

Speech and Language in the Early Years: a nested study of the Linking Schools & Early Years project

Executive Summary

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This is the final report of a one-year study, *Speech and Language in The Early Years (SALTEY)* project, conducted in 2009.

The research was a collaborative project, led by Dr Julie Green, the Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute, Melbourne and Dr Jemma Skeat, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. It was conducted in partnership with the Centre for Community Child Health.

The Speech and Language in the Early Years project was developed as a nested study within the Linking Schools and Early Years (LSEY) project, being led by the Centre for Community Child Health with support from the R.E. Ross Trust. The LSEY project has three main goals (LSEY Outcomes Framework, p. 6-7). These are that:

1. Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and schools (requiring 'dialogue and shared effort between early years services and schools')
2. Early years services and schools actively connect with families
3. Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children ('Schools that link with early years services, parents and community services prior to the start of the school year are in a position to develop tailored learning solutions')

The LSEY goals are being implemented across three Victorian sites, with each site including two to three primary schools and up to twelve early years services. A progressive finding of LSEY in 2008 identified children's early language development as a key area for review, discussion and potentially the development of additional local strategies and service provision.

The SALTEY study was subsequently designed for one of the LSEY communities, Hastings, to gain a deeper understanding of speech and language in the early years with a view to generating evidence to guide local service provision, programs and policy.

SALTEY's aims

The Speech and Language study was driven by the overarching aim to investigate factors related to children's language development in a community with a high proportion of developmentally vulnerable children, with the intention to inform re-configuration of service delivery to achieve better outcomes for children and the community.

The project aims were to:

- a) Investigate how parents conceptualise, foster and incorporate children's early language development into everyday life;
- b) Examine early years health & education professionals' concepts and practices in regard to children's language development, and how these relate to parental views and practice;
- c) Identify how this emerging evidence can inform family-centred approaches to service delivery, health literacy and health communication and to the preparation of families, communities, schools and children ready to engage with learning at school.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Royal Children’s Hospital’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

Design of recruitment for the SALTEY Project occurred in close consultation with the Hastings LSEY Project Manager and the local LSEY Stakeholder Group.

Eight focus groups were conducted with a total of 23 parents of children from birth to 8 years; and 24 early childhood professionals, primary school teachers of Years Prep-2 and health, education and community professionals working with children from birth to 8 years in various direct service, program and policy roles in Hastings.

Key findings

The concepts, beliefs, influences and practices that emerged as central to speech and language in the early years for parents and professionals are clustered into six themes. Along with each theme, the key findings and key implications are listed below:

Key theme 1: Children’s language in the early years is central to their social, emotional and developmental wellbeing

Findings	Implications
<p>Parents and early years’ professionals incorporate many strategies into their everyday contact with children to foster language development.</p> <p>The importance of children’s language and communication to their development & achievement is recognised by parents and early years’ education and health professionals to different extents.</p> <p>Parents do not appear to have knowledge of how central children’s speech and language is to later learning, socialisation and emotional wellbeing and longer-term outcomes. Rather, parents perceive personality and social confidence as contributing to social, academic and wellbeing outcomes.</p> <p>Professionals strongly link children’s language and communication skills to specific outcomes, including reading and writing, academic achievement, behaviour, social success and wellbeing.</p> <p>Early years professionals believe parents underrate language and communication relative to children’s other developmental areas such as behaviour and motor development.</p>	<p>Parents need access to information that links the importance of early speech and language to children’s future capacity in regard to behaviour, socialisation and learning.</p> <p>Multiple opportunities are needed for parents to engage with information on speech, language and general development at regular periods leading up to and including after children’s school commencement.</p> <p>Strategies for effective universal and targeted promotion of speech and language development could be re-visited.</p>

Key theme 2: 'My child'

Findings	Implications
<p>Parents see children's language development as something that is highly individualised, with children developing at their own rates.</p> <p>Parents tailor the strategies that they use to foster communication development to the unique needs of their individual child.</p> <p>Parents are inclined to expect that their children will 'grow out of' poor language.</p> <p>Early years staff draw on their knowledge, training and experience to assess the language and communication capability of a child and identify language and communication issues of concern.</p>	<p>Messages about children's communication development need to be tailored in order for parents to hear a message that is about 'their child' as an individual, versus 'the average child' or children in general.</p>

Key theme 3: 'My past and my upbringing'

Findings	Implications
<p>Diverse family contexts – both positive and troubled – are highly influential to family input into children's language and communication development. Family contexts also determine how or whether services are sought for children who are falling behind.</p> <p>Parents' own experiences of family violence, struggles with low functional literacy and numeracy during their childhood or drug use underpin fears that that their own past will negatively affect their children's future.</p> <p>Negative experiences in parents' own childhood can provide motivation to 'break the cycle' when raising their own children and to seek support during their children's early years.</p> <p>Parents whose literacy and learning has been fraught with struggles are aware of their own limitations to support the development of their children's language and literacy and have deeply-held aspirations for their children to be successful learners.</p> <p>The establishment of good rapport and supportive relationships by skilled early childhood professionals with parents can be empowering and life-changing for parents.</p> <p>Early years professionals recognise the importance of knowing about a child's family context and are accepting</p>	<p>Early years professionals need skills in framing conversations with parents about their own family context, experiences of learning in childhood, adolescence and adulthood and realities of life.</p> <p>Skilled professionals influence parents' engagement and trust in services.</p>

<p>that negative social and economic influences make for complex circumstances. Professionals perceive that more could be done by some families to contribute to children’s language and learning and to engage with services.</p>	
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Key theme 4: Roles of parents & others in children’s communication development

Findings	Implications
<p>Parents see themselves as teachers in their children’s communication development and have a repertoire of strategies to support early language development.</p> <p>People playing important roles in facilitating children’s communication development include parents, children’s siblings and peers, grandparents, early years professionals, teachers, health care professionals and others.</p> <p>Early years professionals perceive parents’ competing demands as an impediment to fulfilling their role in supporting children’s language development; they perceive children’s learning progress to be adversely affected.</p> <p>Parents have limited knowledge of the roles that community education & health professionals play.</p> <p>Certain professionals are seen, by parents, as having more reliable knowledge and influence than others.</p> <p>Professionals often have limited knowledge about children’s home environments. Both groups may struggle to understand the perspective of the other.</p>	<p>Value, affirm and augment parents’ repertoire of strategies to support early language development.</p> <p>Language and communication promotion should consider a cross-generational approach and maximise the potential for input and support from extended family and multiple disciplines and settings.</p> <p>Accessible information that clearly defines roles and skills of community-based health and education professionals, the support by services and strategies for parents to implement in regard to language and communication are needed by parents.</p>

Key theme 5: Being ‘new to the system’

Findings	Implications
<p>Parents’ experiences of the health and education system can be daunting.</p> <p>Parents can perceive school commencement as a panacea to children’s language issues. This can lead to delaying early intervention until children start school and unrealistic expectations of school-based intervention programs and services.</p> <p>Parents struggle to know and understand what happens</p>	<p>Education of parents in the principles and benefits of early intervention is important.</p> <p>Parents would benefit from ongoing communication with school and opportunities to engage with information and key people to develop their knowledge of their children’s day-to-day</p>

<p>in their children's day once their children reach more formal education settings (including kindergarten and school).</p>	<p>learning and development.</p> <p>Practical, up-to-date and locally relevant support and information is needed for both health and education contexts: what professionals and supports are available, what their expertise and roles are and how parent roles are complementary.</p> <p>Communication with parents needs to account for family literacy capability, parents' confidence levels and the possibility of past negative educational experiences.</p>
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Key theme 6: Home-school-early years communication: risks and strategies

Findings	Implications
<p>Early years professionals identify communication concerns as a sensitive topic to raise with parents.</p> <p>Professionals weigh up family functioning and social context, the nature of the professional-parent relationship and availability of specialist services with the risk of parent withdrawal and disengagement from the service before communicating concerns with parents.</p> <p>Early years professionals use a repertoire of strategies to raise concerns with parents that are based around parent identification or acknowledgement of the problem.</p> <p>Current local programs linking professionals and services across schools and early years are valuable to professionals in regard to building professional relationships and knowledge of roles across the early years.</p> <p>Parents are aware of the enormous influence of home life on school life and vice versa, but may struggle to make links between home and school and to understand what happens during 'school life'.</p> <p>Parents know that their children's school life is important yet often have limited capacity and confidence to engage with staff in the way they would like.</p>	<p>Waiting until professionals have established a relationship with parents before raising a concern can be at odds with early intervention principles.</p> <p>Continuous investment in relationship building and communication between parents and professionals is important.</p> <p>Successful strategies for engaging with <i>all</i> families are needed by early years' professionals.</p> <p>There is scope to strengthen professionals' general skills and abilities to forge relationships and foster authentic two-way communication with all families.</p> <p>Greater support for parents to understand how to engage and converse with professionals and express concerns to early years and school professionals would be beneficial.</p> <p>Building on strategies that link schools and early years services, and families and schools/early years services should be considered.</p> <p>Connections with (Victorian-based)</p>

	population-based speech and language intervention research with pre-school and school-aged children would provide access to evidence, current thinking and future.
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The identification of the many beliefs, knowledge, and language and communication support practices, evidenced in this study, further opens up the potential to promote speech and language development to parents and families.

It illustrates that parents are actively encouraging children’s speech and language development - according to their own social and cultural capital. Their knowledge and understanding of children’s development is an on-going project that builds according to their networks, wider family context, knowledge of and confidence to engage with opportunities offered by local service providers.

The study has generated evidence that parents are also operating from a low base of skills, knowledge of children’s development and engagement with service provision. This presents significant barriers to parents growing their knowledge and understanding of their children’s development. It suggests the value of providing linked-up health and education services for children in the early years.

There is also evidence of a level of mismatch in parents and professionals’ perceptions, expectations and observations about children’s speech and language development and progress. Rapport and relationships between parents and families and early years service providers is very influential to early detection, early intervention and on-going dialogue around children’s progress and development.

The research findings reiterate the importance of attending to:

- Parents and children - their access to authentic learning opportunities, continuing service information and service connection as children grow and develop, and early years knowledge development.
- Early years professions and service providers - their continuing relationship building and communication skills with parents and families, reflective practice, consideration of family’s perspective and inter-agency and cross-sectoral ways of working.
- Local services - that foster a culture of inclusion and rapport with families, collaboration with one another and growing appreciation about the connections between service settings; and
- Health and education systems - effective policies and mechanisms fundamental to universal promotion of early language support and development, targeted support and timely interventions so that children’s environments and care, education, wellbeing and support are optimal, and agencies are linked up and working in genuine partnerships.

Whilst the findings emerge from the Hastings context, they are likely to have relevance and application to other similar settings.