

SEN and disability in the early years

Case studies

Hillingdon: Language for Life

The local authority was seeking to create a sustainable model for early intervention and support for children who may be at risk of language delay

Context *Language for Life* is a targeted stay and play session that is run by Children Centre staff for the parents of children with identified speech and language needs. The Hillingdon Early Years Inclusion Team together with the Speech and Language Therapy Service co-developed an approach that is now embedded in the health pathways and Children's Centres across the Local Authority.

The practice

At the outset, each Children's Centre identified a project lead who then takes part in an accredited speech and language course, Elkan, alongside short courses on sharing direct and supportive messages with parents about child development. The project lead attends speech therapy child assessment sessions where they are able to observe the techniques, strategies and activities used by speech and language therapists. The lead gains skills in modelling and teaching language development strategies to parents.

Each Children's Centre lead is then provided with a six week curriculum pack to support them in running the 'Language for Life' programme with parents. Each session is practical and play based using materials that can easily be sourced in the home. For example box play, water or sensory play outdoors or in the kitchen, household resources or opportunities found within the community. Store bought resources are kept to a minimum to enable parents to feel they can re-create this play and learning for their children at home or anywhere.

The sessions are designed specifically for parents to learn the skills needed to support language, communication and cognitive development in children rather than focussing on the child's language needs alone. During the session the staff model strategies to support speech and language development as well as providing advice to parents in context.

During each session, parents are encouraged to observe how their child communicates and to understand what they can do to develop this further. For example, the staff member may comment to a parent *"have you noticed when you talk to him down at his level that he looks at you and responds, more? This will support him in developing attention and listening skills and enhance his understanding."*

Working alongside the Children's Centre lead, each parent agrees a learning target which is initially modelled for them. They are then encouraged to practice it or 'have a go' both within the session and at home during the week. Each week the parent is given opportunity to feed back on how this is developing, successes are celebrated and new targets are set as appropriate.

The other strand to this integrated health and educational model for speech and language support is a co-developed threshold document, 'The Speech, Language and Communication Developmental Tool'. This is a folder that includes some straight forward assessment tools that allow early years practitioners and health workers to ascertain children's developmental stage and identify related interventions through the health pathway.

The assessment pages enable users to examine developmental expectations. A scoring system indicates the level of intervention that may be required. For example a score of 5 or 7 would prompt an invitation to a 'Language for Life' session at the Children's Centre; a score of 8 or 10 would suggest referral for individual speech and language therapy.

Impact**Children:**

90% of children who have taken part in the programme have been assessed a stage or two higher in attainment against the 'Speech and Language Development Tool'.

17 out of 18 Children's Centres are now running this . Each session has hosted between 3 - 6 families. There is strong uptake and good attendance at the sessions.

Parents:

More families are accessing support for their children through the 'Language for Life' session as well as becoming more engaged in other Children's Centre activities.

Children's Centre lead feedback:

Through spending time to teach parents about how they can support their child's development, we have now developed such a positive relationship with them and they in turn are very keen to work with us to support and engage other parents.

Parent feedback after completion of programme:

Every parent needs this training! I was made to feel so supported and that I did in fact do so many things correctly. That made me feel like I could learn something new as well... I just started to get down onto his level, limit the amount of language I used and just talk about what he was focussing on while playing with him; which I realised I didn't do enough. Within four weeks B, who is 2 ½ years old, went from not playing with other children, only making sounds or grunts and displaying quite challenging behaviour to now saying some two word sentences, copying every word I used when playing with him and beginning to play with other children when we come to the Children's Centre. He is a much happier boy and I am so enjoying playing with him every day now.

Multi-agency working feedback:

One of the successes to date in regard to the SLC Development Tool is that it was designed in full partnership between Health and the LA Early Years Service. The use of it has begun to be embedded into the provision of our services across Early Years and has started to influence referrals made by Health Visitors, Speech Therapists, Early Years practitioners and the LA Inclusion facilitators. The collaborative nature of this tool has begun to ensure assessments have a shared consistency and that referral routes are clear for all involved. Feedback from our Speech and Language Therapists is that the referrals made into them are accurate and the Early Years professionals are confident that the families they or Health Visitors have identified for these programmes are appropriate.

Next steps

"We now plan to roll out the use of this tool to all our Daycare providers, to support them in ensuring that all children are screened from an early age, needs or gaps are identified and interventions and support provision put in place for these children; alongside their parents, ensuring that no child 'slips through the net'. We will be monitoring the impact of this intervention over time and our aim is to support more and more children to be ready and confident to begin their school life, with all the language and communication, social and emotional skills they need to support them through their education journey"

Early Language Consultant, Hillingdon.