

Talking Matters:

An Elklan CIC Programme to improve support for speech, language and communication in early years settings

Elklan CIC delivered the Talking Matters Programme under a Department of Education funded grant for the voluntary and community sector from May 2015 to March 2016.

The programme engaged with 6 local authorities and aimed to build the knowledge, skills and confidence of practitioners in early years settings, in the area of support for the development of speech, language and communication, and to implement and embed changes in practice as a result of this training.

1,329 practitioners were trained, in 128 settings, reaching 8,964 children, using a cascade model of delivery. The training has resulted in a reported increase in the knowledge, skills and confidence of practitioners. Those delivering the cascade then supported settings to embed changes in practice and to audit their support for speech, language and communication.

Practitioners were using a wider number of tools and strategies to monitor and support children's speech, language and communication by the end of Talking Matters programme and were able to describe changes in practice at both setting and practitioner level.

Talking Matters was evaluated through surveys, questionnaires and feedback from practitioners, local authority representatives and setting managers. It was found to be a positive experience for all and feedback has been used to develop a sustainable, self-financing programme for national roll out.

Additional data, to support roll out, will be available from an independent evaluation by Sheffield University of the impact on children's attainment, which will report outside of the grant's time frame.

1. Talking Matters Aims

Through Talking Matters, Elklan CIC, in partnership with local authority areas, set out to achieve the following through building on the Early Language Development Programme (ELDP) ¹ and its evaluation:

¹ OPM Evaluation of the Early Language Development Programme, London, 2014.

- Increase the knowledge, confidence and skills of early years practitioners, in settings, in relation to developing speech, language and communication (SLC) in children from 0-5 years;
- Share knowledge and expertise, regarding SLC between early years practitioners;
- Develop the capacity of early years practitioners to support parents in developing their children's SLC;
- Improve the quality of provision, on an on-going basis for children by addressing the speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) of all children, including the upwards of 50% of children in disadvantaged areas who have SLC needs² and children with special educational needs or disabilities;
- Improve outcomes for children in early years settings, 0-5 years, in the development of speech, language and communication;
- Provide an evaluated and sustainable model for implementation throughout England.

2. Talking Matters Programme

2.1. Partnerships were formed with 6 local authority areas, following an open bidding process, in some cases implementation was planned for part of their area:

- Lancashire
- Sefton
- Barnet
- Essex
- Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
- The Isle of Wight

Each area identified a Local Project Coordinator.

2.2. Each area was asked to recruit 5 Lead Communication Practitioners (LCPs) who would cascade training in their areas. 2 areas recruited 6, giving a project total of 31 LCPs.

2.3. Each area was asked to identify and gain agreement from 25 settings, 50% of which would have 2 practitioners identified as Key Communication Practitioners (KCPs), within them to support the settings to make and sustain changes.

During the planning stage the assumption was made that settings would have an average of 30 children on role, such that the total of 150 settings within Talking Matters would include 4,500 children. Implementation was actually to settings with larger average roles, and numbers of settings were adjusted at the request of Local Project coordinators.

² Locke, A., Ginsborg, J. and Peers, I. (2002) Development and Disadvantage: Implications for Early Years International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders Vol 27 No 1

Talking Matters was implemented within 128 settings, 69 of which had KCPs, reaching 8,964 children within a year.

2.4. Tutors from Elklan's network were identified and contracted to provide training to LCPs and KCPs and to support LCPs with the remainder of the Talking matters implementation.

2.5. Training to LCPs and KCPs, delivered either face to face (maximum cohort: 15) or via Elklan's virtual learning environment (maximum cohort : 5).

The primary course for delivery to LCPs and KCPs was Elklan's *Speech and Language Support for 0-3s* course, designed to be delivered over ten two-hour weekly sessions, or ten on-line sessions of underpinning theory and one-hour webinar tutorials. The course uses interactive teaching methods, practical activities, videos and group discussion, it is accredited by Ascentis and can give learners 9 credits at level 3.

Two areas requested, and were allowed, flexibility to deliver an alternative Elklan course *Speech and Language Support for 3-5s* to a subset of their learners.

2.6. LCPs were then provided with training notes and resources to cascade a lighter touch training course, *Communication Counts* to whole staff groups in early years settings (target 5 settings per LCP), with an option for staff to gain accreditation for their learning at level 2.

Communication Counts is designed to be delivered over five one-hour sessions but some LCPs were given some flexibility to deliver over fewer, longer sessions where requested.

2.7. LCPs were required to visit each setting (where they had delivered training) twice to support staff implement changes in practice, from the learning they had acquired through training.

2.8. LCPs then supported settings in completing an audit for *Communication Friendly Setting* status and completed their own portfolios of evidence, enabling them to achieve an accredited award: 6 credits at level 4.

2.9. Networks were established between and within areas to share experience and knowledge.

3. Evaluation of Talking Matters:

3.1. Areas for evaluation were identified as:

- The impact of Talking Matters on early years practitioners' knowledge, skills and confidence in relation to speech, language and Communication
- The impact of Talking Matters on children's progress in speech, language and communication

- The impact of Talking Matters on early years practitioners' capacity to support parents to develop their children's speech, language and communication
- The benefits of Key Communication Practitioners to Talking Matters
- The attitudes and perceptions of early years practitioners and local authority leads to Talking matters
- The value for money of Talking Matters

3.2. The following tools were used for evaluation:

- Pre and post questionnaires for all learners (completed on line where possible);
Of the 1,329 learners who participated in Talking Matters 1,077 completed pre training questionnaires (81%) and 569 completed post-training questionnaires (43%). There were 473 matched responses to questionnaires, where pre and post data could be attributed to the same learners (36% of learners).
- Results of *Communication Friendly Setting* status audits
By the end of February 2016, 67 settings had been audited for the first time, 38 of these had KCPs within their staff and 29 did not.
- Setting Surveys
Within the necessary, very short, timescale of 2 weeks 20 settings returned completed surveys.
- Pre and post Talking Matters questionnaires for local authority representatives
100% return.
- Ad hoc feedback from those engaged with Talking Matters.

3.3. The impact of Talking Matters on children is being formally evaluated by the Department of Human Communication Sciences, University of Sheffield, outside of the Department of Education's time frame.

4. The Outcomes of Talking Matters

4.1. The Value of the Training

Feedback from Local Authority questionnaires and setting surveys indicated that a high value was put on the training with comments including:

- *This is a fantastic opportunity to make a difference by empowering and extending practitioner knowledge, confidence and skills*
- *We feel our Practitioners are now better informed and have the skills required to support the children in our setting with confidence.*

- *Practitioners found the training interesting and it developed their knowledge – whole team training can be very valuable*
- *Settings are conveying enthusiasm and motivation following whole team training during Communication Counts.*

4.2. The Impact of the Training on Practitioner Confidence

Practitioners rated their confidence in identifying, describing and supporting SLCNs, on a scale of 1-5 within 10 different questions in the pre and post questionnaires. The matched responses showed an average positive change, across the 12 questions of 0.93.

The wider range of responses yielded similar results to the matched results, with respondents scoring higher for confidence after as opposed to before the training in all areas.

4.3. The Impact of the Training on Practitioner Knowledge and Skills

The impact of the training on practitioners' knowledge and skills was not directly measured. However, information was gathered from comments made by the practitioners, setting managers and local authority representatives.

Comments- from practitioners:

- *This was a very informative course, which has provided us with lots of strategies to use in our setting to promote the development of the children's language and communication.*
- *I have been an early years practitioner for 20 years and find many training courses don't offer new knowledge or skills. This course however was very interesting and taught me lots of new strategies and techniques to try and really made me reflect upon my practise.*
- *I found this course useful and gained lots of ideas that will be implemented throughout the setting*
- *I found the course attended really helpful and gave me some new knowledge to help and understand how important certain aspects are when communicating with younger children/babies*
- *I feel I learnt a different range of new ways of helping children from doing this course. The course was also very good and easy to follow and was presented for anyone to understand.*
- *I have learnt a lot from participating in the course. I have learnt new skills, which will benefit the setting, and children who we care for.*

Comments from local authority representatives:

- *Evidence has been seen that most staff now have greater knowledge of how to support children, but for some this might take longer to embed in day to day practice, especially in light of the quick time frame for this project*

Comments from setting managers:

- *Practitioners are more confident in what they are doing to support communication and language and also when discussing this with parents.*

- *Staff using more child friendly language and extending communication with new words.*
- *The practitioners are more aware of ways to communicate with the children, using ages and stages-blank level of Communication including -Non verbal.*
- *We have now introduced a vocabulary strategy, which underpins our commitment to support children attending our setting to become skillful communicators.*
- *We feel our Practitioners are now better informed and have the skills required to support the children in our setting with confidence.*
- *In particular, we have introduced vocab planning; adult to child interaction checklists, and practitioner knowledge has been developed.*
- *This training has proved to be highly beneficial to all practitioners in my setting. We communicate very differently with children and are much more reflective in our practice.*
- *It has made all staff aware of the importance of language support in the Early Years and the fact it is not just Teachers but all adults in the setting that make a difference.*
- *It has helped us reflect on the time it takes to acquire language and the time needed for children to answer questions and ways we can aid learning*
- *Strategies are proving successful already e.g. Baby room practitioners have introduced visual clues to support babies with gesture and to communicate their choices and feelings.*

4.4. The Impact of the Training on Practice

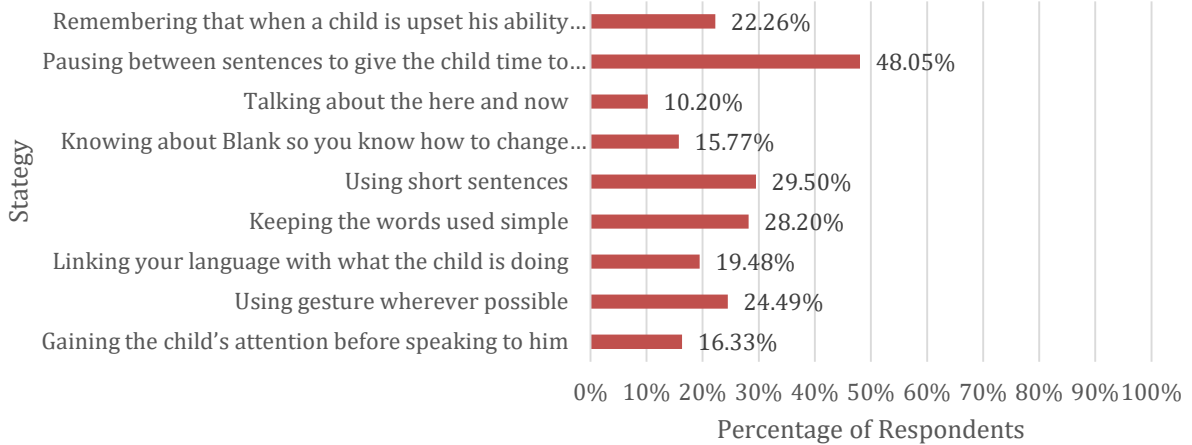
Learners were asked:

What monitoring tool do you use at the moment to assess and track the progress of young children's speech, language and communication skills?

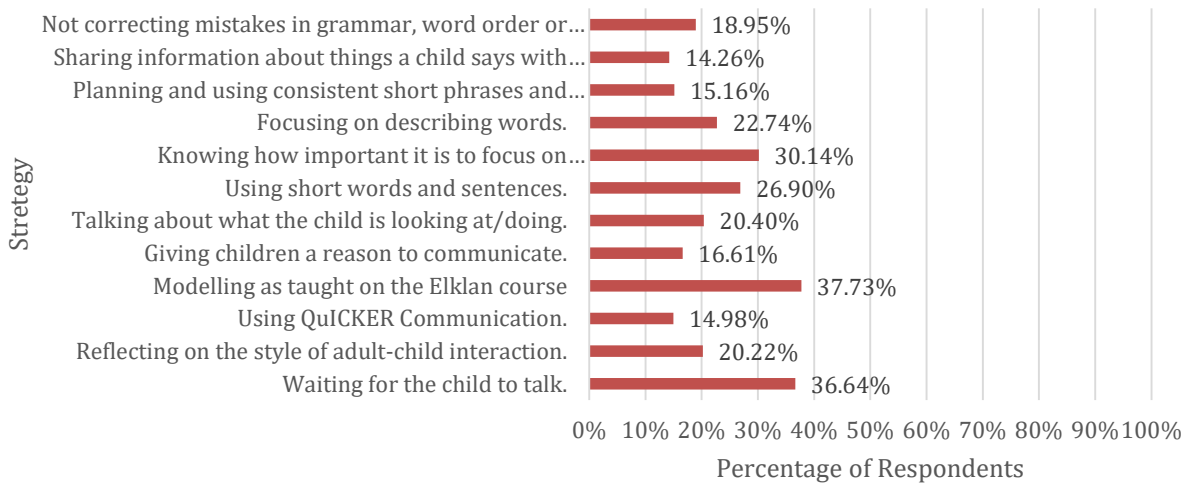
The percentage of respondents who did not use any tool to assess and track children's progress decreased from 9.1 before training to 0 afterwards.

Learners identified specific changes they had made to their practice in response to a number of questions, including 2 questions, results shown in the graphs below, about strategies that they had only used since attending Elklan training:

Which strategies do you use now that you didn't use before attending Elklan training to help children understand things you say to them?



Which strategies do you use now that you didn't use before attending Elklan training to develop children's talking skills?



100% of setting managers who completed the Setting Survey agreed with the statement:

Talking Matters has changed practice in our setting.

The emerging good practice has also been recognised within reports of 2 Ofsted inspections, which have taken place since the Talking Matters intervention:

Children are making rapid progress in their speech and language development. Staff benefit from skills acquired at recent training; they use a variety of questioning techniques, clear pronunciation as they introduce new words, and make good use of opportunities to listen to and engage children in meaningful discussion.

Leaders and managers are extremely effective at involving staff in the evaluation of the provision. For example, staff have skillfully focused on children's communication, following training. They have made groups smaller to give less confident children opportunities to share their views. Later evaluation showed that children spoke more confidently and their social skills developed significantly too.

Staff are skilled at introducing vocabulary. They pronounce words clearly, use lots of descriptive language and demonstrate consistently high-quality communication skills.

4.5. The Value of Setting Accreditation

Having had whole staff training and visits to support settings in implementing and embedding changes to practice, all settings had the opportunity to gain *Communication Friendly Setting* accreditation from the awarding body, Ascentis.

Both the Setting Survey and the questionnaire for local authorities asked questions relating to the perceived value of the accreditation process, results were as follows.

- **Setting Survey:**

How motivated are you to maintain Communication Friendly Setting Accreditation in the future? This would require a repeat audit every 3 years.

Settings were asked to provide a score on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is not at all and 5 was very motivated.

17 of the 20 settings scored this as either a 4 or 5; mean score 4.21.

- **Local Authority questionnaire**

Local authority representatives were asked to score the following statement from 0, not at all to 5, very strong agreement:

Settings have valued the opportunity to gain Communication Friendly Accreditation

Representatives of all 6 areas scored this statement either 4 or 5, mean score 4.5.

4.6. The Value of Key Communication Practitioners to a Setting

Some settings had Key Communication Practitioners (KCPs) identified within them, who were trained at level 3 and able to support the changes in practice and audit process introduced by the Lead Communication Practitioners (LCPs), whilst others did not.

Results of the first 67 audits were reviewed to explore whether the presence of KCPs within the settings had impacted on the likelihood of passing the audit at first attempt.

74% of settings with KCPs (N=38) passed the audit at first attempt compared to 65% of those without (N=29).

Local authority representatives made comments indicating the value of KCPs in motivating and gaining commitment from settings and increasing sustainability:

- *Those setting that have had an member of staff training in Elklan have benefitted greatly from the Talking matter project, it has been a little more difficult to embed the project within those setting that have just received the cascade training.*
- *Going forward, the project requires strong KCPs or SenCo/EYs lead on board with the project to drive it forward.*
- *The 2 settings who had poor and irregular attendance to their in house training were very slow to take strategies in to their practice. However the fact that their KCP's were confident in using the strategies meant that over time when the team could see the impact on individual children the senior managers decided to try again.*
- *Having a network of trainers and KCPs [enables us to drive this forward].*
- *KCP's are able to further support their team following the Communication Counts training to embed the strategies*

4.7. The Value of Talking Matters to Parents

All practitioners involved in Talking Matters have information about accessing an appropriate Elklan training course for parents.

Practitioners who have completed pre and post Talking Matters questionnaires have rated their own confidence in relation to parents within 2 questions, on a scale of 1-5.

Over the course of Talking Matters average ratings have changed as follows:

- *How confident do you feel in talking to parents about their child's speech, language and communication development*
There were 473 matched responses to this question, with a mean gain (on a scale of 1-5) from 3.01 to 4.01.
- *How confident do you feel in talking to parents about how you and the family can work together to develop the speech, language and communication skills of a young child with a delay or at risk of a delay in these skills?*
There were 473 matched responses to this question, with a mean gain (on a scale of 1-5) from 2.96 to 3.98.

Practitioners also reflected these views in their comments.

The setting audit, necessary to achieve *Communication Friendly Setting* status, also specifies elements of how a setting should work with parents:

- *Prior to starting at the setting arrangements are made to see each child with their parent(s)/carer, ideally at home. At this meeting the child's speech language and communication skills are discussed.*
- *The setting works closely in partnership with parents/carers to support the children with SLCN.*
- *Parents are aware of the vocabulary planning and strategy.*

Setting managers also commented on improvements in work with parents as among the most positive aspect of their involvement in Talking Matters, for example:

- *Best thing- ideas to involve the parents more and support communication needs within the setting.*

4.8. The Impact of Talking Matters on Children

Direct measurement of the impact of Talking Matters interventions on children's progress is outside of the timescales of this project and is being undertaken by Sheffield University as described above.

However, anecdotal evidence has been provided through participants' comments, for example:

- *The strategies promoted in the training definitely have a positive impact on developing the children's speech, language and communication skills.*
- *We are noticing a change in the children's communication by implementing the strategies learned.*
- *We are now introducing a wider range of age appropriate vocabulary to the children, monitoring and promoting new language and have already seen an impact.*
- *We focus heavily on our vocabulary and by introducing appropriate verbs on a regular basis in different areas; we have noticed a significant improvement in some of our children!*

5. Going Forward

5.1. Feedback from Talking Matters

Feedback was sought in order to develop the programme for wider implementation.

- Local Project Coordinators and Tutors found the process rushed, in terms of both organisation and embedding and auditing changes in practice. The programme time period has therefore been extended to a recommended 5 half terms or 10 months for future roll out.
- Elklan communicated with settings and learners through Local Project Coordinators and Tutors during Talking Matters. Feedback indicated sharing information more directly would have been appreciated. In future participants will be directed to the Elklan website where video clips explaining each step of the programme, as well as the programme as a whole, will be available. A monthly newsletter will also be provided for settings within the programme.
- Setting managers and Local Project Coordinators were concerned about the issue of staff turnover within Early Years Settings. To address this Elklan has made available a new *Quicker Communication*, on line course for new staff to undertake when they join a setting previously involved in the initiative.

5.2. Key Communication Practitioners

Talking Matters compared the effectiveness of cascade training with and without the presence of KCPs, trained practitioners in each setting who supported the programme.

The evaluation has found that the use of KCPs had a significant impact on the effectiveness of the programme and will therefore be promoted in national roll out. 1 in 10 practitioners in the setting will need to complete the in-depth training course 'Speech and Language Support for 0-3s or 3-5s' in order to gain accredited Communication Friendly Setting status.

5.3. Virtual Learning Environment

Elklan's virtual learning environment was extended and developed to meet the needs of Talking Matters. There were some teething difficulties, rapidly addressed, and also some issues in regards to learners accessing or having competency with information technology. It is recommended that this is audited before implementation in other areas.

6. Value for Money

Talking Matters is available for roll out as Elklan's *Communication Friendly Setting* (CFS) programme. The steps involved in achieving CFS status are as follows:

- (i) Accredited Level 3 course provided to 1 practitioner in every 10 within each setting;
- (ii) A practitioner who has undertaken (i) cascades Level 2 training to whole staff groups and provides portfolio of evidence to become a Lead Communication Practitioner (Accredited Level 4 certificate);
- (iii) LCP supports settings to make and embed changes to practice and to undertake audit;
- (iv) Elklan moderates audits.
- (v) Successful completion of steps (iii) and (iv) qualifies the LCP for a level 4 award called 'Creating Communication Friendly Settings'
- (vi) Ascentis makes CFS award.

Costs are incurred for Level 3 and 4 training, an annual license for the LCP and an annual fee for accreditation. Where the training element is directly delivered by Elklan these costs total (excluding costs for participant time and venue):

1 setting with 10 staff:	£605.00
3 settings, each with 30 staff:	£3,705.00

Alternatively the training element may be provided by a local Elklan Tutor, possibly within their role on the local speech and language therapy team, at no or reduced cost.

These costs compare favourably with other training and accreditation programmes for speech and language support in early years settings, particularly as there are further economies of scale where implementation is across wider numbers of

settings and staff. Furthermore, unlike other programmes, both the Elklan training and the setting accreditation is externally accredited.

7. Exit Plan and Sustainability

Talking Matters was established as a time limited intervention, for completion in March 2016. However, at this time, some practitioners were still working on portfolios and some settings had not completed required developments to achieve Communication Friendly Status. Elklan therefore secured local support for these practitioners and settings to complete the process.

7.1. Sustainability within the 128 settings involved in Talking Matters to date

The Setting Survey asked setting managers to provide a rating for the following question, on a scale of 1-5, where 1 was not at all and 5 was very motivated:

How motivated are you to maintain Communication Friendly Setting Accreditation in the future? This would require a repeat audit every 3 years.

17 of the 20 settings who responded gave a rating of 4 or 5, indicating a high level of motivation.

Each of the 6 Talking Matters areas has made plans for providing ongoing support, coordination and opportunities to share experiences and good practice for settings who have achieved CFS.

7.2. Further roll out of the initiative to other settings within the 6 Talking Matters areas

The 6 local authority areas within Talking Matters each have a minimum 5 trained, experienced LCPs (total 32) as a result of this programme. These LCPs are able to deliver the *Communication Counts* (whole staff training) in unlimited numbers of EYs, to unlimited numbers of practitioners.

The LCPs developed during the Talking Matters programme will join the Elklan network of Community Tutors, delivering subsequent courses under license; Elklan will provide them with updates.

Each of the 6 areas has established a local group for sharing good practice and planning the future of the initiative. In some cases this is being supported by work undertaken locally to map training and key competencies across the Early Years Workforce and identify gaps in practitioner knowledge and skills.

7.3. Potential national roll out

The Communication Friendly Settings Programme is available from Elklan on a sustainable basis, <http://www.elklan.co.uk/information/commissioners-schools/0-5yrs/becoming-an-elklan-communication-friendly-early-years-setting>

