

**Written Evidence from The Communication Trust
Education Select Committee
Life Chances Inquiry**

About us

The Communication Trust is a coalition of over 50 not-for-profit organisations. Working together we support everyone who works with children and young people in England to support their speech, language and communication. Our work focuses on supporting children and young people who struggle to communicate because they have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) as well as supporting all children and young people to communicate to the best of their ability.

The importance of communication skills and language development in affecting life chances

There is a strong link between communication skills and social disadvantage; they are a critical factor in the intergenerational cycles that perpetuate poverty. In many areas of deprivation, more than 50% of children start school with delayed language skills.¹ Children from low income families lag behind their peers by nearly one year in vocabulary at school entry, with gaps in language much larger than gaps in other cognitive skills. In addition, children eligible for free school meals and living in a deprived neighbourhood are 2.3 times more likely to be identified as having SLCN.²

Vocabulary at age five has been found to be the best predictor (from a range of measures at age five and ten) of whether children who experienced social deprivation in childhood were able to ‘buck the trend’ and escape poverty in later adult life.³ At the age of six there is a gap of a few months between the reading age of children who had good oral language skills at five, and those with poor oral language skills at five. By the time they are 14, this gap has

¹Law, J., McBean, K. and Rush, R. (2011), Communication skills in a population of primary school-aged children raised in an area of pronounced social disadvantage. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 46: 657–664. doi:10.1111/j.1460-6984.2011.00036.x

²Dockrell, J., Ricketts, J. & Lindsay, G. (2012) Understanding speech, language and communication needs: Profiles of need and provision BCRP 4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/profiles-of-need-and-provision-for-children-with-language-impairments-and-autism-spectrum-disorders-in-mainstream-schools-a-prospective-study>

³Blanden J (2006) *Bucking the Trend – What enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed later in life?* London: Department for Work and Pensions

widened to five years difference in reading age.⁴ Closing the gap between the speech, language and communication development of the country's disadvantaged children and their less disadvantaged peers needs to be a clear priority for the Government.

In the EYFS there is an attainment gap of 48% between pupils with no SEN achieving a good level of development, and those who have been identified as having SLCN as their primary need.⁵ This trend continues throughout a child's journey through education: just 20.3% of pupils with SLCN achieved 5+ GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics GCSEs. This is compared to 70.4% of pupils with no identified SEN – an attainment gap of 50.1%.⁶

Looking further ahead in life, researchers have found that children who had poor vocabulary at age five were one and a half times more likely to be poor readers or have mental health problems at age 34. They were also more than twice as likely to be unemployed as children who had normally developing language at age 5.⁷

Those with unrecognised and un-met communication needs are also disproportionately more likely to get in trouble with the law; evidence shows that at least 60% of young people in the youth justice system have some form of SLCN, which has often gone unidentified.⁸ This is compared to a figure of around 10% within the general population. In addition to this, research has identified that two thirds of seven to fourteen year olds with serious behaviour problems have language difficulties⁹ and that pupils excluded from school are more likely to have SEN, including SLCN.¹⁰

In contrast, good language and communication can often operate as a protective factor. In a recent Public Health England Report, good communication skills were identified as supporting resilience, which reduces the likelihood of later social, mental and emotional

⁴Hirsch (1996) The Effects of Weaknesses in Oral Language on Reading Comprehension Growth cited in Torgesen, J. (2004). Current issues in assessment and intervention for younger and older students. Paper presented at the NASP Workshop.

⁵ Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results in England, 2016-17, 19th Oct 2017

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results-2016-to-2017>

⁶Children with special educational needs in England: January 2017

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2017>

⁷ Law, J. et al (2010) Modelling developmental language difficulties from school entry into adulthood. *Journal of speech, language and hearing research*, 52, 1401-1416

⁸ Bercow, J. (2008) *The Bercow Report: A Review of Services for Children and Young People (0-19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs* DCSF Publications

⁹ Cohen, N., Barwick, M., Horodezky, N., Vallance, D. & Im, N. (1998). Language achievement, and cognitive processing in psychiatrically disturbed children with previously unidentified and unsuspected language impairments. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 39, 865-877

¹⁰ Clegg, J. (2004) *Language and Behaviour: an exploratory study of pupils in an exclusion unit* Proceedings of the British Psychological Society Developmental Section Annual Conference, Leeds, September

health difficulties¹¹. With the right support, many disadvantaged children with delayed language can be supported to ‘catch up’. Additionally, a focus on speech, language and communication can support early identification of children with SLCN, therefore leading to timely support being put in place and more positive outcomes for children. However, this requires a real and practical commitment from the government to invest in support for early language at universal, targeted and specialist support levels.

The role of quality early years education in determining life chances and promoting social justice

The role of quality early years education is an important contributor to a child’s academic and social outcomes. In particular, having an early start (before age three) and attending a high quality setting have been identified as being particularly beneficial;¹² those who have attended pre-school, compared to those who did not, have been identified as having better attainment in language, pre-reading and early number concepts, and those who started before the age of three years old, on average had better development for language, pre-reading, early number concepts and nonverbal reasoning.

The government has shown a commitment to ensuring that all children have the opportunity to attend high quality early years through the 15 and 30 hours free childcare initiatives, and this goes some way to promoting social justice, through ensuring that all children have the opportunity to access high quality childcare, which we know is important for children’s outcomes.

However, there is variation in the quality of early years settings and in order to provide a quality early years education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is essential that early years staff have the training that they need to support the speech, language and communication skills of the children that they work with. The Communication Trust would argue that all settings with a high intake of children from disadvantaged backgrounds should be required to ensure all staff have training and professional development in speech, language and communication development and each setting has staff members qualified in speech, language and communication at Level 3 (either as part of a broader early years qualification or as a standalone qualification). At present, only 20% of the early years workforce are qualified to Level 3 - considering the profound impact of speech, language and communication development, it is essential that workforce development in this area is

¹¹ Public Health England, *The mental health of children and young people in England* (2016) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575632/Mental_health_of_children_in_England.pdf

¹²Brenda Taggart, Kathy Sylva, Edward Melhuish, Pam Sammons and IramSiraj (2015) Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+) How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time

prioritised. [Platform 3](#) is an online route to achieving a level 3 qualification in supporting children's speech language and communication, which was developed by The Communication Trust in response to a demand from practitioners wishing to take the qualification where it wasn't being offered by local approved centres.

In 2016, The Communication Trust conducted a national survey looking at professional development in speech, language and communication across the workforce. Respondents working in the early years sector reported:

- 49% received little or no initial training about typical speech, language and communication development,
- 56% received little or no training about identifying and supporting children with speech, language and communication needs

Our survey also highlighted that many early years settings based in areas of disadvantage have to deal with tight budget and time restraints, which can often make meeting the training needs of practitioners difficult. The need for workforce development was also a main finding of the [Bercow Ten Years On](#) review, which recommends that the Department for Education (DfE) should 'make communication and language, and identification of speech, language and communication needs/identification of children who are struggling, a core requirement of Level 2 qualifications for the early years assistant'.

To help train the workforce, the Trust has developed free, easy-to-use resources, such as the [Speech, Language and Communication Framework](#), which allows practitioners to evaluate their skills, knowledge and confidence around supporting speech, language and communication and SLCN and the [CPD Online Short Course](#), a free, online professional development resource around speech, language and communication. Tools like these are essential for enabling practitioners and settings to plan their professional development and ensure that it is effectively meeting both practitioners' and children's needs.

Early years practitioners also need to be supported to understand the evidence behind communication and language approaches. The Communication Trust's [What Works database](#) provides important information and evidence for those working to support the communication and language skills of children and young people from the age of 0 to 25.

To further ensure that the communication skills of disadvantaged children are being well supported, it is also essential that language and communication continues to have a strong focus within statutory requirements in the early years. Measures such as Ofsted frameworks should include and highlight the importance of language and communication in the early years and as a central part of children's development. We welcome the focus on early language in the Government's social mobility action plan, Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling

Potential. However, it is important that this is not just focusing on children's early vocabulary – there are a range of language and communication skills which have been shown to be crucial in this area.

The importance of support for parents and families, and integration with other services, in prevention and early intervention

It is crucial that parents and families receive the help that they need in order to effectively support their child's speech, language and communication within the home. The strongest predictor of children's language development is the quantity¹³ and the quality¹⁴ of the language children hear in their environment. It is not socio-economic disadvantage itself that causes slow language development, but the fact that disadvantage is so often associated with an impoverished communicative environment.¹⁵

Research has shown that activities that improve a child's communication environment (such as the early ownership of books, trips to the library and parents teaching a range of activities and the number of toys and books available) are a more important predictor of language development at two, and school entry 'baseline' scores at four, than socio-economic background alone.¹⁶ All and any activities that improve the communicative environment of disadvantaged children should contribute towards helping to close the gap.

It is important that parents know what to expect of their child's language development and how it can be nurtured. It has been highlighted that parental attitudes towards learning in the preschool years have a substantial impact on children's later school readiness.¹⁷ However, The Bercow: Ten Years On review found that 77% of parents found it difficult to find information about speech, language and communication; parents often need signposting in order for them to effectively access the available support and guidance on this subject. Not surprisingly, one of the review's recommendations is to ensure that high quality information is available to parents – and that there are appropriate channels in place to direct parents towards this information.

¹³ Ambridge, B., Rowland, C.F., Theakston, A.L. & Kidd, E.J. (2015). The ubiquity of frequency effects in first language acquisition. *Journal of Child Language*, 42(2), 239-73

¹⁴ McGillion ML, Herbert JS, Pine JM, Keren-Portnoy T, Vihman MM & Matthews DE (2013) Supporting Early Vocabulary Development: What Sort of Responsiveness Matters? *IEEE Transactions on Autonomous Mental Development*, 5(3), 240-248

¹⁵ Hoff E (2003) The specificity of environmental influence: Socioeconomic status affects early vocabulary development via maternal speech. *Child Development*, 74(5): 1368–1378

¹⁶Roulstone, S. et al (2011) Investigating the role of language in children's early educational outcomes DfE Research Report 134

¹⁷Diamond, K. E., Reagan, A. J., &Bandyk, J. E. (2000). Parents' conceptions of kindergarten readiness: Relationships with race, ethnicity, and development. *Journal of Educational Research*, 94(2)

There is a wealth of high quality support for parents and families available within the voluntary and community sector; The Communication Trust's [Consortium Catalogue for Early Years](#) and [Local Offer page](#) both provide information about products and services (free and fee-based) for parents from over fifty different not-for-profit organisations. The Early Intervention Foundation's [The Best Start at Home report](#) also looks at a range of interventions that enhance parent-child interaction with a view to improving attachment and parental sensitivity, and children's social and emotional development and language and communication. Additionally, there is further evidence regarding the impact of parental engagement as an important early intervention tool from the [Education Endowment Foundation's Early Years Toolkit](#). We are encouraged by the work currently underway jointly by Public Health England (PHE) and the DfE to plot a pathway for supporting children's early language, identifying any difficulties as early as possible. It is crucial that this work leads to information and support reaching parents who are most in need.

One potential route is that professionals who come into regular contact with parents, such as health visitors and midwives are knowledgeable, skilled and confident in sharing information about the importance of speech, language and communication skills. These professionals have a vital role to play in sharing information about typical language development, encouraging a language rich home environment and helping parents whose child may be struggling with their language and communication to access relevant local additional support. Ideally, parents should know what to expect, rather than waiting until they are concerned, before they look for information about ages and stages and how to support communication development. As part of The Communication Trust's 2018-19 work, we have established the [Early Voices](#) programme, a national professional development and training initiative that allows health visitors to increase their knowledge in early speech language and communication development in order to achieve higher impact with the families that they work with.

Statutory screening checks such as the 2 year progress check for early years practitioners and the ages and stages questionnaires (ASQ) for health visitors are welcome initiatives, but often are not sensitive enough to identify children who are struggling with their language development, meaning that these opportunities for early identification and support are missed. So it is possible that even when families do integrate well with services who are supporting them, that children can and do slip through the net. This highlights the importance of ongoing professional development around the importance of speech, language and communication as a central life skill and identifying children whose skills are not developing as expected for their age for those providing front line, universal services to families and young children. This should include regular mentoring and coaching from colleagues with expertise in speech, language and communication (such as Communication Leaders from the Early Voices project) in promoting its importance as a central life skill and identifying children whose skills are not developing as expected for their age. We welcome

the development of an early language assessment tool for health visitors and early years practitioners by the DfE and PHE to help to check children's early language development, as mentioned in the Government's social mobility action plan, Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential. However, the importance of underlying professional development also needs to be considered as part of this.

Summary

Throughout our evidence, we have highlighted the importance of speech, language and communication in determining the life chances of children and young people, and the far reaching impact that these skills (or a lack of these skills) can have on the rest of their lives. To ensure that the most vulnerable children and young people receive the support that they need, it is essential that measures are put in place to ensure that parents, early years practitioners and other professionals that come into contact with children and young children have comprehensive knowledge and training on speech, language and communication that will allow them to make a real impact.

The Communication Trust would be very happy to provide any additional information required by this inquiry, or to discuss anything in more detail if that would be helpful.