

## The Year of Communication: why children's communication skills need to improve

2011 has been designated the national year of speech, language and communication. Run by The Communication Trust, the *Hello* campaign aims to make children's communication skills a priority in schools and homes across the country. Warwickshire County Council and Quinzone EAZ in Birmingham are both embracing this, supported by GL Assessment's WellComm: a speech and language toolkit for the Early Years.

Warwickshire County Council has been actively supporting early speech, language and communication development in children's centres through the 'time to talk' strategy for over 12 months, and is now in the process of rolling out the 'Every Child a Talker' (ECaT) programme to early years settings.

Alex Williams, the ECaT and Children's Centre's strategic lead Speech and Language Therapist says, "Like the rest of the country, we recognise that supporting communication development in the early years is crucial if we want to have a real and lasting impact on raising standards in this area. Our aim is to provide every child with opportunities to develop their potential speech, language and communication skills and to ensure that those children who need additional resources to do so are able to access them."

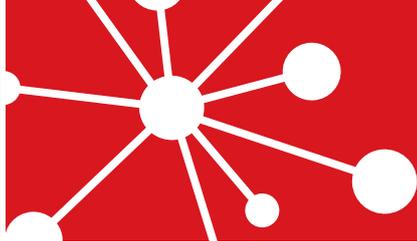
ECaT has enabled Warwickshire to extend the work of the 'time to talk' strategy into an additional 20 early years settings. "Our objective is to have one or two named speech and language champions in each setting who will have a clear understanding of appropriate communication development

in children and be trained to identify when a child needs support and at what level."

"We use *WellComm* to screen our children as it fits in exactly with the work we are trying to do, helping practitioners to quickly and accurately identify the type of support a child needs and providing them with practical steps to intervene. It also helps standardise our work across all the different settings."

*WellComm* is the only toolkit of its kind aimed at Early Years practitioners in nurseries, children's centres and other pre-school settings. The toolkit, which was developed by Sandwell Primary Care Trust, can help specialist and non-specialist staff identify issues with language and communications skills in children from as young as six months to six years of age.

Screening is undertaken using a combination of observation, discussion with parents and carers and direct testing. A traffic light system of green, amber and red is then used to identify the child's needs. Green suggests no cause for concern, those in amber need a little extra help to develop age appropriate skills and a red score flags up the potential need for specialist referral.



The Big Book of Ideas, which accompanies the toolkit, then offers simple suggestions for activities that teachers and parents can use to support the development of children's speech and language. If a child does have an issue that requires specialist intervention, the activities enable specific areas to be addressed quickly, so that children get the help they need whilst awaiting referral.

Speech and Language Therapist, Melanie Packer, is one of the team providing support and training to the nominated practitioners. "We've developed a three tier training programme, looking at the 'ages and stages' of all aspects of communication including social skills, attention and listening, understanding of spoken language, talking and speech sound development. The third tier of our training enables practitioners to use the *WellComm* screening tool and develop language enrichment groups," she comments.

"We are running a pilot 'talk and play' scheme for two to three year olds who have been identified as needing additional support. *WellComm* can help identify the children who would most benefit from 'talk and play' and enable us to ensure appropriate levels of support and intervention. Many of these children score 'amber' and wouldn't necessarily be picked up by other methods but without support they are at risk of not reaching their full potential. During the weekly sessions, we draw on activities from The Big Book of Ideas, as well as modelling the use of positive strategies, such as following the child's lead in play."

Knowing that effective communication skills have a huge impact on a child's future, Warwickshire is working to support children's speech and language needs as early as possible. "If children catch up before they start school, they are more likely to stay caught up and will be able to access the full range of social and educational experiences open to them," concludes Melanie.

### Quinzone EAZ, Birmingham

The Quinzone Education Action Zone (EAZ) is a group of six mainstream primary schools, one high school and two children's centres in Birmingham. In September 2008, they employed Lynne Dallaway, a Speech and Language Therapist, to work with all the settings in the zone to help them develop sustainable practices and to raise attainment in the area.

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Lynne was tasked with increasing speech and language provision across four levels – child, staff, establishment and parental – a massive job, considering the zone caters for 450 children aged 6 months to 6 years.

In September 2010, Lynne started using *WellComm* with all children in the zone, screening all children in nursery and reception classes. She explains, "Each school or pairs of schools have dedicated members of staff to administer the assessment, and another dedicated member of the team to input the data. We then meet to analyse the information and put the next steps into place."

Lynne has adopted a three wave approach to maximise the benefits of *WellComm* in each setting. All children are assessed at the start of the year, data is then gathered and targeted interventions are then

planned at both group and individual level. Children who are reds and ambers are then assessed again in each subsequent term, to ensure adequate progress is made.

After a term of using *WellComm*, feedback from teachers has already been very positive. Lynne explains, "The information is extremely useful for group and class reports, especially as it helps staff group children into the same area of need and identify children who they hadn't previously identified as having a need. We also really like the Big Book of Ideas for its individualised targets."

The cluster has also found that *WellComm* is proving very effective for children who have English as a second language – a common situation in the area. "The assessment clearly highlights the areas in which their grasp of English is below the levels expected for their age."

Lynne is a keen advocate of sharing best practice to support others and uses data from *WellComm* to achieve this in the Quinzone area. To take one example, "One child was known to have significant communication needs. At age two years, she had no words and no means of communication or interaction with others. *WellComm* enabled us to develop a play plan that could be shared across several agencies, ensuring joined-up working."

Lynne is looking forward to the Year of Communication. "It's a very exciting time in speech and language therapy, especially as it will promote all the great interventions that are going on in local schools to improve communication." Sharing good practice will be key to her strategy in 2011, not least as *WellComm* will be rolled-out to the health visitors and the support agencies in the area.

[www.gl-assessment.co.uk/wellcomm](http://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/wellcomm)

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January 2011