

Champion

Speech and language strategy Time to Talk is improving children's communication skills in Warwickshire, finds *Annette Rawstrone*

Outcomes in children's language and communication are being boosted in Warwickshire by a county-wide strategic approach involving children's centres and early years settings, led by speech and language therapists.

The Time to Talk strategy was developed in 2007 by speech and language therapist Alex Williams, and was implemented across Warwickshire from 2009 as a partnership programme between Warwickshire County Council and South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust. The Time to Talk team mentors early years practitioners, who become Speech and Language Champions, ready to promote good

practice in their settings, help to accurately identify a child's level of need for speech and language support early, and provide immediate support. This partnership working with parents and other professionals ensures an integrated and efficient approach built around the child and their family.

'We believe that quality interactions lie at the very heart of a successful modern society,' says Melanie Packer, strategic lead speech and language therapist for Time to Talk. 'More than ever, we need to make sure that our children grow up to be confident to express thoughts, ideas and feelings, as well as respond to those with whom they will share both working and social lives. Time to Talk aims to support children

'The main responsibility is to ensure that speech and language needs are kept high profile in the setting'



Choosing musical instruments

from the moment they are born, by supporting the families and services around them.'

The strategy includes three tiers of interactive training for early years practitioners, which enables them to:

- understand the importance of communication as the foundation for all learning

CASE STUDIES

Weddington Pre-school, Nuneaton

'I qualified in childcare many years ago and there was very little included on speech and language in my training. The numbers of children coming to us with speech and language difficulties is growing, so Time to Talk is an amazing tool for us to use. My SENCO and I are Champions and we're paying for all nine members of staff to undergo the training. We aim for them to all be Tier 2 trained by the end of the year,' says manager Natalie Gudgeon.

'We joke that we're "Champion Talkers", but actually one of the main things we've learnt is to not talk too much – to give less information and allow children time to process what we've said. We've embedded strategies into our work such as playing alongside children and waiting for them

to initiate and lead. We've been amazed what information we've gained from the children.

'It's beneficial for a manager to do the training because I understand why my staff are interacting with children in certain ways, that they are deliberately sitting back and giving children time, not simply doing nothing. Some practitioners have told me that they've done the training but their managers are not totally on board with it. Time to Talk is part of the ongoing discussion in our weekly staff meetings.

'I feel we have a greater understanding of speech and language development and can also support parents. We can target and work with children while they wait for help from outside agencies, which are struggling with high workloads. We have 'The Big Book of Ideas' and know we can approach the

Time to Talk team for support and guidance. We're seeing improvements in children because of our work, which is rewarding.'

Clopton and District Children's Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon

'I became a Speech and Language Champion three years ago and run regular Chatter Matters courses for parents with babies and toddlers at the Children's Centre, which is committed to implementing the Time to Talk strategy. I deliberately keep the groups small, with a maximum of eight children, and make them fun and engaging,' says early years family worker Helen Barboutis.

'These groups give parents the building blocks for speech and language with their children so they are less likely

to have problems when they are older. They are full of music, singing and games that they can also do at home, such as playing peepo with voiles.

'Parents come to me if they're concerned about their child's speech and language, and I can do WellComm screening. I'm able to reassure parents that there are no issues or help them to tweak how they play and talk to their child. Simple strategies can involve stopping the pushchair and getting face-to-face with their child before speaking, so the child can see them forming the words. I also encourage parents to slow down and not use 20 words when two will suffice.

'If there is speech delay, I can refer them to a therapist. Having a Champion in the centre means that we can support families and identify problems quicker and earlier.'



- demonstrate an understanding of how speech, language and communication develops
- accurately identify children's skills in the five areas of speech, language and communication
- identify when a child needs additional support and at what level, through observation and screening
- support this development, including by creating communication-friendly environments.

'The scheme ensures that vulnerable families are being supported by the whole early years workforce, not just individuals. We don't just offer speech and language training but we offer sustained support, supervision and training so that it is embedded into practice,' says Deborah Powers, one of the Time to Talk speech and language therapists.

'There is a lot of focus on how to make good practice stick so that it becomes the culture of the setting. For example, each term, Champions come to us for cluster meetings. There is continuing professional development and we give support through troubleshooting. It's this ongoing relationship that makes the scheme unique.'

A highlight for Champions is an annual conference, which enables them to network and celebrate best practice as well as update their learning. Speakers in previous years have included Elizabeth Jarman discussing Communication Friendly

Spaces, and the linguist Professor David Crystal.

THREE TIERS

Time to Talk received Every Child a Talker funding in 2010, and from 2011-16, Warwickshire County Council continued the funding, which enables training costs to be highly subsidised. Settings involved in Warwickshire's Closing the Gap Project access fully funded training, and others choose to pay for the training (see case study), which costs around £525 to complete the three tiers. More than 160 early years settings are now involved across the county.

'Individual centres choose who to nominate as Champion. It is not always the senior manager, but someone with an interest in speech and language. Trainee Champions get really fired up about communication during the training. Some centres have more than one Champion, which is a good model because they can share responsibility and provide immediate peer support,' explains Ms Powers.

'The main responsibility is to ensure that speech and language needs are kept high profile in the setting. Champions are supported to use the WellComm screening tool so that they can monitor the language levels of children in their care. They have the resources to implement language enrichment throughout the setting, such as running small groups with specific aims and working with the whole team to develop strategies.'

Staff who have completed Tier 1 can train to lead Chatter Matters language enrichment sessions in their settings for babies, toddlers and young children based around singing, storytelling and play (see case studies, left).

FULL POTENTIAL

Data collected from WellComm screening across 49 settings in Warwickshire demonstrates that the intervention and support provided by Champions is having a positive impact on children's language skills. Out of the 583 children in the study identified as being at risk of language delay, those found to be achieving their full language potential by the follow-up screen had risen from 31 per cent to 54 per cent. The number still needing a high level of support had halved.

'We really want to make sure that no child falls behind because of

MORE INFORMATION

- 'The abc of talking with me' by Deborah Powers *et al* (£6.99, Warwickshire County Council). Email deborah.powers@swft.nhs.uk to order, <https://timetotalkwarwickshire.wordpress.com>
- 'All about... communication-friendly spaces' by Elizabeth Jarman, *Nursery World*, 2 May 2007, www.nurseryworld.co.uk
- WellComm, A Speech and Language Toolkit for the Early Years by GL Assessment, <https://www.gl-assessment.ie/videos/wellcomm-overview>



Playing peek-a-boo

difficulties in communication skills. The strategies really do work but they need to happen as much as possible, so there needs to be an integrated approach between early years practitioners, speech and language therapists and families,' says Ms Powers. 'By acting early it allows us to close the gap and for children to reach their full potential.' ■

IN OUR OPINION

Comments from the managers of children's centres and early years settings on the work of their Champions:

'Our Champion has learnt so much in her cluster meetings and then come back and inspired the rest of the staff.'

'She is wonderful... always trying to think of new ways to promote the importance of speech and language in our Children's Centre; including testing the team's knowledge through gruelling quizzes.'

'Our Champion always makes parents and children welcome; she is passionate about making a difference; enthusiastic and creative; committed to promoting a language-rich environment and always makes time to support staff with strategies and play activities.'

'Our Champions are like special keys that have unlocked potential for children and opened their worlds to new words.'

Comments from Champions:

'It makes you think about your own practice... how much you talk, when and whether it's useful to the child or whether it's just for the sake of talking. Reducing questions leads to more speech.'

'I have been able to reflect on my approach to a quiet child and I know it works. It's the perfect approach for every child, something I know we will always use when we can.'