how it is both targeted and how it is delivered.

• So I believe we now need to think about how to make it normal – even aspirational to attend parenting classes.

• We should encourage the growth of high-quality courses that help with all aspects of becoming a great mum or a great dad.
• Life Chances Strategy will include a plan for significantly expanding parenting provision.
• It will examine the possibility of introducing a voucher scheme for parenting classes and recommend the best way to incentivise parents to take them up.
• We need to take steps to encourage all new parents to build a strong network, just as brilliant organisations like Family Action or NCT already do for some parents.
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What does this say about children’s communication development?

• http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEmZht0
Game-changer 1

• Stop seeing attuned parenting/attachment interventions as separate from communication and language interventions
• What have you in your ‘attachment’/sensitive attuned parenting portfolio that is promoting early communication and language development?
• What might need to be added?
Predictors of good language development

- Amount of language spoken to child
- Conversational turns – the ‘serve and return’
- Singing nursery rhymes, sharing books, reminiscing about events
- Lack of background noise
- Child to child speech – engaging in joint planning, negotiating conflicts, providing explanations, telling stories
- The way we talk – following child’s lead and commenting on their topic of interest, recasts and expansions
The language children hear matters

**Quantity**

- 616 words per hour
- 1251 words per hour
- 2153 words per hour

**Quality**

- yes yes yes yes yes yes yes
- no no no no no no no
- yes yes yes yes yes yes yes
- no no no no no no no
- yes yes yes yes yes yes yes
- yes yes yes yes yes yes yes
- yes yes yes yes yes yes yes
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Baby talk
Game changer 2

- Make it everybody’s business

A multi-agency approach
Every contact counts
Shared set of boxes to tick
Stoke on Trent

Multi-agency strategy to support attachment, parenting, language and communication through training, support and advice. It developed from local Sure Start initiatives which identified that between 60% and 80% of children assessed in Stoke at age three to four years had a language delay.
Stoke on Trent

• Multi-agency training framework for all practitioners working in the city with children birth to seven years or their families. The training has five levels, ranging from awareness-raising to detailed theoretical levels, and was jointly written by the project team of speech and language therapists, a clinical psychologist, a midwife, play workers, teachers and a bilingual worker.
Stoke on Trent

- All levels have an expectation that the practitioner will create change in their working environment. In addition, the initiative has a model for toddler groups to follow which enhances language development, and a website offering practical information for parents.
Stoke on Trent

• 64% of three year olds were significantly delayed in 2004, by 2011 it was down to 39%
In Nottinghamshire, speech and language therapists, health visitors and early years practitioners have worked together to tackle delayed language
Nottinghamshire

- Newborn hearing screen
- Oral health team
- Promotional materials
- 2 year check
- Home Talk
The dummy tree
Top Tips for New Parents

- A few minutes after birth your baby will be able to distinguish sounds and be able to tell which voice belongs to their mother or father.
- Babies are born with brains that have a huge capacity for learning. Most brain development happens before the age of three. This is the crucial time to help your child learn to talk and communicate.
- Newborns love physical play, especially when you gently tickle their face or count their fingers and toes.
- From birth your baby is listening, so keep talking.
- Sing to your baby. Your baby will love hearing your voice, any song will do.
- Answer your baby’s noises and babbles.
- Dummies prevent babies from babbling, an important step in learning to talk, only use them at set times, like bedtime. Dummies hide your baby’s smiles!
- Babies are sociable and love to communicate; both mums and dads can get involved in talking to their babies. Talking to your baby helps create a bond and supports language development.

Thanks to www.literacytrust.org.uk for their contribution to our top tips. For more top tips and information on the family time campaign please visit:
www.sheffield.gov.uk/familytime
Teamwork

Work together – one conception to five ‘programme’, one team
Game changer 3 - a shared set of messages

- You are the best toy in the box
- Dummies hide smiles
- Any time is talk time
- Turn off the TV and talk to me
- Keep your first language alive
Game changer 4 – something to talk about

- The rhyme
- A card star to thread with wool
- Star finger puppet
- Biscuit recipe and star cutter
- Glow-in-the-dark stars
- Star kaleidoscope
Activity Sacks from Poole

- For each of PSED, Communication and Language, Physical Development

Sock Puppets
2 x Sock Puppets
1 x Set Plastic Tube Telephones

Splish, Splash, Splosh
1 x Washing Up Bowl
1 x Washable Baby Doll
1 x Doll Outfit
1 x Facecloth
1 x Squeezy Bottle

Snuggle Up Time
1 x Very Hungry Caterpillar Book
1 x Wooden Caterpillar
1 x Butterfly Finger Puppet
4 x Pieces of Velcro Fruit
Reminiscing
Game changer 5 – think hard about behaviour change

- It is hard to change established behaviours
- Lead practitioners, coaching
- Reflective practice - peer observation, video
- Sharing good practice through networks
The biggest underexploited game changer
Social media
How might we use social media to change perceptions about talking to those who don’t talk back?
Children are born communicators