



An Evaluation of
The Development of
Children's Language and Communication
in Pre-School Settings funded by the
Department of Education

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Quantitative Terms Used

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

Glossary of Terms

Statutory	Nursery schools and nursery classes and units within a primary school. Attended by children aged between 3-4 years of age.
Voluntary and Private	Playgroups and funded provision within Day Nurseries. Attended by children in their pre-school year prior to starting year 1 in primary school.
Overall	Statutory and Voluntary and Private groups together.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This evaluation report examines the promotion of children's language and communication skills in pre-schools, and the resulting outcomes for the children.

1.2 The findings of this evaluation are based on inspection evidence collected from 59 funded pre-school centres across Northern Ireland, which were inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) during the 2009/10 academic year. The 59 pre-school centres represent 15 nursery schools, 20 nursery units and 24 voluntary and private playgroups.

1.3 The Survey on Special Educational Needs in the Pre-school Sector (2005) reported that 51% of children entering into their pre-school year demonstrated delays or difficulties with aspects of their speech and language development. The Northern Ireland Taskforce on Speech and Language (2008) also reported high levels (40%) of under four-year-olds having potential communication difficulties, rising to over half in deprived areas. Many of these children fall further behind as they grow older, and require additional support in order to help them play 'catch up' with their peers.

1.4 The Chief Inspector's report 2006-08 also referred to these concerns: "the continued growth in the numbers of pre-school children with speech and language delays points to the increasing need for speech and language support". Inspection evidence continues to support this concern which, if not addressed, have potential long-term effects for individual learners, communities and the wider society.

1.5 This report provides evaluation of the quality of pre-school provision in supporting children's language and communication skills, the quality of the children's responses and evidence of progress made and the standards being achieved by the children. The availability of appropriate training opportunities for staff and the range and nature of the links with parents and others are also considered. The report also includes some exemplars of best practice.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS: THE OUTCOMES FOR THE CHILDREN

2.1 THE CHILDREN'S CONFIDENCE TO COMMUNICATE WITH ADULTS AND THEIR PEERS

2.1.1 Although increasing numbers of pre-school centres report difficulties in children's language and communication on entry to pre-school, it is encouraging to note that over 90% of children were observed as having good or better levels of confidence in communicating with the staff. A key contributory factor is the development of a positive ethos where the children appear to be at ease and settled in their environment and where good relationships have developed between the staff and the children in most pre-school settings.

2.1.2 Slightly fewer children (86%) had the same confidence to communicate confidently with their peer group. This finding may be a reflection, in part, on those settings with a number of younger children (that is, children in their pre-ultimate year), who are not yet ready to engage in collaborative play and communication with other children, but are happier to play in a solitary or parallel manner.

2.1.3 Children's levels of confidence to communicate with adults and other children, and the levels of coherence in their speech were consistently higher overall in the nursery school sector. The children's use of language to question, make observations, engage in discussions, talk about their own experiences and resolve their own disputes, was also of a consistently high standard in nursery schools. In nursery units and voluntary and private

pre-schools the children most frequently used language to talk about their own experiences. They were less frequently observed settling their own disputes or engaging in more sustained discussion. In the best practice, staff encourage, and model for the children, how language can be used in a range of different contexts.

EXAMPLE:

The children begin to demonstrate their use of mathematical language during play activities and daily routines.

- **Outdoors at the construction materials** “...there is enough space for the sand on the shovel...”.
- **In the home area** the children model language used by the staff and independently converse with one another, “ ..my cup is half full, I don't think I could drink any more ...
- **At the water play** children use the language of capacity, “try and put it into this wee hole”...” Yes, that's a good idea..not fill up..not at the bottom, not at the top..

During the break routine the staff use mathematical language naturally ..”cut the toast and butter from corner to corner..”

2.2 THE CHILDREN'S LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT IN BOOKS AND STORIES

2.2.1 The provision of books and stories is good or better in most pre-school centres. The quality of the children's engagement with the books provided is also good or better in most settings, and outstanding in almost all nursery schools.

2.2.2 Some discrepancy of up to 20% was noted between the good quality of book provision provided by staff and the poorer quality of the children's independent engagement with books. This finding may, at times, be indicative of the children's lack of experience with books prior to pre-school and the need for the adults to do more to model the use of books and involve the children in this experience. More children were noted as engaging with books and stories when the adults referred to them in a meaningful context such as a cookery book in the role play area, or an information book about autumn on the interest table.

2.2.3 There was a strong correlation between the overall quality of the staff's interaction and the engagement of children in books and group story sessions. The better the overall quality of the staff interaction with the children, the higher the levels of the children's engagement with books and group stories.

EXAMPLE:

A Newcomer child, who spoke English as a second language, showed a great deal of interest in a reference book on cars during the session. The child was encouraged to take the book home to share with his parents. The staff accessed a number of books in the child's own language for the parents to use at home with their own child.*

* A child who does not speak English as his or her first language.

EXAMPLE:

The staff created an environment which is rich in books. A cosy, carpeted area, with a wide range of quality books displayed, is accessed independently through the session by individuals and small groups of children. Sometimes the children browse themselves and at other times the staff read and discuss stories and books at the children's request. Books are also displayed at a range of other play activities and referred to by the staff when appropriate; for example, the children and an adult look at pictures and discuss dinosaurs arising from a child's interest at the floor play activity; a member of staff engages in lively discussion with a child about journeys as they look at a large book of road maps incorporated into the large block play; and two younger children enjoy a familiar story being read in a "cosy corner" by a student.

2.3 THE CHILDREN'S LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT IN SONGS AND RHYMES

2.3.1 The children's levels of engagement in songs and rhymes was evaluated as always good or better in nursery schools and always satisfactory or better in playgroups and nursery units. Improvements are needed to engage all of the children more fully in songs and rhymes in around 15% of nursery units and playgroups.

2.3.2 In the best practice, the high quality of the staff's interaction and engagement with the children, the wide range of enjoyable songs and rhymes and the use of visual aids, properties and musical instruments enhanced the group sessions. In addition, the staff made full use of informal opportunities to sing with the children during play activities and daily routines, as an integral and spontaneous part of the play.

EXAMPLE:

The children sing together a range of well-known songs as they make transitions, at tidy up time and again, as they move to outdoor play. A member of staff is encouraged to use her musical ability and enthusiasm to develop the use of songs in the pre-school. The children and staff enjoy an impromptu song together as they make "current buns" at the dough table. Outdoors the children make a stage area out of large flat blocks and perform songs to one another and staff. A group of children explore sound and rhythm, as they hit a series of kitchen items strung up to a fenced area.

2.4 THE QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S ENGAGEMENT IN SCRIBBLING AND MARK MAKING

2.4.1 In around 80% of the pre-school centres, the children's levels of engagement in scribbling and mark-making were good or better. In the best practice, the children were involved in stimulating and meaningful opportunities both indoors and outdoors. The children consequently used tools confidently and were highly motivated to engage in emergent writing and representational art work.

3. PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 The overall quality of the pre-school provision to support the children's language and communication was evaluated as good to outstanding in around 80% of the pre-schools inspected. Almost half was judged to be very good to outstanding. Of the pre-schools evaluated 15% were satisfactory with a very small number (less than 2%) evaluated as inadequate.

3.2 While all types of pre-school settings have examples of outstanding quality within their overall programme to promote language and communication, some significant differences were evident. The highest quality was most consistently observed in the nursery schools with 53% recorded as outstanding while 20% in the nursery units and 12.5% in the voluntary/private settings were evaluated as outstanding. It is good to note that no unsatisfactory provision or inadequate provision was evident in any sector.

EXAMPLES:

- * *The playroom and outdoor area are set up with a range of interesting and diverse resources, including interest areas and natural items, which the children are free to explore independently. The nature of the resources stimulates the children's curiosity, and triggers questions and exploration. The adults are skilful in coming alongside individual children to provide appropriate vocabulary and ask open-ended questions appropriate to the child's stage of development. Children who are demonstrating an interest in text and early marking contribute to making the signs for display.*
- * *A group of children initiates the collection of sticks, feathers and other materials and piles them to the side of the play area. The children engage with the staff about building birds' nests. They talk about what they are doing and plan what to do next. The children's work is left in place and the play develops over a few days, resulting in a nest in the low branches of a tree and the selection and placing of objects to represent eggs. The staff encourage the children's own ideas, extend their vocabulary and refer to books to discuss birds, their eggs, and the materials they use to build their nests. Open-ended questions promote problem solving and thinking.*
- * *A large area of the floor space is set up with good quality community blocks and a range of story character puppets in the immediate vicinity. Books and posters linked to this topic are set up in view of the area. A small group of children spends the full amount of time available during free play to build a castle with the blocks. They discuss, negotiate, agree and adapt the plan several times. When satisfied, they recall and re-enact a story with the puppets and their constructed castle, using their own imagination and words.*
- * *A digital camera is used by the children to record their achievements and interests. Pictures are displayed on screen and used as a point of discussion with the children. Text is added capturing what the children have said; this is printed and displayed for children and their parents.*
- * *The pre-school has a number of children who do not speak English as their first language. The staff take care to give good eye contact and come down to the children's level during conversation. They use gestures to accompany directions and instructions. Visual timetables and cues are used regularly to help the children to understand the daily routine, stories are read in smaller groups.*
- * *Through observation by the staff and discussion with the parents, a small group of children has been identified as requiring additional support. The staff use the finding of their observations to identify activities and resources which are relevant to each child's interests and stage of development. An individual education plan is written to identify what resources and strategies will be used to guide the staff in their interactions with the children. The professional expertise of one staff member, who has a professional qualification in speech and language, helps to enrich the language programme and give confidence to all of the staff. The staff meet with the parents individually, both informally and formally, to provide advice and guidance about helping their respective children to develop and progress in their learning.*

4. TRAINING FOR STAFF

4.1 There is evidence that the opportunities for staff to access ongoing professional development, to enhance their understanding and skills to support the development of children's language and communication skills, are very variable.

4.2 The training opportunities for staff in the voluntary/private sector to develop their skills were evaluated as good or better by the staff in 66% of settings while in 33% the training opportunities were evaluated as satisfactory or inadequate. Key features of the less satisfactory opportunities included: a high turnover of staff impeding continuous staff development and training opportunities; training opportunities being provided for the leader, but with little evidence of the knowledge gained being disseminated to the rest of the staff; a lack of courses with a specific focus on developing the children's language and communication; and cluster groups, often led by an early years specialist (EYS), reported as failing to meet the needs of individual groups.

4.3 Of the nursery units evaluated, 30% had satisfactory to poor opportunities for specific training for staff. Key factors included a lack of training for primary staff who have transferred into the nursery unit with no previous pre-school experience, and a reported lack of availability of courses in some areas. Teaching and support staff within a nursery school had a much higher opportunity to avail of professional development and in-service training where the leadership and management of the Principal had been evaluated as outstanding.

4.4 Some of the best training opportunities in pre-school settings included the following examples:

- in-service training provided by a well informed and qualified principal or assistant teacher with that training being disseminated to all members of the staff team;
- specific speech and language training provided for staff through the local SureStart Centre or funded through a local Health Trust or Education and Library Board or organised by an EYS;
- the benefits of close links and relevant in-service training between the nursery unit staff and the staff in their adjoining primary school or from close working links with staff from multidisciplinary teams.

The training was most beneficial when it was fully implemented and closely monitored by the staff to ensure it resulted in improvements in the children's progress. All staff should evaluate more consistently and rigorously any training they receive to assess the impact on staff expertise and children's progress and development.

5. LINKS WITH PARENTS

5.1 The support being provided for parents to promote their children's language and communication skills was evaluated as good to outstanding in 80% of nursery schools, 70% of nursery units and 50% of voluntary and private settings.

5.2 All settings report that with engagement with parents is an increasing challenge. A significant minority of settings are developing strategies to overcome these difficulties through, for example, offering evening events, providing timely information and setting a high expectation of parental partnership when the parents enrol their children. A significant minority of settings, particularly in the voluntary and private sector, have a number of challenges to overcome in running sessions for parents including the lack of resources in terms of paid hours of work available, sufficient space and access to professional expertise.

5.3 Support for parents is often provided through additional funding, such as the SureStart programme or through Extended Schools funding in the statutory sector. Initiatives being implemented by schools currently include, for example, the Incredible Years Programme¹, additional in-school support from speech and language therapists, the provision of story sacks to give focused support to children and their parents or workshops for parents and grandparents. In addition, some pre-schools promote parents' interest in furthering their own literacy skills through a range of suitable classes.

5.4 Many pre-schools also provide links with parents from within the pre-school's normal budget including, the provision of information on the importance of parents reading and talking to their children, and the provision of the words of songs and rhymes for parents either in a booklet or regular newsletter; the use of a lending library; visits by the local librarian to contribute to a pre-school session, and ensuring parents take their own children to borrow books on a regular basis. The use of photographs, written information and digital versatile disks [DVDs] on display within the foyer of the pre-school illustrate how staff can inform parents of the critical importance of language development.

5.5 In the best practice, effective links with the year one teacher or literary co-ordinator in the local primary school often ensures progression in learning and coherence in developing approaches together.

5.6 Most Irish-medium pre-school settings provide classes in the Irish language for parents, who mainly come from English speaking homes, to support their children's communication in Irish. There are limited opportunities for parents from the increasing range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to engage fully with the staff to support their children's language and communication skills. More support and resources are needed to help staff to engage with all parents.

EXAMPLES:

- * *A range of story, maths and science sacks are available for parents to use at home with their children. The packs are good quality and come with instructions to the parents on how to make the best use of them. Workshops are run by the pre-school staff to demonstrate their use. Parents request the packs to demonstrate genuine interest; 80% of parents now make regular use of them with their children. A notebook is provided for parents to record the children's responses. Parents report they are spending time together reading and talking with their child on a more regular basis.*
- * *The parents are provided with attractive and informative induction and transition booklets. Displays of photographs and DVDs are used very effectively to inform and engage parents in their children's learning. Parents are encouraged to contribute to the centre's self-evaluative process through the use of questionnaires.*

¹ The Incredible Years Project is a programme of interventions to help parents and teachers provide young children with a strong social, emotional and academic foundation.

6. LINKS WITH OTHERS

6.1 SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPISTS

6.1.1 There were 58% of pre-schools with evidence of good to outstanding links with speech and language therapists (SLTs) to support children. A significant minority (37%) benefited from opportunities for the SLTs to build the capacity of the staff by providing information and training. Examples of current links between pre-schools and SLTs included Education and Library Board officers and SLTs working together to develop and provide a programme for pre-school staff; multidisciplinary teams contributing their expertise; SLTs providing information, advice and training for staff and parents; and SLTs working in the pre-school setting to identify and provide a programme to individual and small groups of children. While it is encouraging to note the increasing involvement of SLTs in many pre-school settings, particularly those in the most disadvantaged areas, there remains room for improvement in optimising these links for the benefit of all children.

6.1.2 Staff report that more could be done, at times, to improve the flow of information between community SLTs, parents and pre-school staff so that a continuity of approach can be used to help children who are being supported in their speech and language outside of the pre-school setting. Where a school has a speech and language unit, this expertise could be shared with the staff within the nursery unit.

EXAMPLES:

- * *The staff identify small groups of children (5 or 6) in each room who need extra support to promote their speech or listening skills. They benefit from additional training from a speech and language therapist who incorporates a ten minute session each day with this group into planning, focusing on discussion around current themes, topics and interests. The children begin to show more confidence in communicating with the smaller groups.*
- * *Speech therapists conducted their clinics in the pre-school centre. The therapists worked alongside the staff in the playrooms and this provided role models for the staff and the opportunity to increase the capacity of the staff. A noticeable benefit was the excellent attendance at the clinics with nearly all appointments being kept by the parents. The parents no longer felt their children were being singled out by having to go to the Health Centre for appointments.*

6.2 LOCAL LIBRARIES

6.2.1 Only 23% of pre-schools were noted as having good or better links with their local public library. This suggests a very low uptake of the library service. More evidence is required to explore the possible reasons behind this figure.

6.2.2 In the best practice the pre-school children and/or staff visited and made full use of its local library through some of the following: book borrowing to support its curriculum; inviting the children's librarian to the centre to read stories; the provision of information to parents and encouraging them to take their children to the library; and visiting the library as a group. Where a good supply of books was provided, and included within the various play areas in the pre-school centre, the children's curiosity and interest was enhanced. More consistent use could be made by pre-school staff and parents to access and use the resources available from their local library service.

6.3 SURESTART PROJECTS

6.3.1 Of those settings situated within a SureStart area, 70% were evaluated as having good or better links with their local SureStart with 30% evaluated as having inadequate or poor links.

6.3.2 In the best practice, links included the transfer of meaningful information about the children from the SureStart two-year-old programme enrolling in the pre-school; good arrangements were in place to ensure that the children made a smooth and secure transition to the next stage. Once a child has registered with the SureStart centre, the child can be referred to the SureStart family worker and the SLT providing, both for the child and the family in the best practice, prompt and appropriate support, which can be introduced or continued through the child's year in pre-school.

6.3.3 A recommendation from the 'Evaluation of the SureStart Programme for Two-Year-Olds' carried out by the Inspectorate in 2009, highlights the need for SureStart projects to develop further links with the pre-school and primary organisations to which their children will transfer.

6.3.4 All pre-schools within a SureStart area should work collaboratively with their local SureStart project to ensure they are fully informed about the services SureStart offer to support parents and young children, to signpost parents or to link where appropriate.

EXAMPLE:

The nursery unit teacher has a monthly meeting with the Foundation Stage staff in the adjoining primary school to discuss and agree continuity and progression in the children's learning experiences. She also links regularly with the school's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) to avail of her expertise, and with the Senior Leadership Team. Visits to the school by the nursery children, visits to the nursery by the year one teacher and an exchange of information on the children's progress all contribute to a smooth and successful transition for pre-school to school.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 The findings of this evaluation provide positive evidence of the hard work and, in many cases, a considerable success by the staff within pre-school settings, to ensure that children are making progress. Nevertheless, there is clearly no room for complacency as significant numbers of children continue to enter pre-schools with poor language and communication skills.

7.2 All pre-school settings and organisations involved in the provision of training to those working in early years settings should raise the awareness of staff to the issues identified in this report and that in the best interest of young children's development and learning. The Department of Education (DE) needs to consider for staff, from all types of pre-school settings, the most effective way to provide a consistently high level of ongoing professional development, training and resources which builds their capacity to promote better the children's language and communication skills, and helps the staff to work effectively in partnership with the parents.

7.3 Those involved at all levels in the care and education of young children aged 0-6 years, need to work more collaboratively to ensure staff and resources are used to maximum effect, to support and improve young children's language and communication skills.

7.4 It is timely that within the implementation of the DE's 0-6 Early Years strategy there is opportunity for the findings of this report to be used to inform and promote better in the future the support of all children who require it.

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