



Early **Talk**
Boost

Early Talk Boost
Evaluation Report 2015

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Key findings

Early Talk Boost is a targeted intervention aimed at 3–4 year old children with delayed language development, boosting their language skills to help narrow the gap between them and their peers.

After *Early Talk Boost*:

- Children make statistically significant progress in their early language development.
- On average, children make six months' progress after the nine-week intervention, helping them to narrow the gap between them and other children their age. This is twice the rate of progress of children not having the intervention.
- 95% of parents felt that *Early Talk Boost* had made a difference to their children's language and communication. Parents felt they had learnt something by being involved in the programme, and would change how they talked to their child.
- 76% of children said that they were happy telling stories (compared with 31% before the intervention).

- Samples of children's talking showed they used longer and more complicated sentences.
- After *Early Talk Boost* training, all early years practitioners surveyed felt more confident in supporting children's language, and 94% said it would change the way they worked.

About *Early Talk Boost*

Introduction

Research shows that early language skills, in particular vocabulary, are a key indicator of academic success (Treffers-Dallerand Milton, 2013). Without core skills in speech, language and communication young children will not be ready to start school, to make friends and to develop their self-esteem (Snowling et al, 2001). We also know that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are over twice as likely to have poor speech, language and communication skills as those from non-disadvantaged backgrounds (Dockrell et al, 2012).

Early Talk Boost was developed in response to the fact that almost a quarter of children are not reaching expected levels for their age in communication and language by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). This number rises in areas of deprivation where nearly one-third of children (30%) do not reach expected levels (DfE, 2014).

I CAN has over 15 years' experience of working in early years settings, supporting workforce development and good practice. We know that high quality provision with a trained and confident workforce secures good outcomes for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) (Clegg, Rohde and Vance, 2015).

We also know that early years practitioners value practical ideas and easy-to-implement activities which will benefit targeted children. There are very few evidenced interventions available for children in the year before they start school (at age 3) for those with delayed language and communication development. *Early Talk Boost* fills this gap, providing a targeted intervention to boost children's early language and communication skills.

This evaluation report shows the effectiveness of *Early Talk Boost*. The report also describes the intervention itself – setting out the rationale for its design – and then shows how the evaluation was designed, outlines its results and discusses these findings and their implications.

The intervention

Design and rationale

The early years offers an opportunity for rich language experiences. Intervening early at pre-school and nursery and making use of this language-rich environment means that children have the potential to develop a good foundation in language and communication in time for starting school.

Early Talk Boost has been designed by specialist speech and language therapists and a highly experienced nursery teacher. The intervention's design is based on strong evidence of what is known to support language development in the early years, as outlined below.

Structure

Early Talk Boost is designed to replace or complement circle or group times for children who need to boost their early language development. It is also designed for 6-8 children; the numbers of children typically included in early years groups.

Early Talk Boost sessions use a concrete approach, so the children experience direct, hands-on activities. Each session is supported visually by a planning board, song cards, toys and resources, etc. This approach has been found to support children 'when words are not enough' (Wellington and Stackhouse, 2011) to enhance children's learning and support their independence.

The *Early Talk Boost* Intervention Manual contains these activities, together with guidance for practitioners. A toolkit, containing the toys and resources required for the activities, is also provided, as are eight *Jake & Tizzy* story books.

A further range of training materials supports practitioners to learn more about language and communication, identify children with language delay and understand how to implement the intervention.

An additional workshop aims to help parents learn some simple strategies to use to encourage their child's language development through sharing the story books at home.

Components of *Early Talk Boost*

Early Talk Boost supports a range of foundation language skills, including:

- **Attention and listening:** foundation skills for speaking and listening (Gilmore and Vance, 2007).
- **Learning and using new words:** research shows that children with weaker vocabularies are at risk of difficulties with reading (Snow, 2011).
- **Building sentences:** putting words together is a vital skill for having conversations and telling stories (Wellman et al, 2011).

Adult's role

The adult's role in supporting children's language is key, and throughout the *Early Talk Boost* Intervention Manual there are suggestions and opportunities for how adults can scaffold and support children's language. There are also opportunities to extend and expand children's language through using open ended questions, modelling talk and using the experience of being in a small group to have conversations (Sylva et al, 2006).

Throughout *Early Talk Boost* the **Building on practice** sections provide suggestions for building the strategies outlined in the intervention into planning and everyday conversations with children. Various studies show that children benefit most from having conversations with responsive adults (Sylva et al, 2004; Wietzman et al 2002 and 2006). These suggestions are based on research showing that:

- Children learn language by being actively involved and engaged in activities.
- Children learn from responsive adults.
- Children learn from adults modelling language.

The opportunities in *Early Talk Boost* to extend and expand children's language also target some of the vocabulary and language concepts, giving children a chance to build on what they have learned in their small groups.

Attention and listening

Attention and listening skills are two of the building blocks for early language development. Programmes such as Letters and Sounds (DfES, 2007) highlight how vital these skills are for children taking stepping stones to reading. Helping children to learn attention and listening skills gives them a foundation for the rest of the intervention (Gilmore and Vance, 2007).

Learning and using new words

Children go through different stages when learning new words: from not knowing a word, to linking it to its meaning, then being secure in its meaning and then being able to use it. Information about the sounds that make up a word, as well as its meaning, are key to learning new words.

Adults have a role to play in helping children to learn new words. Research suggests that adults giving an explanation and definition of new words helps children learn new words more quickly (Justice, Meier and Walpole, 2005). Giving children an explanation and definition can add more than if they just hear a word.

In *Early Talk Boost* there are examples of how to talk about words with children, explaining different categories of words (verb, concepts) that will enhance practitioners' skills in developing children's vocabulary. There are also opportunities for repetition as this will also help children to learn new words.

Building sentences

Early Talk Boost uses an approach often used with children with communication difficulties to help them build and expand their sentences: colour coding different parts of the sentence. This approach has been shown to have an effect in helping children use longer sentences and develop their awareness of word order (Bryan, 1997; Bolderson et al, 2011).

A building blocks approach using key words is also used (Knowles and Masidlover, 1982; Blank, 2006). This key words approach (also known as 'information carrying words') involves learning about and using the main parts of a sentence that carry information. For example, if you ask a child to 'Put the teddy on the chair' they need to understand 'teddy' (as opposed to monkey, horse, car), 'on' and 'chair' (so they know where to put teddy). Although grammatical structure is important later on, at the early stages children build up their language through hearing and using the key words.

Children start by using single words (cup, apple, Daddy, Jack, drink, eat, sleep) and then gradually start to put two words together ('big cup', 'Daddy go'). They can combine nouns and verbs, nouns and descriptions and concepts (e.g. big, little, happy, sad). *Early Talk Boost* assumes that children do know some words but may need help joining these words together and developing their own mental dictionary.

Retelling stories

Narrative approaches have been shown to have an effect on children's ability to retell stories and organise their narratives (Talking time, 2007; Dockrell et al, 2006; 2010). *Early Talk Boost* aims to provide opportunities to tell stories about everyday familiar situations and routines so that children can both share their experiences and build on them. This supports children to talk about their own experiences, ideas and feelings and supports the English Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum requirements in this area.

Books

The eight *Jake & Tizzy* story books, created specifically for *Early Talk Boost*, are a central part of this intervention for a number of reasons:

- They introduce and reinforce the characters– a young boy called Jake and his Tiger puppet, Tizzy—who appear throughout the intervention so that the children become familiar with them.
- They reinforce key skills covered in the groups, such as attention and listening.
- They cover and target a range of vocabulary.
- They focus on language structures that the children are learning.
- Repeated reading of story books has an effect on children's narrative skills and print knowledge (Horst et al, 2011)
- Repetition of vocabulary gives children an opportunity to hear and use words again, aiding retention (Horst et al, 2011).

As well as this, the way that parents use key strategies – such as pausing and contingent questioning – has been found to have an effect on children's language skills (Colmar, 2014). *Early Talk Boost* introduces parents to these strategies using the story books.

Songs and rhymes

Singing songs and saying rhymes is vital for helping children to develop the skills they need later on for reading. These are known as metalinguistic skills, and will also help children with phonic skills, such as segmenting words into individual sounds (MacLean et al, 1987), when they start school.

Songs reinforce the content of each session to give children another opportunity to hear and share words, concepts and stories. They are also open ended and inclusive so all children can join in and participate.

Pilot evaluation

Outcomes

Early Talk Boost was piloted between September 2014 and September 2015 to evaluate its impact on children's early language development. The evaluation framework was designed with the support of Professor Tim Pring at City University London to be as close as possible to a randomised controlled trial, considered to be the gold standard of research methods.

The following outcomes were identified at the initial stages of project development and formed the basis of the evaluation.

For settings

- Increased knowledge for trained staff in how to support children's language and communication development in the early years.
- Increased confidence for trained staff in the use of strategies to support children's language and communication development in the early years.

For children

- All children who complete *Early Talk Boost* make better progress with their language and communication than a comparison group who don't.
- 70% of children will fall within their age-appropriate range for language and communication following the intervention.

Impact

The evaluation was also intended to look at the wider impact of *Early Talk Boost*:

- Children will show improved dispositions for learning, for example confidence, resilience and curiosity, and the ability to access the curriculum, following the intervention.
- 70% of the children who take part in *Early Talk Boost* will be judged to be 'school ready'.

Area	Number of settings	Type of setting	Index of Multiple Deprivation Decile*
Sunderland	8	3x Private/Voluntary/Independent (PVI) 3x Local Authority nursery 1x Nursery School 1x Nursery Unit attached to School	3 at 1 2 at 2 1 at 3 2 at 4
St Helens	8	5 x PVI 1x Voluntary aided 2x Nursery Unit attached to School	4 at 1 2 at 2 1 at 3 1 at 4
Essex	1	1 x Pre-school	3
London	6	4 x Nursery Unit attached to School 2x Nursery School and Children's Centre	2 at 1 4 at 2 1 at 5

*A rating of 1 represents the most deprived 10% of areas. A rating of 10 represents the least deprived 10% of areas. Data taken from <http://apps.opendatacommunities.org/showcase/deprivation>

Participants

Early years settings in four areas of England were recruited through contacts with local authority early years services. Settings were self-selecting and volunteered to take part, having been given information on the pilot and what their participation would entail.

The areas were:

- **St Helens:** a metropolitan local authority in the North West with low levels of people from ethnic minority backgrounds and a mixed picture of deprivation, with areas of the borough in the most deprived 1% nationally, as well as the 7% least deprived nationally (information taken from the local authority Joint Strategic Needs Analysis –JSNA).
- **Sunderland:** a metropolitan local authority in the North East that is in the 20% of local authorities with the highest index of deprivation and that has an increasing ethnic minority population(JSNA).

- **London Borough of Haringey:** an exceptionally diverse and fast-changing borough. Almost two-thirds of the population, and over 70% of young people, are from ethnic minority backgrounds, and over 100 languages are spoken in the borough. There are very high levels of deprivation, as Haringey is the fourth most deprived borough in London (JSNA).

- **Essex:** with a population of close to 1.74 million, currently 10.5% of the population are from ethnic minority backgrounds. Essex has some of the most affluent and some of the most deprived areas in the country, with further pockets of disadvantaged communities that are hard to identify. The number of young people in Essex not in education, employment or training (NEET) is higher than national and regional averages. Young people from more disadvantaged communities are at a higher risk of becoming NEET(JSNA).

The settings were a mix of maintained nurseries in schools and private and voluntary providers.

	Male	Female	Children with SEN	Children with EAL	Children eligible for FSM	Children aged 3 years 6 months or under	Children aged over 3 years 6 months
Number of children	91	68	19	32	25	70	83

Settings in each area were randomly assigned to either an active group (who would take part in *Early Talk Boost*) or a waiting comparison group (who would take part in *Early Talk Boost* after waiting for a term).

Early years practitioners in each setting were asked:

- To identify eight children with delayed communication and language development to take part in a ‘catch-up’ intervention.
- Not to choose children who had significant speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).
- To indicate where children had English as an additional language (EAL).
- To identify whether the children were in families who qualified for social welfare support, using eligibility for free school meals (FSM) or early years pupil premium (EYPP) as an indicator of this.

Parents were asked to give their permission for children to take part in the pilot and were given information about its structure. Some children took part in *Early Talk Boost* first and some had to wait until the following term, but all the children had their language assessed. The children were also asked to give their assent to taking part in the pilot.

The table above shows the profile of the children who took part in *Early Talk Boost*.

Please note we do not have all of this data for all 163 children. The figures for SEN, EAL and FSM are likely to be an underestimate of the actual total.

Baseline assessments

All the children taking part were assessed using a combination of standardised assessments, checklists and surveys. Evaluation assistants who were either qualified speech and language therapists or speech and language therapy students were recruited to administer some of the assessments. These evaluation assistants were not directly employed by I CAN and did not know whether the children they were assessing were in the active group or the comparison group.

The baseline assessment included the ***Pre-School Language Scale – Fourth Edition (PLS-4)*** (Zimmerman, Steiner and Pond, 2009), which is a standardised assessment of young children's receptive and expressive language. In addition to this standardised measure of children's language, baseline testing also included a measure of the children's well-being and involvement in their early years environment, adapted from the FerreLaevers Self Evaluation Instrument for Care Settings (Laevers, 2005).

Practitioners were also given a checklist developed by the project team based on developmental language norms to use as an additional measure of the children's speech, language and communication skills (**Selection tool**).

In addition, children were asked to rate their own communication skills and confidence using a tool developed by the project team (see **Appendix A: Children's voice form**).

Initially parents were asked to rate their children's communication skills and their confidence in supporting them. From the data obtained, scores appeared to be unreliable (inflated as compared to practitioner responses and direct assessment) so a retrospective questionnaire was developed to capture their views on their child's progress (see **Appendix B: Parent questionnaire**).

Additional measures included a baseline confidence measure that practitioners completed to measure the level of their confidence in identifying children with delayed language and in knowing how to support them (**Staff outcomes survey**). The quality of both practitioner and parent training was also evaluated using a post-training questionnaire..

The table overleaf shows the range of assessments and who completed them.

Assessment	Who carried it out	When
<i>PLS-4</i>	Evaluation assistant	T1; T2; T3 – all children
Parent questionnaire (retrospective)	Early years practitioner with parents	T1; T2 – after intervention
Well-being and participation checklist (adapted from FerreLaevers)	Early years practitioner	T1; T2
Selection tool	Early years practitioner	T1; T2; T3 – all children
Children's voice form	Early years practitioner	T1; T2; T3 – all children
Staff outcomes survey(questionnaire pre-training and post-intervention)	I CAN communication advisor	T1; T2 Waiting and active settings
Quality audit of staff training	I CAN communication advisor	Following staff training
Quality audit of parent training	I CAN communication advisor	Following parent training

T1 = first assessment period (before *Early Talk Boost*)

T2 = second assessment period (after *Early Talk Boost*)

T3 = third assessment period (approximately one term after *Early Talk Boost* for the active group; after *Early Talk Boost* for the comparison group)

Practitioner training

Practitioners attended a training course that was developed and delivered by the project team. The objectives of the training were to develop practitioners’:

- Awareness that communication and language development helps children to develop confidence and skills to express themselves, and to speak and listen in a range of situations.
- Awareness of how children develop communication and language skills at home and at pre-school, and the importance of working with parents.
- Awareness that language and learning are linked and the importance of good communication skills for school readiness.
- Knowledge of the *Early Talk Boost* intervention and resources, and how to implement the intervention.
- Ability to identify the children who would benefit most from the *Early Talk Boost* intervention.

Of the practitioners who responded to the post-training questionnaire:

- 100% reported that they would recommend the course to others.
- 100% felt the course had met the learning objectives.
- 94% reported it would change the way they work.

At their training course practitioners were provided with an *Early Talk Boost* Intervention Manual with a week-by-week guide to the activities. This also included the key learning points that the children needed to become aware of, together with suggestions for differentiation and strategies for use in the wider early years setting.

Practitioners were also given a toolkit with all the toys and resources required to carry out the activities. *Early Talk Boost* is designed to be delivered in three weekly sessions of 30–40 minutes over nine weeks. The sessions follow a set format (shown below) of Activity 1, Activity 2, Song and Story (about Jake and Tizzy). The song and story are repeated at each of the three sessions and the story book is given to the child to take home at the end of each week.

Sample *Early Talk Boost* session

Planning: Planning board and Tizzy puppet

Activity 1: Who’s who?

Using our ears and eyes to find out what’s happening

Activity 2: Matching sounds

Can you do this?

Song: ‘Zoom, Zoom, Zoom’

Jake and Tizzy story: *The Ice Lolly*

Parental involvement

Some parents also attended a workshop intended to support them in using the *Jake & Tizzy* books to support their child's language and communication at home. The training aimed to coach parents in using some of the key strategies that have been found to be effective in developing children's communication and language skills, and that have been used successfully in parent interventions (Colmar, 2014).

The strategies identified were:

- Pausing.
- Looking at the book together.
- Asking contingent questions.

These were presented to parents using the mnemonic **LEARN**:

Look at the pictures together

Encourage your child to talk by letting them start the conversation

Ask questions about the story

Remember to talk about things your child is especially interested in

Never rush; remember to pause

These strategies were introduced using the *Jake & Tizzy* books from *Early Talk Boost* as a stimulus for communication and language.

Although responses to the workshop were favourable, attendance was limited and it was not possible to evaluate whether children whose parents did attend the workshop made better progress than children whose parents did not.

Assessments after *Early Talk Boost*

Following completion of *Early Talk Boost* all participating children were re-tested using the same range of assessments, checklists and surveys, delivered by the evaluation assistants and the early years practitioners.

In addition, parents of the children who had taken part in the intervention were asked to complete a retrospective Parent questionnaire to capture whether they felt their children's communication and language skills had changed.

To supplement these measures a representative sample of practitioners was also interviewed following the intervention using a semi-structured interview format (Staff interviews). These interviews were carried out over the phone by a member of I CAN staff who was not directly involved in delivering *Early Talk Boost*.

Evaluation results

Results from the Pre-School Language Scales (PLS-4)

Data was available from eight early years settings where children completed *Early Talk Boost* and from seven settings that acted as a waiting comparison group (children from these settings completed the intervention in the following school term).

- One hundred and eleven children were initially assessed.
- Sixty six children were in settings running the intervention (active settings) (27 girls, 39 boys; mean age 42.67 months, standard deviation 4.32).
- Forty five children were in comparison group settings (18 girls, 27 boys; mean age 41.78 months, standard deviation 3.75).
- Of these, 87 children were reassessed at the end of the term (50 active, 37 comparison), giving an attrition rate of 21.6%.

The major measure of the children's language abilities was the PLS-4, which gives an expressive score and an auditory score, measuring a child's talking and understanding. The analysis below is of the raw scores from the assessment. The PLS-4 is standardised and can be converted to standard and percentile

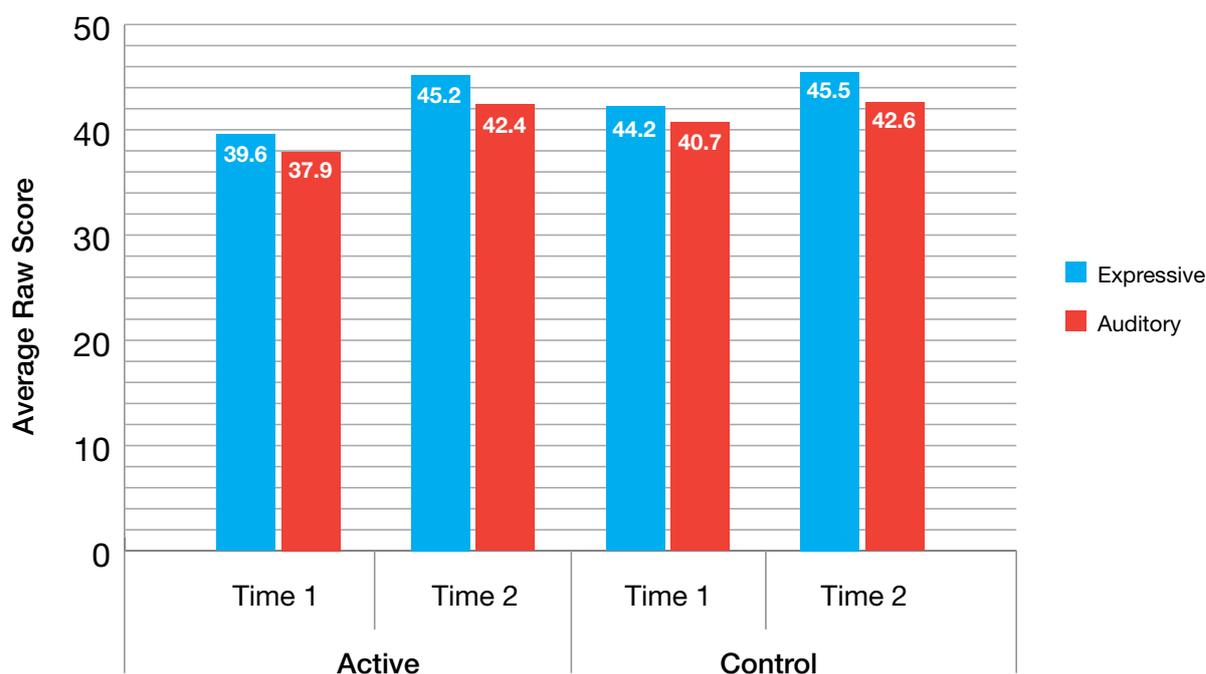
scores, and the child's language age (age-equivalent score) can also be obtained. This means we are able to compare children with others of the same age with typical language development.

As expected, the children improved over the three months of the evaluation ($F(1, 83) = 89.69, p < .001$). This result merely reflects the increasing age of the children and their general improvement while in early years settings. The important result is the interaction between time and whether children took part in *Early Talk Boost* or not. This is significant ($F(1, 83) = 9.47, p < .01$).

The table on the following page shows the **progress** that the children made; it shows that the active children improved more on both the expressive and auditory scales. Although the changes and the advantage for active children appear quite small, they are highly significant and would only have occurred by chance fewer than one in a hundred times. This means that the children who took part in *Early Talk Boost* made significantly more progress with talking and understanding than children who did not.

		Before <i>Early Talk Boost</i>	After <i>Early Talk Boost</i>	Change
Active children	Expressive	39.58 (7.99)	45.18 (7.68)	5.60
	Auditory	37.90 (6.93)	42.40 (6.89)	4.50
Comparison children	Expressive	42.16 (6.58)	45.51 (6.89)	3.35
	Auditory	40.70 (6.48)	42.59 (7.12)	1.81

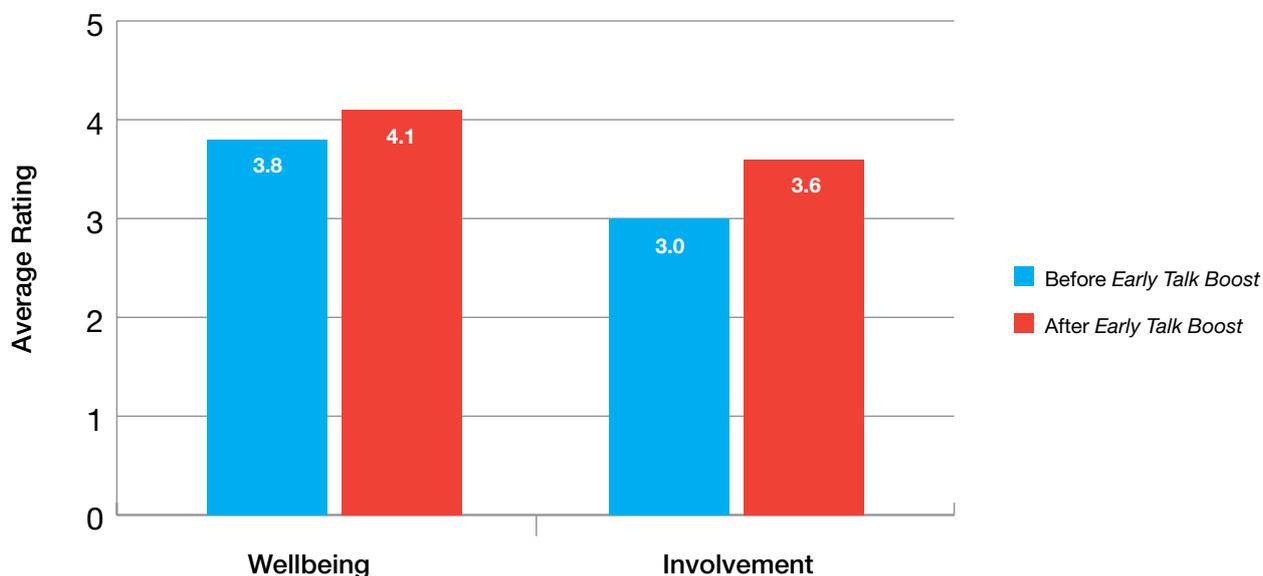
Early Talk Boost Evaluation PLS Average Raw Scores



A further indication of the changes is given by comparing age-equivalent scores:

- Children who were not involved in *Early Talk Boost* advanced by three months (the time between before and after measures).
- Children who were involved in *Early Talk Boost* advanced by six months.

Early Talk Boost Evaluation: Wellbeing and Participation



Results from the Well-being and participation checklist

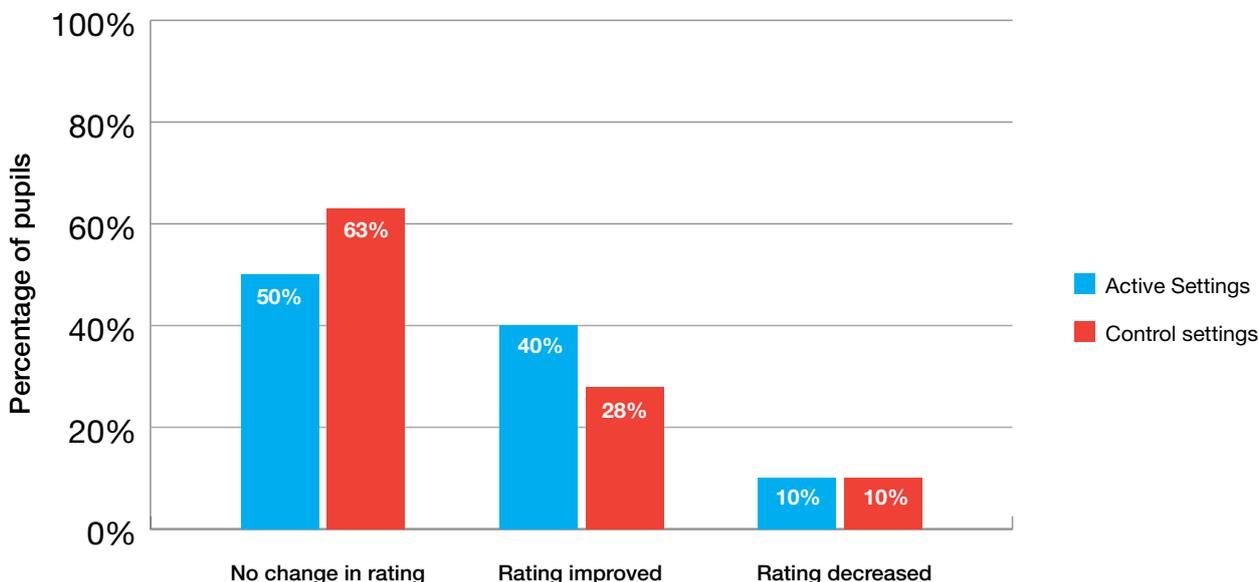
The **Well-being and participation checklist** was developed from the Leuven Wellbeing and Involvement Scales (Laevers, 2005). It was used to look at the impact of *Early Talk Boost* on areas such as non-verbal communication and expression and activity levels, which are indications that children are enjoying and learning in their early years setting.

Staff fed back to us that the checklist was at too low a level for some of their children and didn't capture some of the behaviours they felt indicated school readiness. Very few checklists were completed before and after *Early Talk Boost*, and only for children who did the intervention, so we do not have comparison data. This does limit any conclusions that can be drawn.

However, the data we do have does show significant changes. Comparing the before and after scores with a Wilcoxon test, the results from 16 children were:

- **Well-being:** The mean before score was 3.8, with a mean after score of 4.1. Although this is not a very big change, it is significant at $p < .05$. This means there is a less than 5% chance that this would have happened by random chance. Eleven children increased their scores and four decreased.
- **Participation:** The mean before score was 3.0, and the mean after score was 3.6. This is significant at $p < .01$. This is a strong result, meaning there is less than a 1% chance that this would have happened by random chance. It is also consistent, that is 15 children improved their scores and only one decreased.

Early Talk Boost Evaluation: Difference in Selection Tool ratings before and after *Early Talk Boost*



Results from the Selection tool

The evaluation included a tool which practitioners used to measure progress following *Early Talk Boost*. The Selection tool comprised of an elicited section where children responded to requests from an adult to carry out an action or point to pictures.

Both the active and the comparison settings were asked to use the tool as a ‘before and after’ measure. The scoring was based on a red/amber/green (RAG) rating system familiar to early years practitioners, with green indicating language development within the typical age range, amber indicating delayed language, and red indicating significant levels of difficulty.

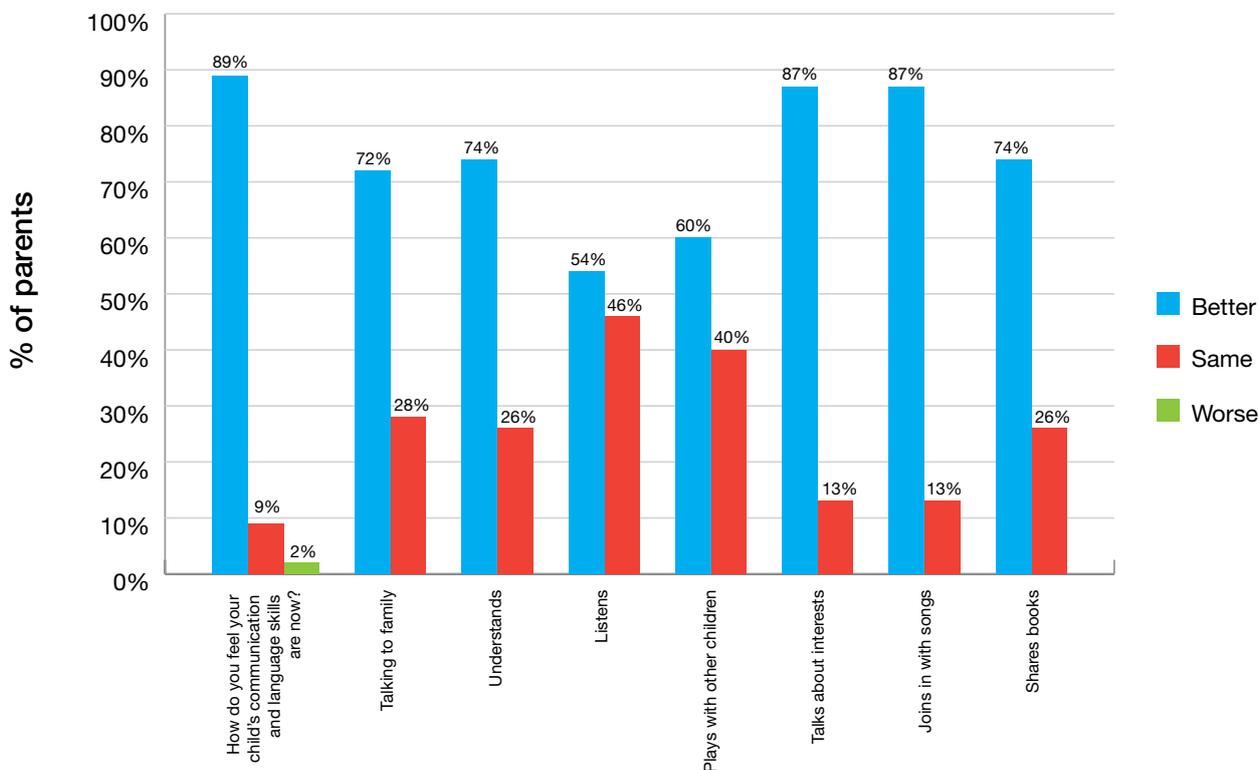
In the pilot, practitioners found it difficult to use the Selection tool and reported low levels of compliance in both active

and comparison groups. The tool proved complex to score and although based on developmental norms, it was not standardised and so it was not possible to check its accuracy. Outcomes based on the Selection tool results therefore need to be considered with caution.

Complete before and after scores were available for 50 children in the active settings and 40 in comparison settings. This graph shows whether their rating stayed the same, increased (e.g. moved from red to amber or amber to green) or decreased (e.g. moved from amber to red).

The pilot of the Selection tool prompted the creation of the *Early Talk Boost Tracker*, which is now included in the intervention.

Early Talk Boost Evaluation: Percentage of parents who rated their child's skills as better, the same or worse after *Early Talk Boost*



Results from the Parent questionnaire

The retrospective Parent questionnaire was given to parents after their child had completed *Early Talk Boost*. The return rate was 55%.

Parents were asked to compare their child's language and communication before and after *Early Talk Boost*. They did this by selecting 'Better/Same/Worse' for a number of statements (see Appendix B: Parent questionnaire).

See results on the chart above.

Of parents who answered the questionnaire, 95% reported that *Early Talk Boost* had made a difference to their child's language and communication.

The parents who rated their child's communication as worse commented that their child had 'always been a good talker'. This indicated that they may have felt that their child did not need the intervention as they already demonstrated good communication skills.

Results from the Children's voice form

Children were asked to rate their experiences of nursery on a 3-point scale (1=Sad, 2=OK, 3=Happy) using visual support. Forty eight forms were completed in settings before *Early Talk Boost* started, and 37 at the end.

Forms for before and after *Early Talk Boost* were not completed in the settings that did not run the intervention, so no comparison data is available.

Not all of the questions were answered on every form. Given the constraints of consulting 3-year-old children with delayed language development the results must be treated with some caution; however, they did show change following the intervention.

For 34 of the children we have scores both before and after *Early Talk Boost* (although not all of the children completed all of the questions).

After *Early Talk Boost*:

- More of the children selected 'Happy' in all of the areas.
- 32% more children said they were happy when they went to nursery.
- 25% more children said that they were good at talking with their friends.

- 29% more children said they could talk to their teacher.
- 56% more children said that they could listen when their teacher/keyworker was speaking.
- 76% children said that they were happy telling stories (compared to 31% before).
- Numbers of children who felt 'Sad' about their communication skills decreased in all areas.
- Samples of children's spoken language showed an increase in MLU (mean length of utterance, i.e. the average number of words used) and complexity of sentence structure.

These results need to be treated with caution as this is a small sample and consulting with children of this age is, of necessity, a challenge. Nevertheless, the results indicate that children enjoyed taking part in *Early Talk Boost*, with comments such as:

'I liked the baby animals, I like singing songs and Tizzy puppet.'

'I liked all of the books and taking them home. I liked playing instruments and finding pictures.'

'I liked the jumping one. Jake is a boy and Tizzy is a boy as well. I like the jumping games. I really like them.'

Results from the Staff outcomes survey

One of the predicted outcomes of early years practitioners' involvement in *Early Talk Boost* (using practical activities to support children's language and communication) was that they would become increasingly confident in using these strategies and in supporting children.

Staff were asked to rate their confidence before attending the initial training course and after running *Early Talk Boost*.

In active group settings staff confidence continued to rise; however, in comparison group settings staff reported high confidence before starting *Early Talk Boost*, which dropped slightly afterwards. This may be because being involved in the *Early Talk Boost* project in a peripheral way initially (i.e. selecting the children and conducting the baseline assessments), had given staff a level of confidence that was then reduced when the training highlighted gaps in their own knowledge of which they were previously unaware .

The numbers of staff in each group are small, so the results need to be treated with caution.

● **In the active group:** 12 staff completed the Staff outcomes survey before *Early Talk Boost*, 5 after *Early Talk Boost* and 3 staff one term after *Early Talk Boost*.

● **In the comparison group:** 5 staff completed the Staff outcomes survey one term before *Early Talk Boost*, 8 just before *Early Talk Boost* and 4 staff after *Early Talk Boost*.

See the results on the next page.

Staff comments included:

'Early Talk Boost has definitely developed my confidence in supporting language and communication skills. It has given me new ideas and strategies.'

**Practitioner, Bright Stars Nursery,
Hudson Road Primary School**

'I feel the Early Talk Boost programme has helped me re-focus my thinking and really support the children who need extra support.'

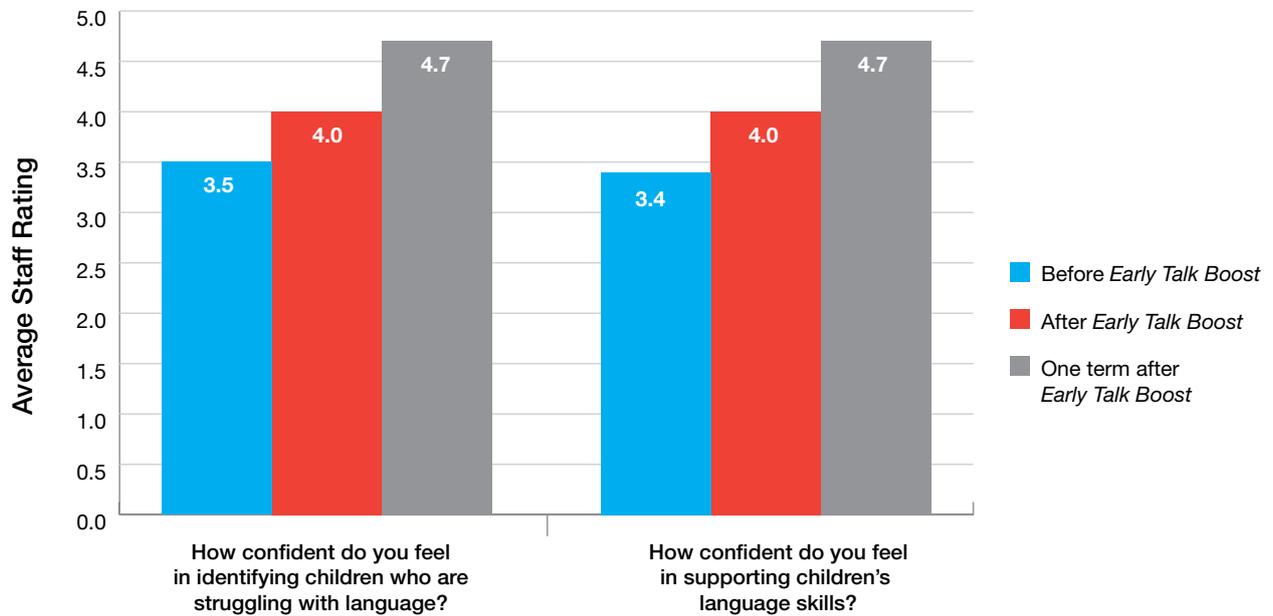
**Practitioner, St Josephs RC Primary
School Nursery**

'I feel that the I CAN programme helps the younger children to improve some areas of communication and language and I feel happy to deliver it.'

Practitioner, Little Harvards Day Nursery

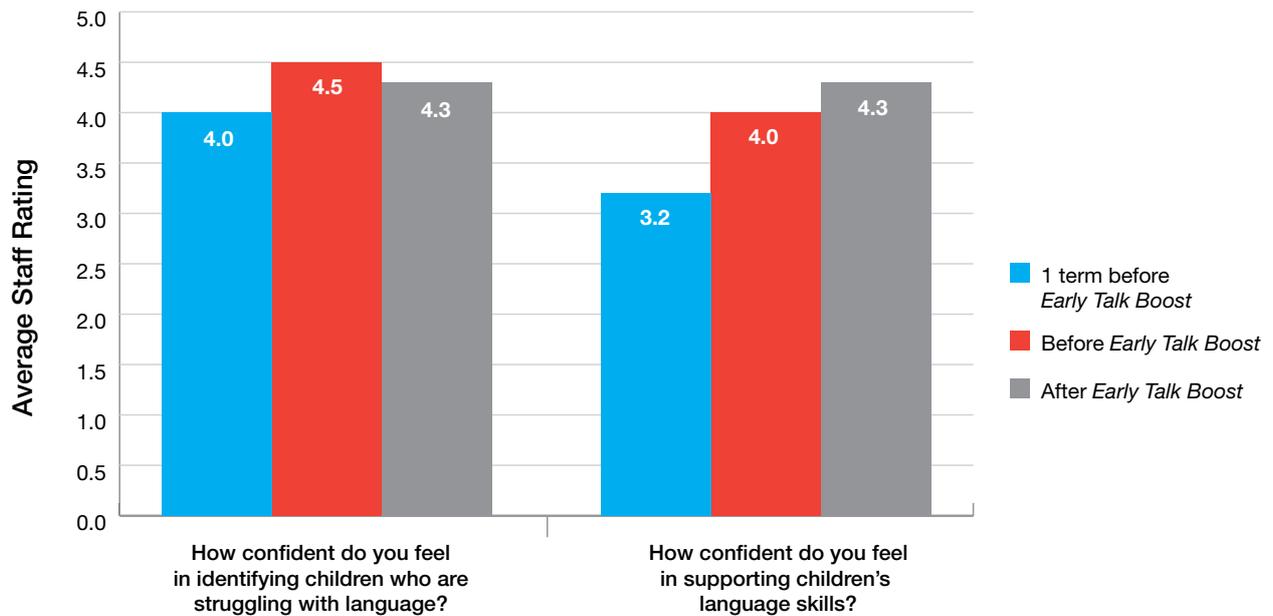
Early Talk Boost Evaluation: Staff Confidence Active Settings

1 = Not at all confident 5 = very confident



Early Talk Boost Evaluation: Staff Confidence Active Settings

1 = Not at all confident 5 = very confident



Results from the Staff interviews

Five staff members participated in telephone interviews. They represented settings from all three areas. Interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 23 minutes (mean= 18 minutes).

Thematic analysis of the interviews identified factors that facilitated *Early Talk Boost* as well as barriers to its implementation.

What worked well?

Having clear daily routines

'Well we're fairly structured here in terms of the adults, not the children, we have very clear daily routines and systems that are already in place ...So in terms of actually fitting another intervention in it wasn't difficult for us to place and organise it as part of our daily set of interventions.'

Manager, Pennywell Nursery School

Clarity of the resources

'Found it really informative...you had all your resources there to hand and you didn't have to, you know what it's like if you need to go on a hunt beforehand, it's all there and all ready.'

Manager, Springboard Nursery

Books

'Children love the books as I say, they do ask for the books and we read them nearly every day. They say "Can we have Jake and Tizzy books?"'

Manager, Parish C of E Primary School Nursery

Barriers

Parental engagement

'A lot of my parents didn't agree to having the training themselves so they don't really know too much about what they've been doing apart from what I've told them on handover.'

Nursery Nurse, Storytime Private Day Nursery

Children attending different sessions at different times of the week

'The only thing I struggled with is with us being a private setting all the children are not in at the same times each week so we're doing 3 sessions a week. I've had to do 6 sessions a week. One in a morning one on an afternoon and then some children missed out on one session as well with us being so flexible.'

Manager, Springboard Nursery

Time consuming

'It was hard to manage my time and no I don't think anyone else would have undertaken it in the preschool at the moment because everyone's under a lot of pressure getting the paperwork done and do the children and as it went on I did enjoy it.'

Deputy Manager, St Luke's Primary and Nursery School

Analysis of interviews also provided additional evidence of impact on children, staff and on practice.

Impact on staff **Increased awareness**

'It's made me more aware about what's involved in speech, language and communication skills.'

Manager, Springboard Nursery

Increased confidence

'It does make you say to staff "you've got to be thinking, you don't just keep saying to a child get your coat, get your coat, get your coat you give them what you want them to do and you count to 10 in your head, you need to give the child time to process...you need to be talking slow and low to them and you need to be extending their talk and expanding things. But I do feel more confident in myself.'

Deputy Manager, St Luke's Primary and Nursery School

New ideas

'It's changed how I would look at activities for helping speech and language it's given me so many ideas and so much more to contribute to the sessions and the rest of the nursery.'

Nursery Nurse, Storytime Private Day Nursery

Impact on children in the group

Talking

'They've absolutely loved it. One of the children is definitely become more vocal because he didn't actually speak much within the nursery and he's actually now saying 2 or 3 words together.'

Manager, Springboard Nursery

Confidence

'The majority of the group that have done the pilot we've seen improvements. The data we collect every term we've seen an improvement in how they're scoring against their early learning goals. We've seen an improvement in how confident the children have become, how much more their using words and using language.'

Manager, Parish C of E Primary School Nursery

Listening skills

'Yeah their listening, attention and their concentration skills throughout the session and we've actually started using the eyes, the ears in our normal group times as well.'

Manager, Springboard Nursery

Social skills

'One of my parents when I said about her child doing this she said why have you chosen my child he doesn't need it and I said that's OK and about getting seen by speech therapist and she said I don't want him seen by speech therapist...and then she changed her mind and he got seen. That was the parent who came in to me and said oh my goodness I can't believe he did this and that was after a week...this was the child that wouldn't join in activities.'

Deputy Manager, St Luke's Primary and Nursery School

Impact on children in the whole setting

'As well as the pilot group we've started to do other groups now so it's having a much wider impact on many more of the children. It's well and truly in; this is part of our intervention system now.'

Manager, Pennywell Nursery School

Evaluation: conclusions

Outcomes

This evaluation gives us both qualitative and quantitative data to show that *Early Talk Boost* is successful in meeting its outcomes.

For settings

- Increased knowledge for trained staff in how to support children's language and communication in the early years.
- Increased confidence for trained staff in the use of strategies to support children's language and communication in the early years.

Staff reported increased knowledge and confidence on a range of measures, including evaluation of the initial training, confidence measures before and after *Early Talk Boost*, and follow-up interviews.

Staff also reported that strategies and activities from the intervention are being used more widely across settings and shared with other staff and parents, thereby increasing the reach and impact of *Early Talk Boost*.

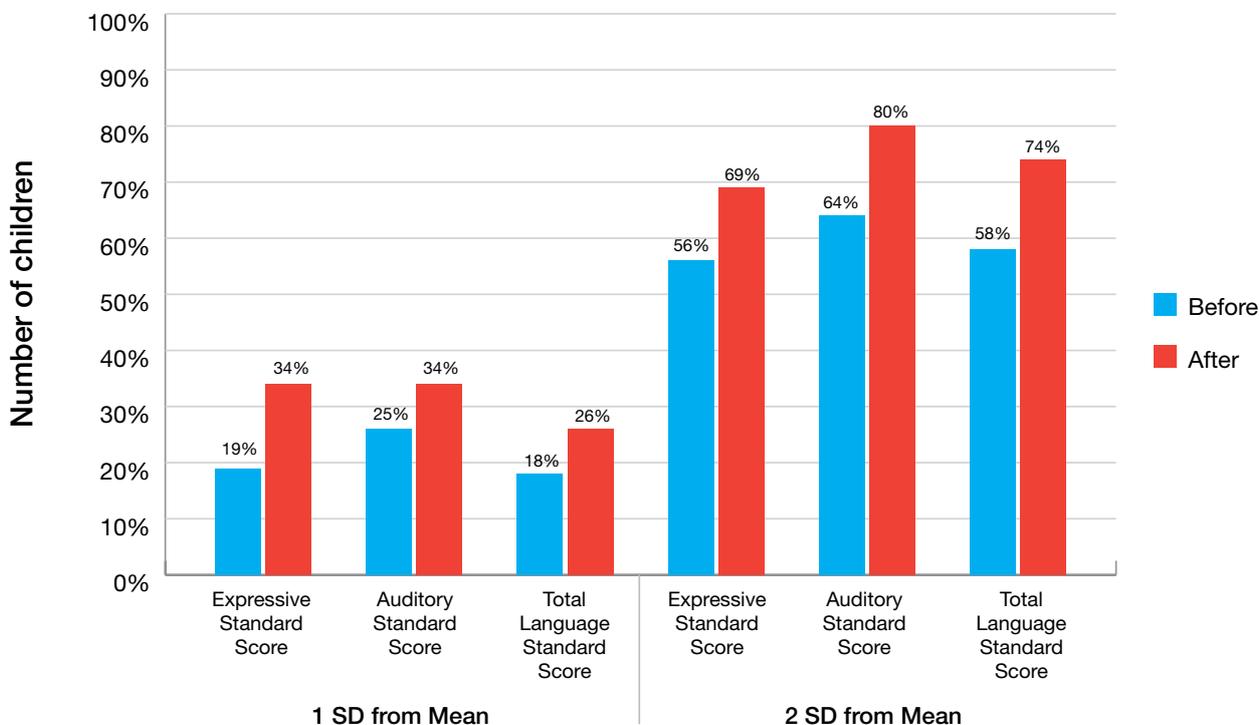
For children

- All children who complete *Early Talk Boost* make better progress with their language and communication than a comparison group who don't do the intervention.
- 70% of children will fall within their age-appropriate range for language and communication following *Early Talk Boost*.

The results from the standardised assessment (PLS-4), the Selection tool and the Staff and parent reports show that the children's communication and language skills increased as a result of taking part in *Early Talk Boost*.

However, as seen in the table below, taking a definition of 1 standard deviation (SD) from the mean, only 34% of children moved to within the age-appropriate range for their age. Although the children made statistically significant progress, they did not all catch up with their peer group. This is in large part due to the children's very low levels of language at the start of the intervention.

Early Talk Boost Evaluation: PLS Standard Scores



Impact

The intention of the evaluation was also to look at the wider impact of *Early Talk Boost*:

- Children will show improved dispositions for learning, for example confidence, resilience and curiosity, and ability to access the curriculum, following the intervention.
- 70% of the children who take part in *Early Talk Boost* will be judged to be 'school ready'.

Some settings, where the nursery is co-located within a primary school, have reported that the Reception Class teachers

have noticed an improvement in children's attention and listening and language skills on school entry (e.g. Parish C of E Nursery and Primary School). Parents, staff and children themselves have reported that children's confidence and use of language increased.

There is also some indication from the results of the Well-being and participation checklist that these behaviours increased. However, evaluating the wider impact of *Early Talk Boost* has been challenging as there was no robust measure of school readiness used as part of this project. This is therefore an area that requires further investigation.

Evaluation: discussion

Limitations and challenges

Parent workshops and parent engagement

Unfortunately, take-up of the workshops among parents was low and settings reported varying levels of engagement. The initial Parent questionnaire showed us that parents found it hard to recognise that their child was struggling with communication and language, and this may be a factor in their lack of engagement with *Early Talk Boost*.

Other factors mentioned by nursery staff include reluctance to attend group events in schools or settings, and concern about their own communication and/or literacy skills.

In order to address some of these issues we have developed an interactive workshop session that we hope will be easier to access and improve parent engagement. However, engagement with this group of parents remains an area of focus for I CAN.

Level of speech, language and communication needs of the children

Although analysis of the PLS-4 data results showed a statistically significant difference between the active and comparison groups, further analysis showed an unexpected pattern. Children with very low scores (more than 2 standard deviations below the norm) and children with scores of between -1 and +1 standard deviation made the most progress. Dividing the groups up in this way gives smaller numbers so the findings must be treated with caution.

However, this may be explained by the recent findings of Roy, Chiat and Dodd (2014) who reported that children from low SES (socio-economic status) backgrounds had lower language levels than their clinical sample of children from higher SES families. It may be that children with environmental language delay have lower language levels at 3years than language-impaired children of the same age, but because there is no language impairment, the former group respond more to *Early Talk Boost* because they are able to use their intact language learning mechanisms to acquire the skills covered in the intervention. This area requires further investigation.

Selection tool: development of the Tracker

The initial Selection tool had several limitations, including challenges in administration and scoring. Based on feedback from this initial pilot, we decided to develop a tracking tool as part of the development of the *Early Talk Boost* resources, using the following criteria.

The Tracker needed to:

- Be simple to use and easy to score, with emerging/exceeding/expected or equivalent categories. This mirrors systems familiar to early years practitioners, and to the systems currently being developed by school staff for measuring progress.
- Cover the 3–4 year old age range using evidence of developmental norms.
- Take 15–20 minutes to administer, so that it is practical for use in a busy early years setting.
- Have a combination of elicited responses and observations in order to gather both quantitative and qualitative data.
- Identify which children are appropriate for *Early Talk Boost*.
- Measure progress, so that settings see the impact of supporting young children's language and communication in a more targeted way.

- Include language and communication categories that mirror *Early Talk Boost* so that it measures progress in these areas.

In addition, online scoring of the Tracker was developed in order to facilitate calculation of progress by comparing scores before and after *Early Talk Boost*. Providing an easy-to-manage way of doing this will encourage more early years practitioners to share progress data with I CAN so that we can continue to monitor the efficacy of *Early Talk Boost* in the future. The online system also provides settings with automatically created graphs of progress data, which are useful when reporting to senior staff or school governors.

Areas for further investigation

Consulting with children

Methods for consulting with very young children, especially children with communication difficulties, are challenging to develop. I CAN is committed to consulting the children and young people we work with and we will continue to explore and develop the best methods by which to do this.

Ongoing staff behaviour and practice change

Early years practitioners who took part in the training and intervention reported that they used the *Early Talk Boost* strategies and activities more widely across the setting and with other children.

Having practical strategies to use and the opportunity to practise these as part of a structured intervention seemed to support further development of practitioners' skills and knowledge about speech, language and communication. Capturing this, together with resultant practice impacts, would be interesting and also useful in providing a strong case for investment in interventions such as *Early Talk Boost*.

Working with parents

Engaging with parents of children with language delay in areas of social deprivation has proved a challenge. We need to explore what motivates and supports parents to help their children, and also effective ways of engaging them in learning. Part of this work may be looking at how we support parents to develop their own communication skills.

Final comments

The *Early Talk Boost* pilot set out to design and evaluate a workable and effective intervention for early years practitioners to use with 3–4 year old children with delayed communication and language skills.

This report shows *Early Talk Boost* to have a positive impact on young children's language development, providing a valuable resource for early years practitioners. The evaluation also highlights opportunities to build on findings, identifying areas for further investigation.

Early Talk Boost is now being disseminated through I CAN's Licensee network (see www.ican.org.uk/licensees), allowing ongoing monitoring and evaluation of its impact through the online Tracker.

For academic references, please see pages 37-38.

Early Talk Boost has been developed with support from the UBS Optimus Foundation.

With thanks to the early years settings staff, children and parents in St Helens, Sunderland, London and South East England who took part in the pilot.

Written in conjunction with Professor Tim Pring, City University London.

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Appendix A: Children's voice form

What I think about talking

This form is to give us more information about what children think about their talking.

It can tell us a lot about what children think and how they feel.

Instructions for practitioner

Complete this form both before and after the *Early Talk Boost* groups.

1. Cut up the faces on **Page C**.
2. Complete the details on **B: Record form** below.
3. Sit with the parent and child and ask each statement.
4. Ask each child to point to how they feel about each statement: **Happy, Sad** or **OK**.
5. Make a note of each response, putting the number in the column: **1 for Sad; 2 for OK; 3 for Happy**

Record any additional comments in the box at the end of the Record form.

Appendix B: Record form

Child's initial:

Setting:

Date:

What I think about talking	Response: 1 for Sad 2 for OK 3 for Happy
1. When I go to nursery, I am ...	
2. I am good at talking with my friends.	
3. I can talk with my teacher.	
4. I can listen when my teacher is talking.	
5. I can ask for a drink or something to eat.	
6. I can tell my teacher if I am upset.	
7. I can tell stories.	
8. I can make friends.	
9. I can talk about who lives with me	
10. I can talk about what I like doing	
<p><i>Do you want to tell me anything else? For children who have done Early Talk Boost, ask:</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me anything about Jake and Tizzy?</i></p> <p><i>Did you like Jake and Tizzy's games?</i></p> <p>Additional comments:</p>	

Page C: Children's voice form

What I think about talking

Ask the children the questions on **B: Record form**, and ask them to point to how they feel.



Sad (1)



OK (2)



Happy (3)

Appendix B: Parent questionnaire

To be completed either in person or over the phone by the practitioner.

Please say the words in *italics*.

Child identifier (initials; gender; date of birth):

Name of setting or school:

Date of interview:

Please note phone or in person: Phone In person

I CAN would like to know what parents think about their child's communication and language skills. I'm going to ask you some questions, and your answers will help I CAN to make sure the games and activities they develop work well.

1.00 *Thinking back to your child's [use child's name] communication and language skills in January and comparing with how they are now do you feel they are:*

Better About the same Worse

2.0 *I am going to ask you to think about some of the ways [child's name] uses communication and language – can you tell me if you feel he/she is better/the same/worse than in January.*

Area	Better	Same	Worse
Happy to talk to family members			
Understands when you talk to him/her			
Listens when people talk to him/her			
Plays with other children and can share toys			
Talks about what he/she is interested in			
Joins in with rhymes and songs			
Shares a book with you or someone they are close to and talks about it			

Parent confidence rating

1. How much do you know about language and communication?

				
1	2	3	4	5
Nothing	Not much	A bit	Quite a lot	Loads

2. How important do you think good language and communication skills are for a 3 year old?

				
1	2	3	4	5
Not important at all	Not very important	A little important	Quite important	Very important

3. How many ways can you think of supporting your child's language and communication skills?



<i>I don't know any</i>	<i>1 way</i>	<i>2 or 3 ways</i>	<i>4 or 5 ways</i>	<i>6 or more ways</i>
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Can you give me some examples? Make a note of these below:

Examples:

4. *How confident do you feel about supporting your child's language and communication skills?*



1



2



3



4



5

Nothing	Not much	A bit	Quite a lot	Loads
---------	----------	-------	-------------	-------

Your child has been taking part in Early Talk Boost and bringing books home to look at with you. Do you think doing Early Talk Boost has made a difference to your child's communication and language?

YES/NO

Comment:

What did you think of the Jake and Tizzy books?

Comment: