



Early Voices: Case Studies

Embedding speech, language and communication knowledge into practice

Early Voices was a national professional development and training programme for Health Visitors designed to impact the families that they work with. It increased their knowledge in speech language and communication development, helped them share that knowledge as Communication Leaders and led to change in their local areas. This 'embedding speech, language and communication knowledge into practice' case study focuses on practical takeaways for a wide audience of health visitors, the wider EY workforce and parents.

How did Early Voices and the Level 3 qualification help embed speech, language and communication knowledge into practice?

Summary

The work of a health visitor is critical, not just because they are often the first early years professional a parent encounters, but because their work is so multi-faceted.

Increasing numbers of 0-19 services are emerging and as such, a health visitor and school nurse workforce knowledgeable about speech, language and communication development beyond the early years also becomes key.

As Public Health England consider their review of the Healthy Child Programme, stories from Early Voices Communication Leaders illustrate the need and benefit of having speech, language and communication knowledge and practice embedded as a golden thread throughout the revised public health messaging.

Getting everyone talking about talking!

Following multiple cascades of the Early Voices training and through regular planned and incidental conversations with colleagues, there has been much enthusiasm for this project driven by the two Communication Leaders in Newham. Here, they are already acting on their ambition to share the Early Voices key strategies leaflet and ‘through the eyes of the child’ videos with many more parents, many more professionals and through many more channels.

For example, the borough distributes a new birth pack containing a plastic wallet of information leaflets across a range of topics pertinent to new parents. However, there isn’t currently a communication leaflet in it. Communication Leaders here have plans to include the Early Voices Top Tips leaflet in every pack so that conversations about speech, language and communication development can be facilitated more easily.

The Newham team also utilise the Building Community Capacity approach, delivering workshops for the community to help underpin their universal work across the Healthy Child Programme. However, one Communication Leader reflected that she feels information about communication is not overt enough in the early stages right across the 6 high impact areas identified, so there is a risk that it is tacked on rather than embedded. She is now ensuring that communication is in all her Building Community Capacity talks, whether breastfeeding, transition to parenthood or healthy 2-year-old and getting ready for school.

In Newham, there are plans to ensure that a key message for their team is that every contact is about communication.

Embracing the power of social media

Clare, a Communication Leader in Gateshead described how a colleague had developed a Facebook page for Gateshead Health: <https://www.facebook.com/GrowingHealthyGateshead/>.

With her new knowledge about speech, language and communication, Clare agreed to develop a weekly post for the Facebook page. She reflected that although it was more time consuming than expected, and a journey of discovery as a non-Facebook user, she considered it a success.

Clare's aim was to engage the audience, to promote the health site and to promote some dialogue in the online community. She selected 12 topics, starting antenatally and building from there. Themes evolved over time. Each post included a statement to capture interest with a few interesting facts to draw people in; followed by a top tip. Clare used materials provided by Early Voices and also scoured YouTube for clips which would reinforce the messages she wanted to disseminate. For example, she introduced a clip of signing babble and monkeys to demonstrate the use of gestures, and another about a baby's reaction to loud, aggressive noise even when still in the womb.

The reach, just a few weeks later, was encouraging: 2,500 impressions for one post and eight out of the ten posts reached over 1,000 predominantly local Facebook users. The posts on dummies and TV reached a wide audience while the one on books seemed less popular. Posts didn't stimulate much direct comment and so there wasn't the interaction element Clare hoped for with families. Neither was it really clear, from data capture, who all the users of the page were. Comments, although few, came from as far away as Northern Ireland however. Two neighbouring local authorities, Durham and Sunderland, have subsequently taken all 12 posts and disseminated the content out on their Facebook pages automatically.

Clare had many reflections to share and viewed her journey into social media as a work in progress. She wasn't sure what the impact of her work was but felt that social media messages supported the 'drip drip' approach to changing the local and national conversation about language development. Clare also felt that her work contributed to making every contact count. She further acknowledged she had much to learn about which posts engage audiences and which don't.

Making every contact count

Caroline, the Communication Leader in Shropshire, had completed her Health Visitor qualification relatively recently, but she felt that the information she was given on speech, language and communication was limited. Feeling instinctively that these skills were central to a child's overall development and readiness to learn, it was this knowledge gap that prompted her to undertake the Early Voices training, so that she could improve her own practice and develop that of her colleagues.

Caroline has embedded her new knowledge by introducing to parents, very early on in her contact with them, what they can do to support their children's speech, language and communication development. As a result, opportunities to visit the home at the new-born and 6 weeks contacts are now focused much more on communication aspects.

The small changes the team now recommend help challenge common misconceptions within the home learning environment; for example, many parents thought leaving the TV on was helping their children. Using

the gifted Book Start packs, Caroline is encouraging parents to turn off the TV more and read to their child from the earliest stage. Parental response has been encouraging, but many had no idea until this point that reading to their new-borns was at all worthwhile. Good relationships between health visitors and the library service in this area mean that multi-lingual and sensory versions of books can be ordered upon request.

The feedback Caroline has received and changes to parental behaviour she has witnessed have inspired her to continue spreading the word. She has seen a change in parents' understanding of what their children can do from such a young age, simply through the positive benefit of not having TV on all the time, for example. She feels parents have a greater understanding of how and why they can better incorporate supporting their child's communication development in their everyday life.

Caroline's message is simple but effective: by taking a consistent approach, the issue of speech, language and communication is becoming as important as breastfeeding.

Enhanced level of learning = enhanced confidence to act

Early Voices Communication Leaders all embarked on a Level 3 qualification in speech, language and communication in order to deepen their knowledge and understanding, and not only in relation to language development in the early years.

A quite unique opportunity in the health visitor world, this enhanced knowledge has led to greater confidence amongst Communication Leaders to notice and question speech, language or communication skills in children and families on their caseload. Because the Level 3 course material goes beyond the early years, it has also helped them apply their knowledge within 0-19 teams more easily.

In one example Vicky, a Communication Leader in Wakefield, advocated for a child and family struggling at school as a result of 'behavioural difficulties'. At team meetings about the child, the school expressed that he was bright, but it was Vicky who encouraged an investigation of his speech and language. The child was found to have a language processing difficulty, making it challenging for him to follow what was going on in the classroom. These invisible challenges had been presenting as visible behaviours in class and leading staff to come to unhelpful conclusions as to their source. Vicky attributed her ability to suggest speech, language and communication as a route of enquiry to her increased knowledge through the level 3 training.

Like Vicky, other Communication Leaders feel that a greater embedding of speech, language and communication knowledge in their practice has led to better quality referrals when these are required. Fawn, for example, reflected that while she previously would have 'referred anyway', she now has what she sees as the right 'tools' to discuss the referral with speech and language therapy before making it – explaining through much more confidently and competently what she has seen.

Reflections on the impact of the level 3 training

- 1.** Rather than 'lumping them together' Communication Leaders, and colleagues in receipt of their training, are thinking more about the different headings of speech, language and communication and feel able to give more relevant information.
- 2.** Others feel that the training has led to giving more effective examples. For example, reflecting on what speech was like 6 months ago and what it's like now.

- 3.** With increased knowledge and confidence, there has also been an influence on how to engage with parents and to ask them the right questions about their different aspects of their child's speech, language and communication development.