

Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families

Commons Education
Committee:

Impact that the early years of a
child's life have on their life
chances
Evidence Submission

May 2018

Inquiry into the impact that the early years of a child's life have on their life chances

Written evidence submitted by Professor Clare Wood and Professor Carrie Paechter, Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families, Nottingham Trent University

We are happy to provide oral evidence if required. Please contact Professor Carrie Paechter on carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk for further information

1. Executive Summary

- In this submission we are focusing in particular on addressing the importance of support for parents and families, and integration with other services, in prevention and early intervention
- Our submission is based on research evaluating a national targeted programme, Early Years Together, that aimed to develop young children's communication, language and literacy can enable family engagement through the support of peer volunteers.
- The focus of the intervention was on families in which there was evidence that levels of parent-child interaction and shared activity were a cause for concern
- Evidence from the National Literacy Trust demonstrates that 'literacy is linked to life chances through a range of socioeconomic factors'. These include health, employment and income (National Literacy Trust, 2018). Early interventions to improve literacy are therefore crucial to children's life chances.
- It is therefore imperative that greater emphasis and support is given to early literacy programmes such as the one studied in Professor Wood's research. This short, volunteer-led intervention resulted in:
 - Significant improvements in children's understanding of spoken language
 - Significant improvement in children's enjoyment of sharing books
 - Significant improvement in children's enjoyment of joining in with songs and rhymes
 - Increases in parent-child talk
 - Increased parental confidence in sharing books with children
 - Increased parental understanding of the importance of sharing books with children
 - Increased quality of the home learning environment
 - Increased school readiness

- We recommend that such programmes in which there is a focus on literacy in a structured session, should be provided nationally, using supported volunteers. This should include giving young children books of their own to have at home, and supporting library use by young children and their families.

2. Submission

Our submission is based on an evaluation of a targeted National Literacy Trust programme, Early Years Together, which aimed to develop young children's communication, language and literacy and to enable family intervention through the support of peer volunteers. It was typically delivered in a six-week intervention, bringing practitioners and volunteers together to improve the home learning environment of children aged two to five. It was delivered in small group sessions of around 1.5 hours. Central to the programme was peer support that helped parents to:

- Understand why they are important to their children's reading and language development;
- Adopt effective activities to enrich their play, engagement and attachment with their child;
- Benefit and increase their children's literacy, communication and language development.

The evaluation covered the work of the programme in 13 local authority areas across England.

Vocabulary development

Pre-test scores suggested that the majority of the children entering the programme were underperforming on their understanding of spoken language relative to where they should be for their age. Three months later the children's vocabulary levels suggested that they were catching up with their peers. Before the intervention, 30.5% of the children were within the normal range of vocabulary score for their age group;

this had increased to 43.1% three months later. This effect was particularly pronounced for girls, whose language comprehension increased by 11 standardised score points in four and a half months – from 78.6 to 89.6. Strongest gains for both boys and girls were in the small number of very young children who participated, and the three-year-old age group.

Interest and enjoyment of the child in communication, language and literacy

The evaluation focused on parents who said before they started the programme that they did not like to share books with their children or only liked it ‘a bit’. The results showed a 76.7% increase in enjoyment of shared book reading for these families. 74.9% of parents whose child previously did not have a favourite book reported that their child now had one, and 79.9% of all parents who participated reported that their children’s ability to listen and join in with stories had increased. The intervention also had an impact on the amount of talk in the home, with 85.8% of all the parents involved talking more to their children. This is important because levels of parent-child talk are related to literacy development. Parents attributed increased verbal interaction to more talk coming from the child, increased contact time with the parent and more child confidence in verbal interactions, including increased talking and listening with other people. There was also a 20% increase in parents reporting that their children enjoyed joining in with songs and rhymes, something that develops vocabulary and literacy development. Other research by Professor Wood (Harrison et al, 2018) suggests that understanding speech rhythm (which can be developed using songs and rhymes) is an important for supporting reading attainment and vocabulary once a child starts school.

Children with English as an Additional Language

Parents who spoke other languages at home with their children reported that their children had developed greater confidence in

speaking English and that the programme had introduced them to a range of English nursery rhymes and songs that they had not previously known. Increasing the confidence in English of bilingual children is important in preparing them to start school.

Awareness and confidence of adults in supporting their child's communication, language and literacy

The programme resulted in 65.7% of parents feeling more confident about sharing books with their children. Greater improvements were shown in families about which there had previously been concern about the child's language development. Some parents were sharing their new knowledge and skills more widely in the family or were becoming volunteers on the programme themselves. Parents had developed knowledge about the importance of talking and listening with their child, and there was evidence that the programme was significant in teaching them *how* to communicate with their children. As a result of participating in the programme some parents also went on to engage more with their own learning, taking up further education courses. This is likely to have longer-term impact on family outcomes.

Impact on home learning environment

Reading books regularly with children is an important indicator of the home learning environment. This increased from 52% of families reading to their children every day at the start of the programme, to 73.5% doing so afterwards. Because children were given books to keep as part of the programme, the number of books in a home also increased. Where the programme included a library visit, this was a turning point for many parents, leading to regular use of the library with their children. Those who could afford it also started purchasing books for their children. By the end of the programme, 85.5% of all parents reported that they were now more likely to buy or borrow books.

School readiness

Being ready to start school is vital if a child is to make progress from an early stage. In focus group responses, parents spontaneously gave evidence of their child displaying behaviours indicative of school readiness, such as: being aware of others' emotions; sitting still and listening to books being read; understanding structure and discipline; sharing and playing together; how to hold a pen properly; knowing colours; knowing the letters in their name; understanding the function of text; counting to ten. Data from the focus group was further validated by analysis of other evidence.

Recommendations

- Programmes such as Early Years together should be developed and supported on a national basis, using supported volunteers working in small groups
- Focusing on literacy in a structured session is particularly important and should be emphasised
- All young children should be given their own books to own and read at home. This should be supported by programmes to increase library use by parents and children
- Parents should be supported to engage in literacy activities with their children, especially by peer volunteers
- Early literacy interventions should be embedded in other educational services so that parents can be encouraged to develop their own learning beyond the programme.

References:

Wood, C., 2015, *Final Report: Early Words Together: Impact on Families and Children*. National Literacy Trust

Gilbert, L., Teravainen, A., Clark, C. and Shaw, S., 2018, *Literacy and life expectancy An evidence review exploring the link between literacy and life expectancy in England through health and socioeconomic factors*. National Literacy Trust

Harrison, E., Wood, C., Holliman, A. and Vousden, J.I., 2018, 'The immediate and long-term effectiveness of a speech-rhythm-based reading intervention for beginning readers'. *Journal of Research in Reading* 41:1, 220-241.