

# Changing the Conversation about Language

Round Table 2020

**Strategies to engage hard to reach families in disadvantaged areas**

The Round Table's purpose was to share the learning from the Changing the Conversation project and had 2 questions

- What are the key elements that have contributed to success in reaching families in areas of disadvantage and having an impact on early speech, language and communication?
- How could some of these elements be applied in your area to develop sustainable approaches to reach out to families in similar situations?

# The Roundtable – the attendees

Name	Role
<b>Jean Gross CBE</b>	Independent Consultant, Chair
<b>Sheena Carr</b>	Deputy Head Children, Young people and Families, Public Health England
<b>Philip Worsfold</b>	Policy Lead, Department of Health
<b>Michelle Morris</b>	Consultant Speech and Language Therapist, Salford Royal Foundation Trust
<b>Louisa Reeves</b>	Head of Impact and Evidence, I CAN
<b>Andy Russell</b>	Head of Partnerships, Easy Peasy
<b>Alistair Scott</b>	Service Manager - Knowsley Early Years
<b>Hilary Smith</b>	Head of Education Learning and Skills, South Gloucestershire
<b>Karen Hingston</b>	Head of Early Years and Childcare, Peterborough (Implementation Lead)
<b>Jackie Pitman</b>	Narrowing the Gap Advisor, Cambridgeshire County Council (Implementation Lead)
<b>Lil Bowers</b>	Family and Community Locality Manager (Implementation Lead)
<b>Anne-Marie Cray</b>	Project Facilitator, Bristol and South Gloucestershire
<b>Susan Richards</b>	Project Facilitator, Cambridge and Peterborough
<b>Gail Ross</b>	Children Centres Service Manager, Knowsley
<b>Claire Campbell</b>	Service Manager - Children Centres Liverpool (Implementation Lead)
<b>Kim Garthwaite</b>	Service Manager Liverpool Children Centres

What are the barriers and challenges to engaging with families in areas of disadvantage and what works to overcome these?

# Challenges: competing priorities

- Competing priorities can be a challenge: an oral health programme may have reduced number of settings taking part in EasyPeasy round 2 in **Peterborough** because settings didn't have capacity to take on both programmes.
- There is a need to make SLCN a priority: **Bristol** used data and an advisory board which included local practitioners to decide on priority focus. Having strong communication between strategic and operational levels was essential. Peer Challenge helped gain momentum around early years governance – ensuring early years has a city-wide profile, they are setting up a Starting Well Board which will have groups feeding into it to help share knowledge about different initiatives and support continuity between strategic and operational levels.
- Some parents know what to do, but have other competing priorities e.g. financial troubles, ill health.

# Challenges: families feel stigmatised

- There is an issue of not wanting to stigmatise parents by offering targeted services, **but** if services are presented as universal then some vulnerable families may miss out: **Cambridgeshire** has very mixed populations – they can have just one family in a school on Free School Meals (FSM) but they struggle to close the gap because it's hard to target this family without singling them out in the community.

# Challenges: difficult conversations

- Practitioners need support to have difficult conversations with families – this goes wider than SLCN. They find it difficult to judge the terminology to use. Early Years Practitioners need support to know how to engage parents: in **Knowsley** they practise saying difficult things in role play during training. Developing those trusting relationships is essential, but there is a need to roll out further CPD to practitioners on how to handle those ‘difficult’ conversations.

# Key elements of Changing the Conversation

- Technology – utilising smart phones, as most parents have these
- Parent champions – peer:peer influencing
- Co-production
- All mediated through a trusted relationship (Early Years Practitioner or Family Worker)

Possible solutions and top tips from  
experts in the field

# See things from families' perspective

- Families need a reason to come along – what's in it for them?
- Non patronising/worrying/criticising way of explaining to parents the benefit for children of SLC as they don't always see this.
- Universal in reach, personalised in approach.
- Parents need to feel safe and that they matter.
- Dads also need to be included.

# Working together: key ingredients

- Creativity and persistence – you can't have a script as every parent is different – use every opportunity to engage
- Co-production, community intelligence, volunteers.
- Remaining flexible for parents is essential.
- Never giving up.
- Humour and enjoyment are key factors to include.

# Addressing workforce issues

- Social Workers can be a gap, there are 'hard to reach' professionals who don't always see SLC/N as a priority issue.
- Cascading out can be a challenge for practitioners – they mustn't make assumptions about parents or judge them
- Consistent messaging is needed from all professionals. Universal offer must have consistency all the way through from birth to school. It has to be universal otherwise people feel singled out and stigmatised.
- Silo working needs to be removed – act locally but cast a big net – universal sweeps in targeted people too if it's wide enough and done through local people who know which levers to pull.
- CPD for professionals would be helpful on how to have difficult conversations and how to talk about language behaviours.
- Peer Review helps with developing a common language

# Trust is crucial

- Building relationship and trust; valuing parent's contributions and showing their role is valued are essential. Their voices need to be heard.
- Build on existing trusted relationships/upskill those people to reach parents (eg using volunteers from the community).
- Knowing and understanding families is important, as well as, being located where people feel most at home

# The priority is **early language**

- How can you make S&L an everyday behaviour for parents who don't do it especially when they have other concerns?
- Parents can feel isolated so language must be clear and understandable
- Priorities need to align – both strategically and for parents. We need to be cognisant of parents' priorities in their lives.
- Timing is important: it is hard to focus on S&L when parents have other things going on. It helps to position language as underpinning everything (e.g. behaviour).

# Policy and strategic approaches help

- Play leads to learning – this needs to be a clear message to parents
- The difference between **knowing** something and **doing** it is important
- Having strategic groups that feed up and down.
- Several different initiatives can be confusing, some parents have little capacity.
- Saturating the environment, consistent messaging.
- Chasing the norm: Tiny Happy People; Hungry Little Minds.

# A 3-layered approach to reaching families

- Local strategies: making SLC a priority; sharing clear, consistent messages. The PHE pathway and Peer Reviews help with this.
- CPD for practitioners – including on non-judgmental listening and building relationships with parents.
- Parents need to feel safe, accepted and knowledgeable; make people feel safe not stupid.

# Further information

- [Views of the Round Table participants](#)
- [Talking to parents about their child's SLCN](#)