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## **Article series- Roadmap to recovery: supporting children's learning and development as lockdown eases.**

### **Article three**

#### **Supporting children's speech and language development**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been significant for many people, in a variety of ways. We know that for first time mums the lockdowns have not been easy. At times, they have struggled to access support from health professionals and have not been able to join other new parents socially or at the usual baby groups, which has led to many feeling isolated and alone. For the children this has also meant reduced opportunities to mix with others, outside of the home. Babies have not heard the sing-song conversations of their mothers or fathers talking with other parents nor have they been around peers to hear others babble as they explore and try out their voices, enjoying the sounds they can make. It is inevitable then that this would have an impact on small children's emerging speech and language development. Consequently, we now seem to have a generation of young children whose speech and language seems to be delayed and this is causing concern across the piste from government, local authorities, schools and within early education settings. However, speech and language delay are not a new phenomenon – there have always been children who develop speech and language slightly later, but what is new is the scale of the issue and the amount of children affected. It is important for early educators to remember that they probably have more experience than they think, supporting children's speech and language development and to try to not feel overwhelmed at the current scale of things. It is just a question of building on what is already known.

#### **A positive listening environment**

For children to learn to speak they need to hear lots of everyday speech, to understand how it works. Creating a positive listening environment sounds simple but can be a significant challenge in a busy early years setting. Over the years I have noticed that many practitioners like to have music on during the day. Whilst this might be helpful for the staff and some children may enjoy it, for those children who are struggling to develop speech and language, the background music creates a wall of sound, which makes it much harder for them to hear the nuances in speech. Music is fantastic and an important part of life, but it needs to be used in a bounded way for a specific purpose.

For some reason occasional groups of children have a tendency to be noisier than others. They seem to interact more loudly. Although their enthusiasm is great, it can have a negative impact on the overall listening environment and again negatively impact those children who are less confident and are emerging talkers. Staff can work together to promote clear expectations for all the children to use inside voices, have signs to remind everyone when the noise levels are rising and introduce activities which include whispering, and reducing voice volume.

Reducing background noise is an important part of promoting speech and language. As the restrictions in settings reduce, managers can think about using neutral cloth underneath tabletop activities which can significantly reduce the clatter in the setting, again promoting a positive listening environment. For settings with high ceilings, neutral sheeting can be used to improve echoing acoustics. This doesn't have to be a huge expense; I have always used neutral coloured cheap duvet covers and sheets.

## **Dialogic talk**

The Every Child a Talker (ECAT) programme offered settings an opportunity to audit their provision and identify where and when children had opportunities to talk, to each other and with adults. It also helped practitioners to consider what type of talk was happening. For settings who are finding larger amounts of children with speech and language delay, I would suggest that they also audit their provision. Engaging in reflective practice can sometimes be uncomfortable and practitioners may find that often the interactions between the adults and the children are limited to instructional commands, with the focus on the physical tasks of the day. However, to really tackle the issue of delayed speech and language it is important to increase the opportunity for adult-child dialogic talk. The routine of the day can be an excellent way to start. Most practitioners engage in conversation and singing during nappy changing routines, but it is important to make this invisible practice – visible and intentional so that all staff are encouraged to do this and supported to understand the value of these interactions.

Mealtimes also offer massive potential for dialogic talk, but these times can be highly stressful for staff who are often focussed on the logistics of feeding children and covering each other's lunches. However, if a whole team approach is adopted and staff are encouraged to sit with children and engage them in everyday chit-chat about life, once again it offers the children another opportunity to experience the wonderful social aspect to eating, where talking is an important element.

Role play and small world play also offer huge opportunities for speech and language development. Planning for staff to locate themselves in the home corner to promote role play games is an extremely effective way to increase chances for children to learn and practice talking. Making sure that there are plenty of old mobile phones available and defunct ipads or laptops will also give children the chance to re-enact phone calls and the zoom calls they've had with loved ones during the pandemic.

When staff are allocated to work in the small world area their role is slightly different. They can offer a narration of the play, verbalising what the child is doing as they are doing it. One parent once described this as being a football commentator for their son's car play. It is quite a skill to be able to allow the child to lead their own play, whilst maintaining an ongoing narrative, but can have a huge impact for children as they develop speaking skills.

## **Slowing things down**

Although the lockdowns have been difficult, lots of people have said that one of the benefits has been the slowing down of life. For young children learning to talk, they can also benefit from a slower pace in early education settings. To begin to talk, children need to feel motivated and safe. It is important for them to feel that what they say will be heard and valued. Staff need to remain alert to the small often non-verbal cues that children can give when they are ready or want to start talking. Staff need to be available for the children and able to 'tune in' to their early utterances. This takes a huge amount of energy from the staff and again they can need support from management and permission, to spend time in conversations with children. By slowing things down, it will release the pressure on staff and children and can give more space to for emerging conversational interactions. Many children seem to prefer side-by-side conversations. These often happen when they are playing with open-ended resources and an adult is playing alongside them, chit-chatting about what they are doing rather than asking questions. Increasing the number of open-ended resources for children to play with, and intentionally planning for adults to play alongside small

groups of children with the sole purpose of engaging in conversation, will support the children's emerging speech.

Other parts of the day which could benefit from a slower approach is the singing and story time. Rhyme, rhythm, and song are extremely important for the development of language skills but songs and stories can unintentionally be hurried. Children who are struggling with their speech and language often need more time to process what is being said to them and if they want to join in with a song, really benefit from it being slower. Again, this works best when it is a whole team approach, and everyone is committed. Not only will slowing things down help children who have delayed speech and language, but also reducing the size of the circle. Having large amounts of children in a group can often inhibit less confident speakers and the more talkative children tend to dominate the airtime. To make circle time language rich, plan for smaller groups of no more than eight so every child has an opportunity to take part. Children learn by repetition, so plan to have a small set of songs and stick with them for a period of time, so that children can learn them. It is often easier for children with delayed speech and language to sing a tune and begin to try to articulate the words, than speak, because if they learn the tune, it stays with them. I have also found that if the songs are related to a general group interest, then children learn the lyrics quicker, so never be afraid of making up songs based on common tunes and shared interests. For maximum effect – send the lyrics home so that parents and carers can sing with the children to really embed their learning.

### **Creating purposeful opportunities to talk**

Other positive uses for the smaller circle times, are offering children planned purposeful times to talk and to learn how to listen to others. Introducing talking baskets is a way of doing this. Unlike the games like "What's in my bag" where the object is to make a guess and then listen to the adult who might then lead the talking – talking baskets offer a different approach. Anything can be included in the basket. I have themed my baskets according to the needs and interests of the group. One basket had a medicine theme when I included a prescription, an empty bottle of calpol, a medicine spoon and syringe. Asking the children the question: So, what do you think about that? is a great opener. Everyone has something to say. The key is to manage the conversation, so the children learn to listen, hear one another, and start to respond appropriately. Having clear listening rules, with visual prompts, that are taught regularly really helps. For example: one voice, listening ears and looking eyes are three very simple ones which work. Creating these purposeful opportunities to talk can act as a safeguard against some of the pitfalls that are easy to fall into when supporting children's speech and language development. One of the quickest ways to inhibit early speech is to constantly question a child or ask them to repeat words. Equally unhelpful is asking them to say something twice because their speech is unclear. Generally, what is best is to repeat (often approximately) what you think they have said, with a similar intonation. This can act as a correct model for them to hear and is more helpful for them.

### **Promoting peer conversations**

What we know is that children tend to talk to each other in smaller spaces, often away from the adult gaze. To encourage children who are slightly delayed in their speech and language development it is a good idea to develop tent and den type spaces. If your setting already has good and available hide-holes, then add to and increase these spaces to offer greater opportunities for peer conversations.

Something I have noticed which also seems to promote peer conversations, is when the adults in the setting stop having conversations over the heads of the children. It seems strange but I think what

happens is that the adults start to treat the children respectfully and include them in the interactions, maybe explaining that they need to pause their interaction and talk to whoever is trying to speak to them. This sends subliminal messages to the children, that they are part of a conversational, speaking community and are valued. It also role models healthy conversational etiquette. Children learn so much from watching and being part of respectful conversations, and then they replicate with their peers. With careful planning and sensitive interactions, early years practitioners are really well placed to support children to develop confidence, motivation and the skills they need as they re-engage with the wider world as we begin to return to a more normal way of living.