



**Final Report:  
Early Words Together: Impact on Families and Children  
March 2015**

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## Executive Summary

Early Words Together is a targeted National Literacy Trust programme that aims to develop young children's communication, language and literacy and to enable family engagement through the support of peer volunteers. It is typically delivered as a six week intervention, bringing practitioners and volunteers together to enable families to improve the home learning environment of their children aged two to five. The programme is delivered through small group sessions of around 1.5 hours, and includes an important peer support factor that helps parents to:

- Understand why they are important to their child's reading and language development
- Adopt effective activities to enrich their play, engagement and attachment with their child
- Benefit and increase their children's literacy, communication and language development

Open to a range of families, the project was particularly concerned with reaching so called 'target families': families where there was some evidence that levels of parent-child interaction and shared activity were a cause for concern.

Between April 2013 and March 2015, the National Literacy Trust received funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver Early Words Together in 13 local authorities across England. 120 Children's Centres and early years settings delivered the programme.

The evaluation has shown that Early Words Together:

- Significantly improved children's understanding of spoken language (measured using a standardised vocabulary test). Children's average standardized scores increased from 77.1 to 82.9 in approximately four months. This means that the children were catching up with same-aged peers in terms of where they should be with their language development relative to national norms. Girls, in particular, showed improvements.

Not only were children's verbal skills significantly improved but Early Words Together also:

- Significantly improved children's enjoyment of sharing books overall (increase from 72.1% to 87.1% of families reporting good levels of enjoyment). The impact is particularly significant for target families, where 76.7% more parents reported that their child enjoyed sharing books at the end of the programme;
- Significantly improved children's enjoyment of joining in with songs and rhymes (increase from 75.5% to 88.3% of families reporting good levels of enjoyment). Again, the impact was particularly significant for target families, where 77.7% more parents reported that their child enjoyed joining in with songs and rhymes at the end of the programme;
- Increased the amount of parent-child talk in 88.1% of target families;
- Increased parents' confidence in sharing books with their children (78.3% of target families) and in singing with their children (57.6% of target families);
- Increased parents' understanding of the importance of talking to children (68.5% of target families);
- Impacted the quality of children's home learning environment through significantly increasing the frequency of book sharing (91.3% improvement in target families) and joining in with songs and rhymes (85% improvement in target families), and by increasing the likelihood of families buying or borrowing books (89.9% improvement in target families);
- Impacted children's school readiness through spontaneously-reported improvements in reading-related behaviours, social / emotional skills and children's language and communication abilities.

There was limited evidence of parents referring other families into the programme, but almost all parents (98.5%) reported that they would recommend the programme to other people, and some parents have already become programme volunteers. Focus groups and interviews with parents suggested that the volunteer-led aspect of the programme was particularly important for the success of the programme in engaging families.

A key recommendation from this evaluation is that further consideration is given to how boys could be engaged more effectively in the programme so that their language outcomes are as strong as those reported for girls.

## Part 1: Background and Evaluation Methodology

### Background

Early Words Together (EWT) is a six week intervention, bringing practitioners and volunteers together to enable families to improve the home learning environment of their children aged two to five.

Between April 2013 and March 2015 the NLT received funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver Early Words Together in 12 local authorities across England. One further authority, Bradford, was recruited to the programme in April 2014. An average of 120 Children's Centres and early years settings, deliver the programme.

The programme is delivered through small group sessions of one and a half hours, and includes an important peer support factor that helps parents:

- Understand why they are important to their child's reading and language development
- Adopt effective activities to enrich their play, engagement and attachment with their child
- Benefit and increase their child's literacy, communication and language development

Volunteers from the same community as the families are trained using NLT resources and work with the families following a toolkit, which includes structured but flexible activities. The fun, easy activities help parents to extend and engage their children's learning and, importantly, to see that their children are really motivated and enjoying themselves.

During the six sessions (lasting one to one and a half hours), volunteers empower families to feel confident about their ability to support their children's development and help to encourage a love of books, stories, rhymes, songs and talk. Setting staff and volunteers are also given tools to measure impacts through observation and self-evaluation.

The programme has demonstrated positive outcomes with families who were often experiencing social or economic disadvantage, both hard to reach families and groups specifically targeted by the Children's Centre.

### External Evaluation

Two external evaluators were appointed:

1. Coventry University to look at the impact of the intervention on children (using the Pearson Pre-school Language Scale, families and the home learning environment
2. OPM to consider the impact on Children's Centre practice, referral working and the role of volunteers

While Children's Centres were initially targeted as the lead delivery partners, a variety of settings were involved with Early Words Together, including schools, libraries, early years settings and community centres.

This report presents findings from the Coventry University evaluation of the programme.

Early Words Together (EWT) was designed to impact six key outcomes (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1: Key Outcomes Targeted by the Early Words Together Programme**

Outcome No.	Outcome
<b>KO1</b>	Engagement in the programme increased the interest and enjoyment of the child in communication, language and literacy
<b>KO2</b>	Engagement in the programme increased the awareness and confidence of the adult in supporting their child's communication, language and literacy
<b>KO3</b>	Engagement in the programme improved the home learning environment
<b>KO4</b>	The programme has contributed to the child's school readiness
<b>KO5</b>	Participating families refer other families to the programme
<b>KO6</b>	Volunteer-led engagement has had a positive effect on the family's home learning and willingness to engage with the programme

Volunteers running Early Words Together completed 'toolkits' which profiled each child and his / her parent at the start of the programme and again at its conclusion. These profiles took the form of a series of simple questions and rating scales, and captured data relating to Key Outcomes 1-5. In total, 902 toolkits were received by the evaluation team in time to be included in the analyses presented in this report. Around another 100 were returned too late to be included in this report. Of those received in time for inclusion, in some cases either the data from the first session (which provided a baseline), or the last session was entirely missing, and so these toolkits had to be excluded from analysis. This resulted in a final sample of 776 toolkits where there was some attempt to complete the baseline and final session questions. The number of toolkits received by area is presented in Table 2 below. It should be noted that Bradford is not represented in this evaluation as their delivery started too late to be included.

**Table 2: Breakdown of Data Received and Analysed by Local Authority Area**

Area	Toolkits Received	Toolkits Analysed	Parents Interviewed
Bristol	9	5	
Derbyshire	47	33	
Ealing	10	10	
Croydon	196	173	11
Lambeth	97	89	13
Sutton	98	91	11
Middlesbrough	102	93	
North Yorkshire	45	32	17
Rochdale	76	68	28
Sheffield	22	18	
Staffordshire	105	82	
Wiltshire	73	71	26
Unidentified	12	11	
<b>Total</b>	<b>902</b>	<b>776</b>	<b>106</b>

In order to collect more detailed information and to address KO6, six local authority areas were selected for detailed scrutiny: Croydon, North Yorkshire, Rochdale, Wiltshire, Sutton and Lambeth. In these areas, the parents of children who took part were invited to participate in either one-to-one interviews (at a location of their choice or over the phone) or focus groups at a Children's Centre three months after participating in Early Words Together. These data were used to inform KO1, 2, 4 and 6 in particular, but also contributed

to the contextualization of Toolkit data in relation to the other key outcomes. 106 parents participated in either focus groups (n=89) or telephone interviews (n=17), and their distribution across regions is shown in Table 2.

Another aspect of the evaluation was the standardised assessment of vocabulary levels of a subset of children who were in the project (sampled from North Yorkshire, Rochdale, Wiltshire, Sutton and Lambeth). Vocabulary is predictive of later success in reading (both decoding and comprehension skills) as well as providing a measure of oral language comprehension, which is in itself an important early literacy skill. We used the Auditory Comprehension subscale of the Pearson Preschool Language Scale ([4<sup>th</sup> Edition](#)) to assess this in preference to other vocabulary measures because it makes use of and refers to actual objects during the assessment, rather than pictorial representations. It was therefore considered by the Children's Centre staff to offer a fairer assessment of language ability than other vocabulary tests, which are based entirely on pictorial representation and more limited interaction with the assessor. To assess the impact of the programme on the children's vocabulary, the children were assessed at the beginning of the programme and again approximately three months after the final session of Early Words Together, at the time of the focus groups / interviews. The reason for this extended period was to ensure that sufficient time had elapsed between Early Words Together delivery and post-testing for us to reasonably expect parents' behaviours and the children's home learning environment to have changed, and for children's behaviours and cognition to have been impacted. 115 children were assessed at pre-test and 72 were assessed at post-test (37.4% attrition from study over three months). The reasons for non-attendance at follow up testing are not known to the evaluation team.

Analysis of standardized scores at pre- and delayed post-test enabled us to examine how well the participating children were making progress, relative to national norms, by examining whether there has been any significant change in standardised scores (which indicate how well the children are performing in relation to the national 'norm' for other children of the same age). This approach was adopted because of the ethical and practical difficulties associated with using a control group-based design in a project of this nature. That is, having identified parents in need of the programme, it would be unethical to withhold their participation, as this would increase the risk of those families losing interest in participating and would increase the risk of non-participation with intervention services more broadly. The recruitment of a control group from another region not participating in Early Words Together was discussed, but concerns about comparability of samples appeared to outweigh the benefit of this approach.

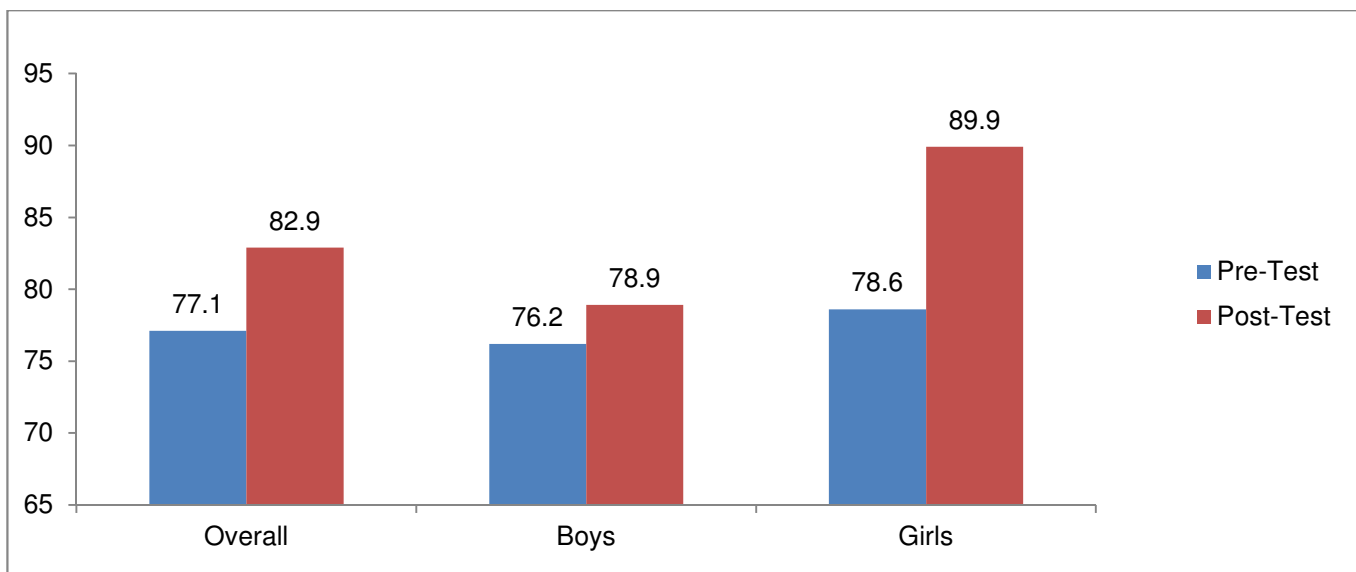
Telephone interviews, focus groups and post-testing sessions were arranged, either via the Children's Centre workers and/or EWT co-ordinators, or with the parents directly. Face-to-face interviews with the parents were completed during the post-testing session with the children, either prior to or following the completion of the Pearson assessment with the children. Focus groups and interviews typically lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Focus group sizes varied depending on attendance, but did not exceed eight participants for any session.

## Part 2: Impact of the Programme on Children’s Vocabulary Development

Given the focus of Early Words Together on Key Outcomes 1, 2 and 3, it seemed reasonable to expect that the programme would impact participating children’s understanding of English vocabulary. As noted in the previous section, we conducted an analysis of this using receptive vocabulary data collected using the Auditory Comprehension subscale of the Pearson’s Pre-School Language Scale before and three months after completion of the programme. The tasks on this subscale *‘target skills that are considered important precursors for language development (e.g. attention to speakers, appropriate object play)’. The tasks designed for preschool-age children and children in early years education assess comprehension of basic vocabulary, concepts and grammatical markers.*<sup>1</sup>

If a child is scoring at a level to be expected for their chronological age, then their standardised score will be 85 or higher. A score lower than 85 indicates a child with a level of delay in their comprehension of language that represents a cause for concern. A standardised score is age adjusted, which means that if development is typical we would not expect a child’s score to differ significantly between pre- and post-test (e.g. if a child has a score of 100 at Time 1, he/she should still have a score of 100 three months later, as changes in ability that are due to age-related maturation are taken into account when the standardized score is calculated).

**Figure 1: Average receptive vocabulary scores in standardised score points before and three months after participation in Early Words Together (overall, and by gender).**



At pre-test, the average performance of the children assessed was 77.1, indicating that the majority of children assessed were underperforming on their understanding of spoken language relative to where they should be for their age (see Figure 1). This itself suggests that the programme was generally reaching the right type of families. Three months later these children’s average score had increased to 82.9 – an

<sup>1</sup> Taken from page 2 of Zimmerman, I.L., Steiner, V.G., and Pond, R.E. (2008). *Preschool Language Scale Fourth Edition – UK (Examiner’s Manual)*. London: Pearson.

increase of over five standardised score points, indicating that the children’s vocabulary levels were developing faster than we would predict from normal maturation (i.e. they were catching up with peers). This puts the average post-test performance of the children sampled just short of the normal range. This improvement is both statistically significant ( $p=.006^2$ ) and educationally meaningful. When we look at the number of children in the normal range at each time point, 30.5% of the children were in the normal range at pre-test, and this increased to 43.1% of the same children just three months later.

This impact was particularly pronounced for girls who participated in the programme. That is, when we look at the impact of the programme on the language comprehension scores of girls and boys who participated, we see that the boys’ scores increased modestly from 76.2 to 78.9. The female children showed an increase from 78.6 to 89.6 - a change of 11 standardised score points in around four and a half months.

Average scores achieved are presented for the age groups where the number of children in that age category was more than three. As Table 3 shows, the strongest gains are observed in the small number of very young children who participated, and the three year old age group. However, it should be noted that, overall, there was no one age group who benefited significantly more than the others.

**Table 3: Pre and Post Test Assessment of Children’s Receptive Vocabulary Scores by Age Group**

Age Group (n)	Pre Test	Post Test
1 year olds (7)	67.4	78.4
2 year olds (39)	76.8	80.1
3 year olds (21)	78.6	88.7

<sup>2</sup> A *p* value indicates how likely it is that the observed result does not reflect a genuine difference in the two sets of scores. To be statistically significant, the *p* value should be smaller than 0.05 (i.e there is less than a 5% probability that the result is due to random sampling error). In this case, a *p* value of 0.006 indicates that there is a 0.6% probability of this result not reflecting a genuine difference in scores.

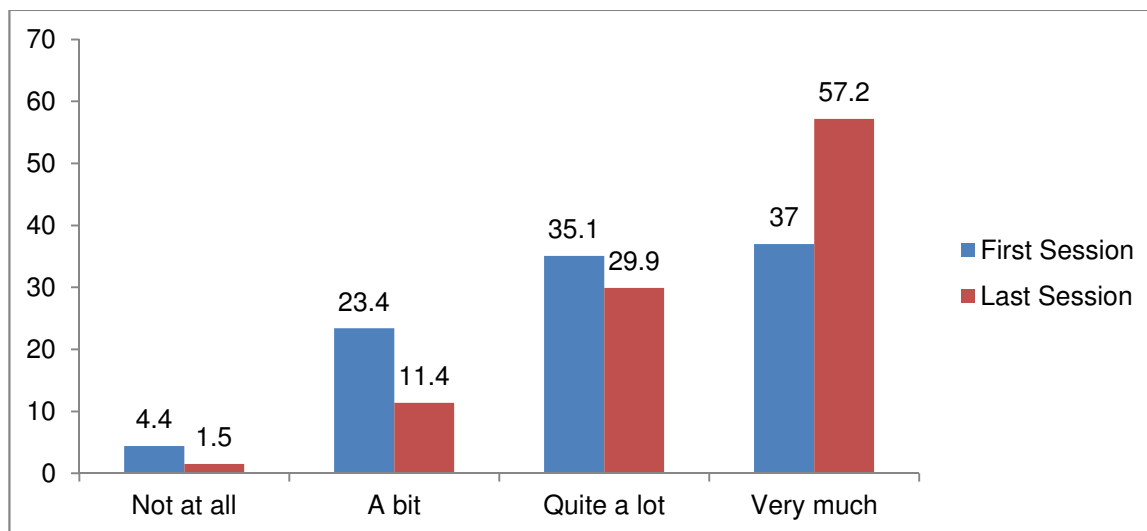


### Part 3: Analysis of Impact of Programme against Key Outcomes

#### Key Outcome 1: Interest and enjoyment of the child in communication, language and literacy

The programme aimed to achieve a 75% increase in enjoyment and awareness of books and print. At baseline, the percentage of parents reporting that their child enjoyed books either ‘quite a lot’ or ‘very much’ was already at 72.1%. This had increased to 87.1% by the final session, with 20% growth in the number of parents reporting that their children enjoyed sharing books ‘very much’ (see Figure 2 for breakdown of responses). This improvement in enjoyment of sharing books is statistically significant at the  $p < .0005^3$  level.

**Figure 2: Percentage of parents’ responses to ‘How much would you say child enjoys sharing books?’**



As a result of this high level of enjoyment evident at baseline, we felt that it was appropriate to focus our attention on families who were intended to be the target of Early Words Together when the programme was first designed – families where there might be concerns over the quality or quantity of the interaction between parent and child (poor home learning environment). These families are differentiated from the sample as a whole in this report by the terms ‘target’ or ‘targeted’ families. When we looked at the subset of 215 parents who reported at baseline that their children either did not like to share books or only liked it ‘a bit’ (thereby defining them as ‘target families’ in relation to this question), 165 reported increases in their children’s enjoyment of book sharing by the final Early Words Together session (see Table 4). This results in a **76.7% increase in enjoyment of shared book reading for targeted families.**

<sup>3</sup> A p value of less than 0.0005 indicates that there is a less than 0.05% probability of this result not reflecting a genuine difference in scores.

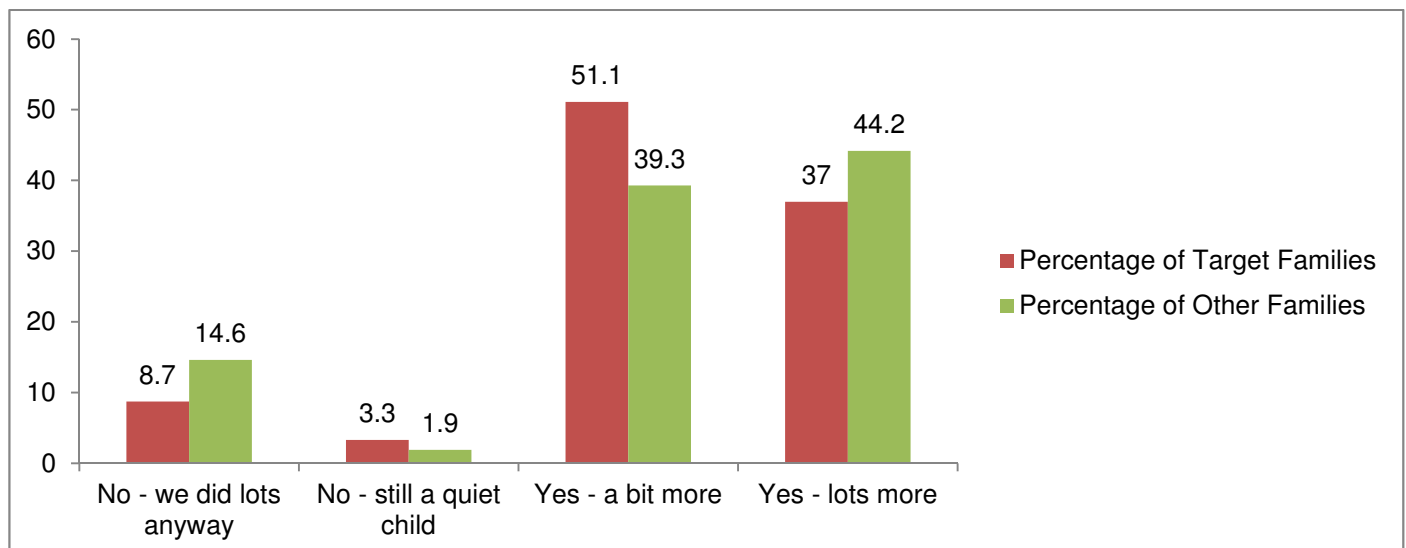
**Table 4: Contingency table showing how target families responded at pre and post test to the question ‘How much would you say your child enjoys sharing books?’**

		Post test				Totals
		Not at all	A bit	Quite a lot	Very Much	
Pre test	Not at all	3	12	11	8	34
	A bit	5	42	80	54	181

74.9% of all parents whose child did not previously have a favourite book reported that their child now had one, and **79.7% of all parents who participated reported that their children’s ability to listen and join in with stories had increased**. Of these, 83.1% of parents attributed this change to their participation in Early Words Together.

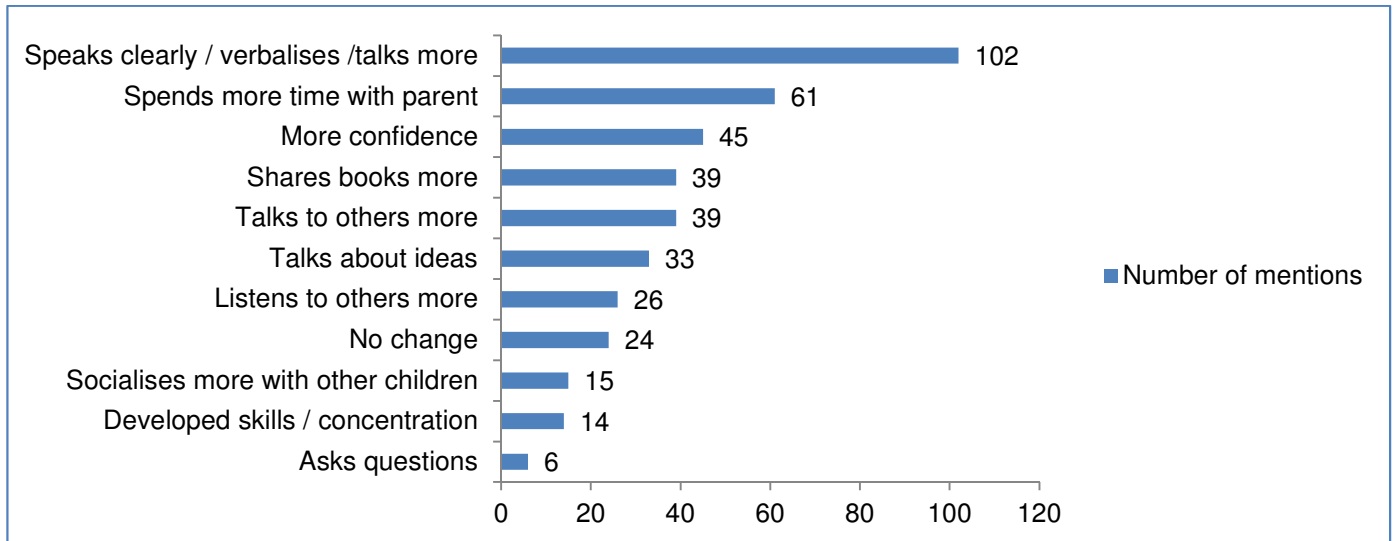
The programme was also found to impact the amount of talk in the home between parent and child with **85.8% of all parents talking more to their children**, with 82.9% of these parents attributing this to participation in Early Words Together. For the purposes of evaluating the programme, levels of parent-child talk are seen as literacy-related behaviours, and these data exceed the target of 50% increase in literacy behaviours. As with the other outcomes, we performed a comparison of outcomes for target families and other families who participated in Early Words Together. For this question, target families were those families who reported at registration that they either never shared books with their children or only did so once or twice a week. As can be seen from Figure 3, 88.1% of these target families reported an increase in parent-child talk and this is slightly higher than the 83.5% improvement reported by other families, although they showed lower levels of improvement in relation to talking ‘lots more’.

**Figure 3: Parents’ Responses to ‘Do you think you and your child talk more now?’**



We explored the open-ended responses from parents in the toolkits to understand the reasons underlying increased talk between parents and children, and the results of this analysis are presented in Figure 4.

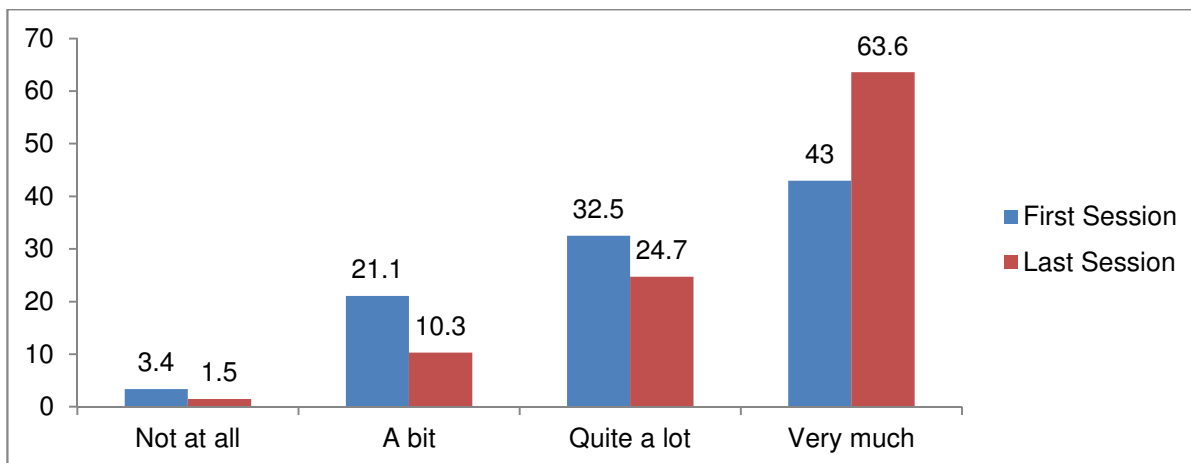
**Figure 4: Parents' explanations of increases in child's talk**



The parents appeared to attribute increases in verbal interaction with their child to increased talk coming from the child, increased contact time with parent, and more child confidence in verbal interactions, evident from increased talking and listening with other people. Shared book interactions also accounted for some of this increase in verbal interaction.

Parents were also asked to indicate how much their children enjoyed joining in with songs and rhymes (see Figure 5 below), and there was a statistically significant improvement in reported levels of enjoyment ( $p < .0005^4$ ) across the sample as a whole, with a 20% increase in parents reporting that their child enjoyed joining in with songs and rhymes 'very much'. 74.2% of children who previously did not have a favourite song or rhyme now do, with 70% directly attributing this to participation in the programme.

**Figure 5: Percentage of Parents' Responses to 'How much would you say that your child enjoys joining in with songs and rhymes?'**



<sup>4</sup> a p value of less than 0.0005 indicates that there is a less than 0.05% probability of this result not reflecting a genuine difference in scores

Rhymes and songs are considered to be literacy behaviours (as they contribute to vocabulary and literacy development), so joining in with these activities contributed towards the EWT target for a 50% increase in literacy behaviours. As a result we identified 179 target families who indicated in the first session that their child either did not enjoy joining in with songs and rhymes at all, or only enjoyed joining in ‘a bit’. Of these, 139 reported that their child had a higher level of participation when re-assessed in the final session of Early Words together (see Table 5), indicating **a 77.7% improvement in joining in with songs and rhymes in families targeted by Early Words Together.**

**Table 5: Contingency table showing how target families responded at pre and post test to the question ‘How much would you say your child enjoys joining in with songs and rhymes?’**

		Post test				Totals
		Not at all	A bit	Quite a lot	Very Much	
Pre test	Not at all	6	8	6	6	26
	A bit	2	32	61	58	153

### English as an Additional Language

There appeared to be a particular appreciation of the Early Words Together programme from parents and children who were from English as an Additional Language (EAL) homes. There were 18 spontaneous references to the benefits of the programme for such families included in the open ended responses to questions in the toolkits at the end of the programme (see Part 4 of this report), and the EAL parents who were interviewed also mentioned the benefits of their children being able to speak English, share English books and learn English rhymes:

*‘When she is at home with me, she is by herself, she goes to nursery now, she comes back speaking more confident in English, as we speak Chinese at home. Now she is half and half. Before the centre she couldn’t speak and get friends. More confident, so she can do things for herself’ (Croydon).*

*‘I speak in Polish at home, so it was an opportunity for him to talk English and learn from other children.’ (Sutton)*

*‘Also the nursery rhymes not originally being from this country, we hadn’t learnt the nursery rhymes in English, but she learnt them here, she knows more than I do. That was good.’ (Lambeth)*

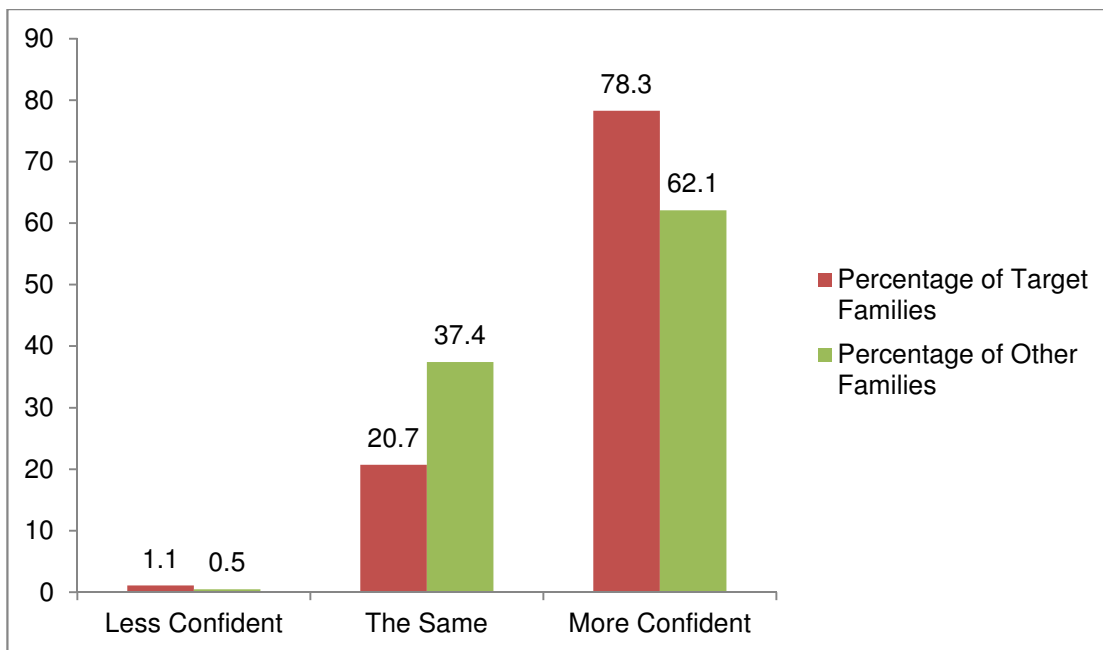
*‘I buy the book with CD because of my English and my accent, sometimes my English word doesn’t sound good, so I buy the book with CD so he has clear English’ (Sutton)*

In Croydon, EAL families were being referred from Early Words Together to an English as an Additional Language course at the centres (N.B. other parents also commented on further skills development as a result of participation, and this material is presented on page 14).

## Key Outcome 2: Awareness and confidence of the adult in supporting their child’s communication, language and literacy

Toolkit analysis revealed that 65.7% of all parents reported feeling more confident about sharing books with their children than they were before participating in the programme. When we compare levels of improved parental confidence of target families compared to those of the other families who participated, we can see that **78.3% of target families<sup>5</sup> reported improved confidence** (see Figure 6), higher than the percentage reported by other families.

**Figure 6: Do you feel more confident about sharing books with your child than before?**



Open-ended responses from parents collated from the toolkits also evidenced that parents showed improved knowledge about why it is important to share books with children:

- ‘I think it is a great way to help bond with your child, learning new ways to keep them interested in books.’*
- ‘I make more effort to share a book during the day not just at bedtime.’*
- ‘I understand I need to make quality time with him and it is working in that he is settling down for stories.’*
- ‘Reading is very important for every child and the project has given me more information on this.’*
- ‘I do read with her more than before because I do understand the importance of reading.’*
- ‘After finishing books I now ask him what the book was about and what he liked about it.’*
- ‘You can learn new things and help your child in making reading routine and lots of interesting stuff.’*
- ‘I have learnt lots of tips from my volunteer about reading with my son and interacting with my son. I find it difficult before.’*

<sup>5</sup> ‘Target families’ refers in this section to those families who reported at registration that they either never shared books with their children or only did so once or twice a week.

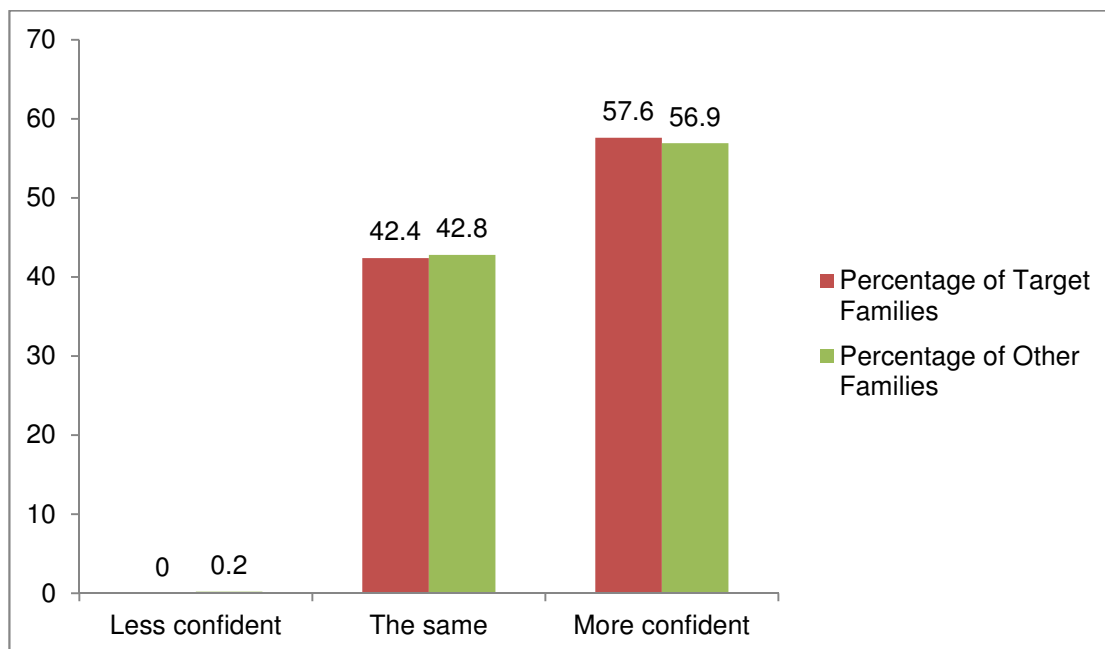
*'Now I know how to read the story so he is more active and learning and speaking confidently'*

There was also evidence that programme participants were then sharing their new knowledge and skills with other people in the family. For example:

*'I have been able to help my husband to read more interactively with [child]'.*

There were modest increases in parental confidence levels in singing with their children (58.1% improvement), and 66.6% of those parents attributed this to participation in Early Words Together. As before, we compared the percentage of target families whose confidence increased to the percentage of other families who reported increased confidence in relation to singing, and there is no real difference between the two groups (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Do you feel more confident about singing with your child than before?**



Parents discussed changes that occurred to their parenting skills as a result of participating in Early Words Together. Both increased confidence and an understanding of how to support their child's learning were mentioned.

*'I needed help as a parent, and found the help with the sessions and the volunteers, I am feeling confident and happy.'* (Croydon)

*'Even things like that have helped me when choosing stories, and just keeping it simple but not too much language as gets bored; as a parent it has taught me all of those things as well.'* (Sutton)

*'It gave me confidence with her, it gave her confidence to do things.'* (North Yorkshire)

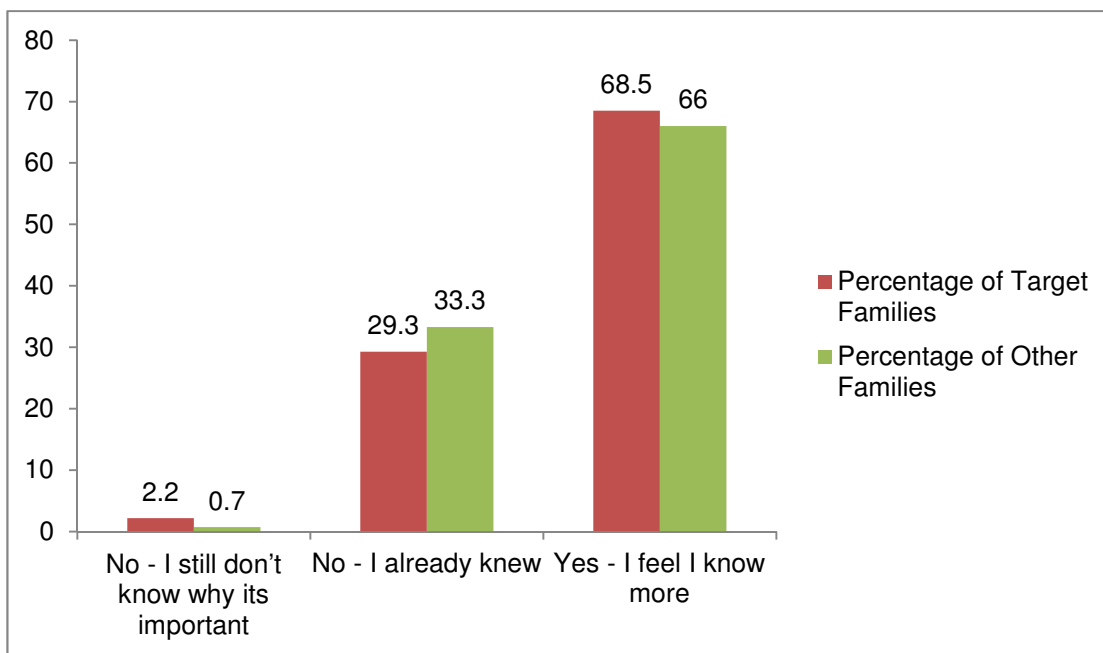
*'Just new and different ways of doing things, making it more fun and interactive and that is the main thing I got out of it personally.'* (Lambeth)

*'I have become a lot calmer, I have a better understanding, I don't rush X into explanations, I give him chance to process his words now and actually tell me what he is wanting.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'It has given me confidence to read out loud, I use to be a bit shut off especially if there were people in the room, but now I am not so bothered about it.'* (Rochdale)

There was also evidence that the parents who completed the programme were more knowledgeable about the reasons why it was important to talk to their child than they were at the start of the programme (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Do you feel you know more about why it is important to talk to your child than you did at the start of the project?**



The open-ended comments from the toolkits suggested that for some parents the programme was significant in teaching them *how* to communicate and interact with their children:

*'We have learnt to communicate more and I treat him more as a little person who knows a lot rather than a little person who doesn't know anything.'*

*'It is really nice for mum and child, you will gain experience of interacting with your child especially a first time mum, I did not have any idea.'*

*'Attending the programme has made me learn how to spend time with my child.'*

*'I have more ideas of what to do with my daughter this I gained from the project.'*

## Impact on parents' engagement with their own development

Parents mentioned that engaging with Early Words Together now meant they were attending other courses at their Children's Centre:

*'I finished a computer course.'* (Lambeth)

*'Two weeks ago we did a course.'* (Lambeth)

*'After EWT, I went on the EAL course.'* (Croydon)

*'I am doing Maths and English with the Children's Centre.'* (Wiltshire)

After completing Early Words Together, some parents decided to become Early Words Together volunteers. At one centre, two fathers who had participated in the programme (the programme was typically completed by mothers) had put themselves forward to be volunteers. One centre in Rochdale suggested to a number of parents about volunteering to improve their skills, which a number did.

*'I did Early Words Together as a parent and now I am doing it as a volunteer. This week we have just started the programme.'* (Rochdale)

*'Watching the children change over the course became quite dramatic so I become quite passionate about it. So I wanted to keep doing the course with the families. So I started off as a parent but I am now a volunteer.'* (Croydon)

*'It is good experience for the CV and help link with schools.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'Yes, X mentioned that they were looking for volunteers after the course and I put my hand up straight away to get involved as I think it would be really interesting.'* (North Yorkshire)

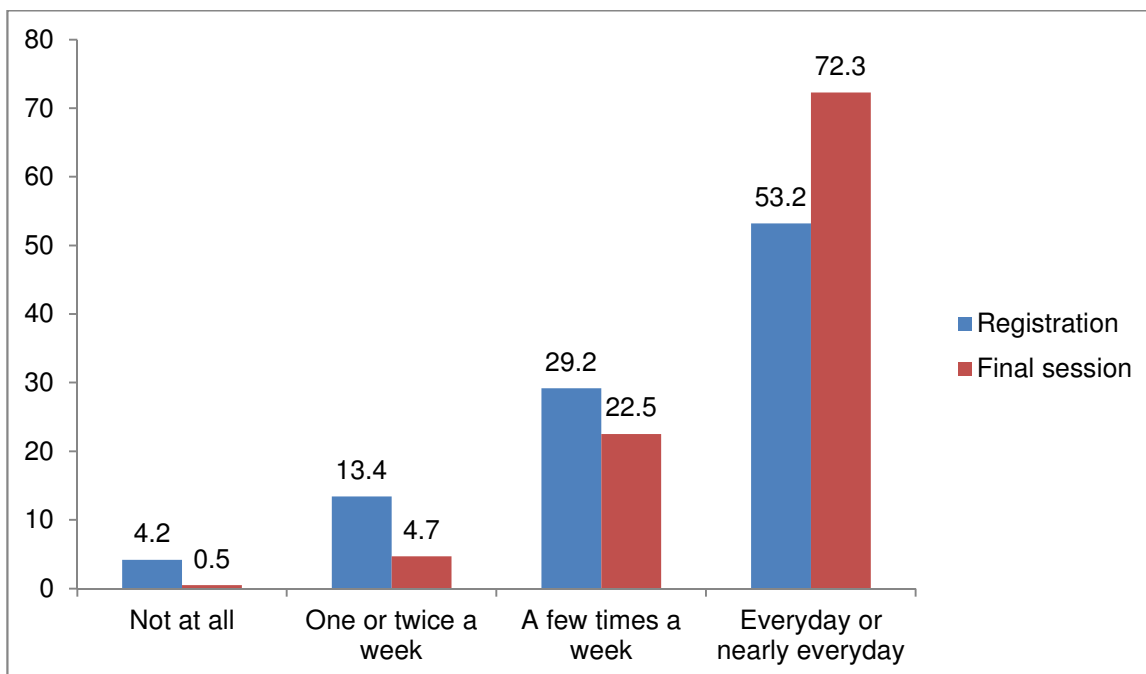
*'I have just asked if I can help here for one day a week.'* (Rochdale)



### Key Outcome 3: Improved home learning environment

There was evidence that the home learning environment of programme participants was positively impacted. One of the targets of this programme was to improve the home learning environment of 50% of families who participated. At registration 53.2% of families assessed reported reading to their child every day, and 4.2% reported that they never read or shared books with their child. By the end of the programme, six weeks later, 73.3% of families who completed EWT read to their child every day and only 0.5% reported never sharing books (see Figure 9). This change in reported behaviour is statistically significant ( $p < .0005^6$ ). 74.9% of participants attributed these changes in their behaviour to participating in the programme.

**Figure 9: Percentage of parents' responses to 'In a typical week, how often do you look at or share books with your child?'**



To assess progress against the '50% improvement in home learning environment' outcome, we focused on target families once again; in this case, those parents who at registration reported less than ideal levels of shared book reading and shared singing / rhyme-based activities with their children. These metrics were incorporated into the toolkits used by the National Literacy Trust as proxy indicators of an effective home learning environment. This focus on a cohort of families targeted by the programme is appropriate, given the high levels of shared learning activity that were reported by parents during the pre-test survey at baseline, which were not always evidenced through staff feedback on children's behaviour. Some over-reporting of parental involvement at the beginning of the programme, meant that there was a 'ceiling' effect on performance against the programme goals looking across all programme participants (see Figure 9).

In relation to frequency of shared book activities in target families, 92 parents reported that they read to their child either 'not at all' or only 'once or twice in a typical week' at registration. Of these 92 parents, 84

<sup>6</sup> a *p* value of less than 0.0005 indicates that there is a less than 0.05% probability of this result not reflecting a genuine difference in scores

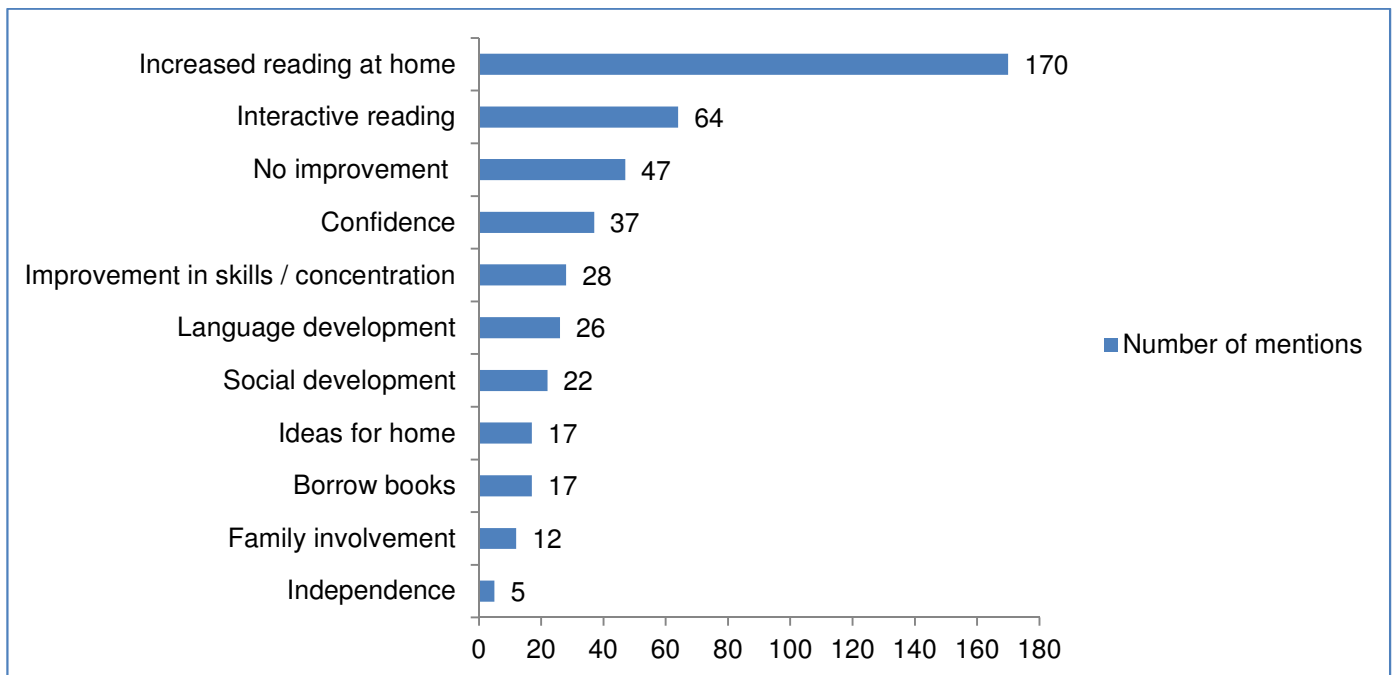
improved the frequency of their book sharing activity by the final session of Early Words Together (see Table 6). This represents a **91.3% improvement in shared book activities in targeted families**, and 74.9% attributed this improvement to participation in Early Words Together. This increased frequency of shared book activities also exceeds the target set of '50% increase in listening and joining in with stories'.

**Table 6: Contingency table showing how target families responded at pre and post test to the question 'In a typical week, how often do you look at or share books with your child?'**

		Post test				Totals
		Not at all	Once or twice	A few times	Everyday or nearly everyday	
Pre test	Not at all	1	3	10	7	21
	Once or twice	1	6	29	35	71

We then quantified the parents' explanations for any changes in the frequency of book sharing, and these are presented in Figure 10. As can be seen there is evidence of increased reading at home, more interactive reading, more book borrowing, more family involvement and greater parental confidence to share books.

**Figure 10: Parents' reasons for increased levels of shared reading.**



Participation in Early Words Together **increased print exposure** for most children. Print exposure was either increased by the free books which were gifted as part of the programme, increased exposure to the local library, or a general understanding of the importance of reading by the adults resulting in increased book ownership.

The free books were repeatedly highlighted as being a positive aspect of the programme. For some of the parents it gave them access to new books that they may not have been able to otherwise access. Allowing the child to select their free book was mentioned as important for engaging the child in reading:

*'The Dear Zoo one we like, Going on a Bear Hunt you like that one, he still gets them out and reads them.'* (Rochdale)

*'Some of the books that we got for free are some of X favourites now, and he will get them out at night time to read them before bed.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'She loved them, always going through the zoo book, she really loves that book.'* (Rochdale)

*'The more books you have got the better.'* (Rochdale)

*'They were lovely, I wish we could have more and more. She keeps reading them over and over.'* (Sutton)

*'I thought it was nice that you got to pick a book to take home at the end. I think other children who don't have access to books the same way we do and does, it might inspire them to read more.'* (Rochdale)

In the Early Words Together programme, a trip to the library was recommended to take place, however for some centres this was not possible. To overcome this barrier, library staff visited the sessions to inform the parents about library services. A library visit was, for many families, a turning point in their access to books:

*'Yes we went to the library. We are now members of the library since that and we go don't we? We go every Friday and get some new books.'* (Rochdale)

*'We go to the library every week, take books home to read, every week.'* (Croydon)

*'We have a weekly trip to the library.'* (Sutton)

*'He joined it and liked looking at the books and drawing. He did pick some books out for himself.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'I have started to do that, as before I didn't go to the library, they loved it that time.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'They actually joined us and we are members of the library, we have taken the kids a few times now, which has been fun, all six of them coming out with ten books.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'Since that programme, I don't know if this is coincidence but he now actively on a weekly basis wants to go to the library so we do rent books on a weekly basis.'* (Rochdale)

*'It helped me get into the library as I never used to go to the library.'* (Sutton)

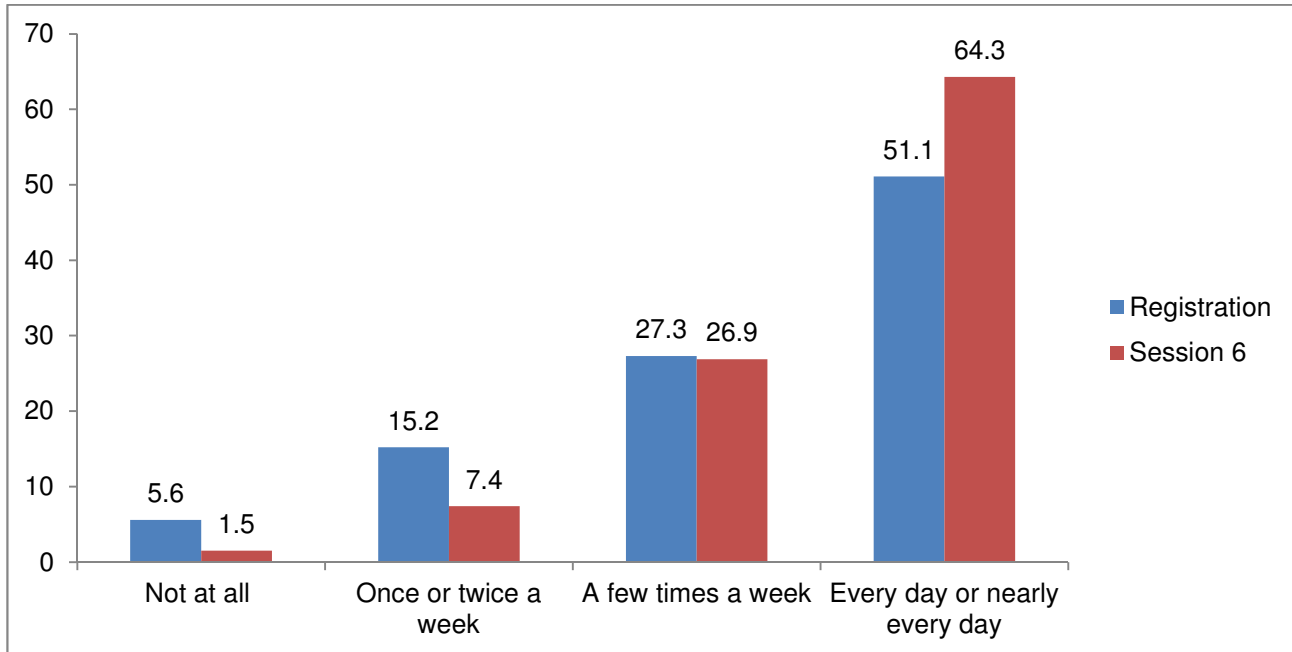
Print exposure was increased also through using story sacks at the Children's Centres as well as through purchasing books:

*'Just yesterday I bought some books for her, a lot, about over ten books. I hope she enjoy to learn something in books and picture as well.'* (Wiltshire)

*'We borrow books like every other day and we read them together. I think she has really improved in her speech.'* (Sutton)

The second home learning environment indicator used within this project was the frequency of children's song and rhyme activity. These data are shown in Figure 15 below, and as can be seen, 88.3% of parents reported that by the end of the programme their children enjoyed joining in with songs and rhymes either 'quite a lot' or 'very much' (see Figure 15), and this improvement was statistically significant at the  $p < .0005$  level.

**Figure 11: Percentage of parents' responses to 'In a typical week, how often do you and your child sing together?'**



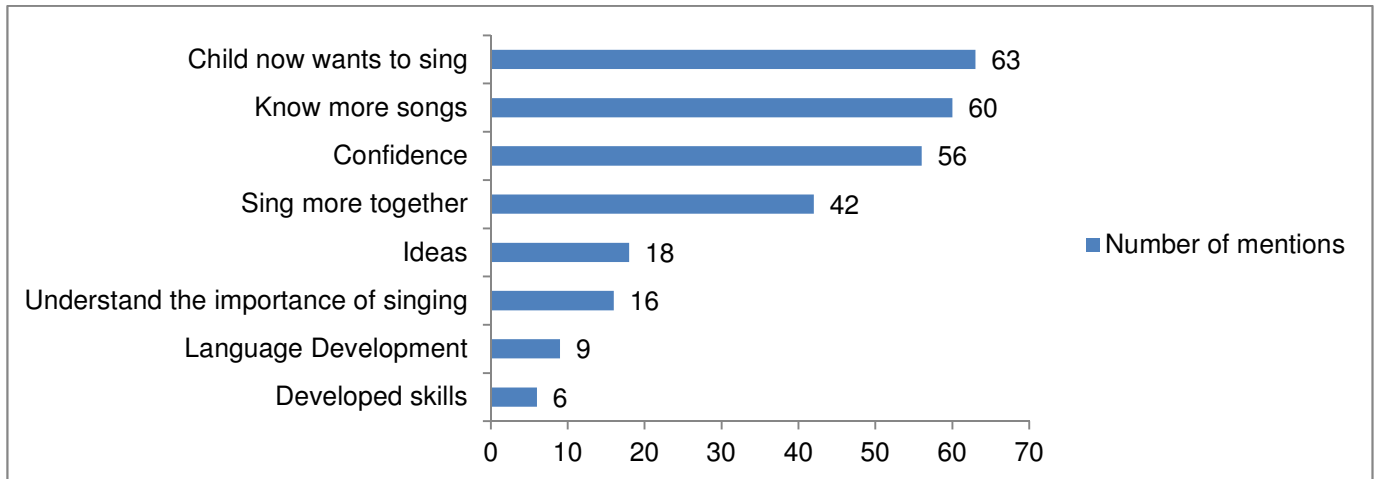
When we focused on the 107 target families where the children either did not join in with songs and rhyme at all or only 'a bit' at baseline, we found that 91 of these families reported improved frequency of song and rhyme activity by the final session of Early Words Together (see Table 7). This represents an **85% improvement for target families** in this home learning environment indicator.

**Table 7: Contingency table showing how target families responded at pre and post test to the question 'In a typical week, how often do you and your child sing together?'**

		Post test				Totals
		Not at all	Once or twice	A few times	Everyday or nearly everyday	
Pre test	Not at all	2	9	11	8	30
	Once or twice	2	12	26	37	77

The parents were asked to explain any change in frequency of joining in with songs and rhyme, and their responses are characterised in Figure 12. As can be seen, the main reasons behind the increase were: increased knowledge of songs, increased confidence and the child wanting to sing more than before.

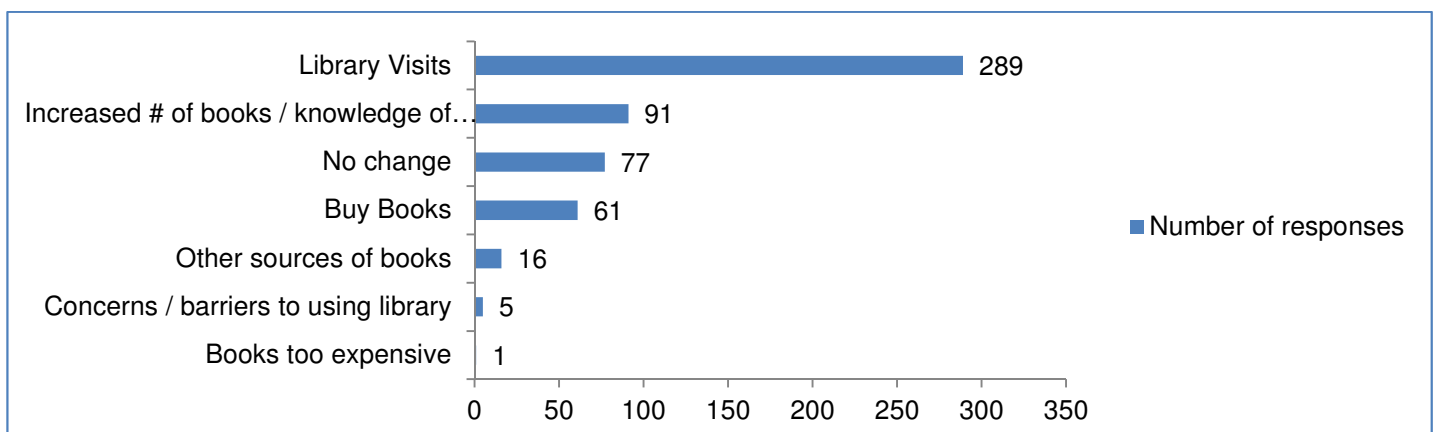
**Figure 12: Reasons given for increased frequency of joining in with songs and rhyme**



A third key indicator of home learning environment is book ownership. At registration, 2.1% of families owned no books and the majority (56.8%) owned between 1 and 30 books, indicating low levels of book ownership as typical of the parents who participated in Early Words Together. Although levels of book ownership were not assessed in the final session, the book gifting aspect of the programme mentioned earlier meant that 100% of families now owned more books, and **88.5% of all parents and 89.9% of target families reported that they were now more likely to buy or borrow books.**

We further quantified the explanations that programme participants gave in their toolkits to the question ‘Do you think you are more likely to buy or borrow books now?’ As can be seen from Figure 13, nearly 300 programme participants indicated that they were now using or were increasing their use of libraries to provide access to books, and there was also evidence of increased book ownership for 61 families, who were now buying books for their children. Many parents commented in this section on the increased levels of enjoyment and knowledge as a result of programme participation, and indicated that this was the reason why they were now increasing book access in their homes. One parent indicated that they were less likely to own books because of the expense of buying them, and five parents cited concerns around library use, such as worries that their children might damage library books.

**Figure 13: Reasons given for being more likely (or not) to own or borrow books**



The children and parents who participated in Early Words Together and were interviewed reported an overwhelmingly positive experience, and it was evident there have been changes in the home learning environment due to the interaction with the volunteers and/or centre staff. For some parents, Early Words Together significantly changed the home learning environment for the benefit of all the children in the family. For example, one family talked about a memory game the volunteer used in the session, which is now used with all the family:

*'We have got the older ones into it, the memory game. They have to remember eight objects and then put it in a bag and then they have to remember each one. The others got involved so X didn't think it was just aimed at him.'* (North Yorkshire)

An objective of Early Words Together was to enrich the conversations parents have with their children to improve language development. Relative to reading-based activities, few parents mentioned this as an outcome of the programme for them in the focus groups. This may be due to the children recruited or the expectations parents held about the programme:

*'I can understand my son more and I have learnt activities to do at home.'* (Croydon)

*'Actually X speech has come a lot better, a few months back he wouldn't say anything and now he won't stop talking.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'He has come on a lot, he is talking a lot more.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'We can't shut up him now. He is massively more vocal now. Now and then he will totally surprise you. He is picking up words and applying them to the right people which I am finding quite impressive.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'She talks constantly after taking part.'* (Rochdale)

*'Before this my son would be watching TV, and now we do things together because it has taught me how to communicate at the same level.'* (Lambeth)

*'They were on about him going to speech therapist to see whether we needed the speech therapist they said do a session down here, they were on about him going on that, but first he went on that EWT and they never told me to take him on it again.'* (North Yorkshire)

The use of rhymes in the sessions and singing songs were attributed to the increased levels of talking; as well as the increase in reading:

*'The little one, she likes the songs, and is singing in the bathroom, it is very good.'* (Lambeth)

*'I didn't know any of those songs till I came here, to the centre, I learnt all the songs.'* (Lambeth)

As mentioned, the small groups allowed **the development of their child's confidence**, which was considered important for their educational journey.

*'I think he is more confident, whereas before he didn't use to talk to anybody apart from me, his dad and his brother, now he has started talking to other people.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'He is confident, not afraid, prepares them for the next stage.'* (Lambeth)

*'We saw our school, before he entered the centre he was a little bit closed by himself, and when he started the centre he started to be open, with the activities it just makes them jump.'* (Croydon)

*'It has made him a lot more confident I would say, it was a small group and it is relaxed he has grown in confidence.'* (Sutton)

*'Early Words Together has really built her confidence. It was the smallest group I could get her into to build her confidence.'* (Croydon)

Many parents mentioned that from participating in Early Words Together they have **increased the amount of reading they do at home:**

*'To be honest with ya, I'd never sat down with him with books before, but now he loves 'em and he got really into books now.'* (Rochdale)

*'It was actually quite good because before we started off on the sessions he wasn't really into books...but now he started to read a lot of books.'* (Sutton)

*'We do a read a lot more at home, she likes her books, she brings her books to you.'* (Rochdale)

*'It has made him a little bit more interested in books and reading. If I get a book out now, he is like 'yes gingsman'.* (North Yorkshire)

*'I read more books to X, that's the one thing that I have learnt.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'A bit more than what I used to since we gone to that thing because she's been asking me more now.'* (Wiltshire)

*'He is more interested in books now, he will go and pick one up.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'I have found she wants to do it more, because I am involved with it rather than just reading the story to her.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'He does now, but he didn't before, he will bring a book and say 'mommy read'. It has really boosted that desire to read.'* (Rochdale)

*'He's always bringing me a book and saying can I read it to him.'* (Rochdale)

*'I definitely read more with him since then, he knows before bed we must read a book.'* (Rochdale)

*'Reading bigger stories with X mainly, because I just use to do easy stories with him, but now he really enjoys reading bigger stories.'* (Rochdale)

The key message many parents took away from Early Words Together was that just reading is not enough; acting out the story, discussing the pictures on the page and generally talking about the story is all important in engaging the children with the story and support language development:

*'Now I do the voices to certain things, like goldilocks and the gingerbread man, I change my voices a little bit, and she seems to enjoy it a lot more which is something I wouldn't have done before. They told me to try it, so I did, and she seems to love it.'* (Wiltshire)

*'X enjoys pointing at the books a bit more now. We are going through them more and he will sit there and be more focused on them.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'I think X likes me getting involved in stories, before we just sort of read it but now he wants me to play along with him more so than just read.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'It was great before we just read the book and that was it, but now I know I can do something more, which is great for building his vocabulary.'* (Sutton)

*'We use the idea of the stories he enjoys to role play with water and sand and the little characters, and I found out that he really enjoyed putting the two together, we read the story and now all he does is act, I can't stop him.'* (Sutton)

*'Making storytime fun, like introducing puppets and making the book come to life, rather than just sitting there and reading it word for word.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'They was a book on racing cars and X actually on his own, no one was helping him he sat there and started making action for when we turned the page for each thing, so we were well impressed that he was making actions to the story.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'We read going on a bear hunt, and we brought his bear down, we have done a few things with that story. I keep doing things differently, like reading words out and waiting for him to read words out, he fills the gaps in. It is only when speaking to someone you realise the little things that you can do to encourage them to participate, it did.'* (Rochdale)

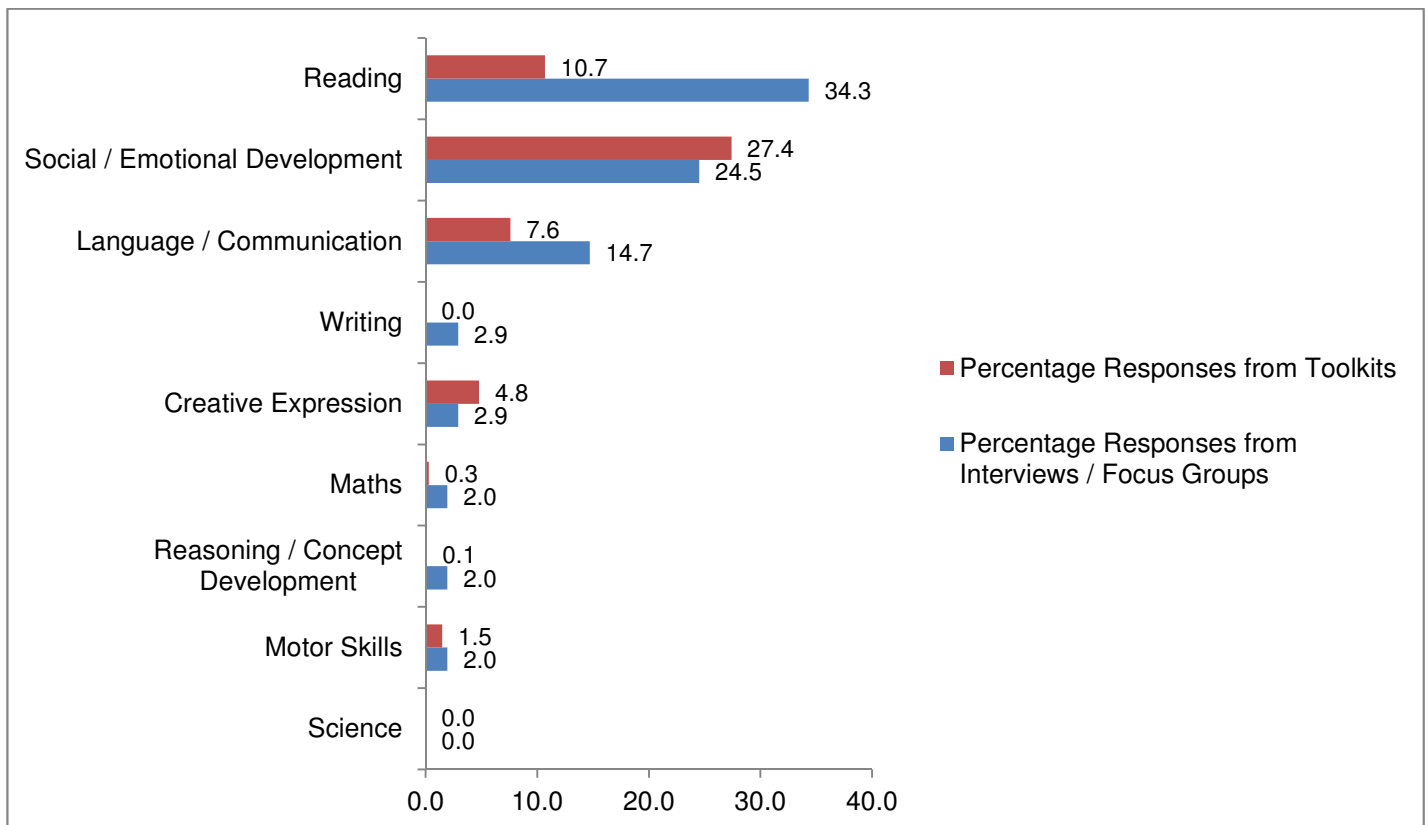
*'We spend a little more time on each page, saying look at this, rather than just reading the book, we do a lot more of that now.'* (Rochdale)



### Key Outcome 4: School readiness

School readiness was assessed by reviewing parents' focus group and toolkit responses to identify instances where parents spontaneously gave examples of their child displaying behaviours classified as indicative of school readiness (see Appendix A). The distribution of responses is shown in Table 14 below

**Table 14: School Readiness Indicators from Focus Groups / Interviews and Toolkits, as a percentage of total available responses**



Examples of this from the focus groups included:

*'When he goes into nursery he already knows about structure and discipline from other people, but also to be aware of other people's emotions. It is all those elements that have benefited him.'* (Croydon)

*'We are reading books differently, and we have got the library, we are looking at books, different books at home, so yes I do think it gets them ready for school and nursery.'* (Rochdale)

*'Yes trying to get them to sit and listen to books with other children who are doing other things than listening.'* (Rochdale)

*'She knows the importance of sharing and playing together.'* (Lambeth)

*'I think it will prepare him for nursery and reception, he needs to learn to share, do activities and play with new toys.'* (Croydon)

*'After a couple of weeks he knew the routine and he came and sat down for the reading.'* (Rochdale)

*'It is definitely something that people should do before they get into school. It has helped with his reading and listening.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'That was good, when X got X to sit down and showed him how to hold the pen properly and he drew pictures.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'I probably wouldn't have come up with, like playing with chalk outside I probably wouldn't have thought about that as a way for him to learn how to hold a pen.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'He knows all the colours now and he can count to ten.'* (Croydon)

*'The highlighting of the colours, he didn't always know what colours were what and he has definitely improved on that.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'He has started to show an interest in his letters, after doing a X for his name.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'He is picking up words and applying them to the right people, which I am finding quite impressive'* (North Yorkshire)

*'I think it will be helpful as it will build his vocabulary, which is important for him because he is talking Polish at the moment, and he will need to speak English for nursery'* (Sutton)

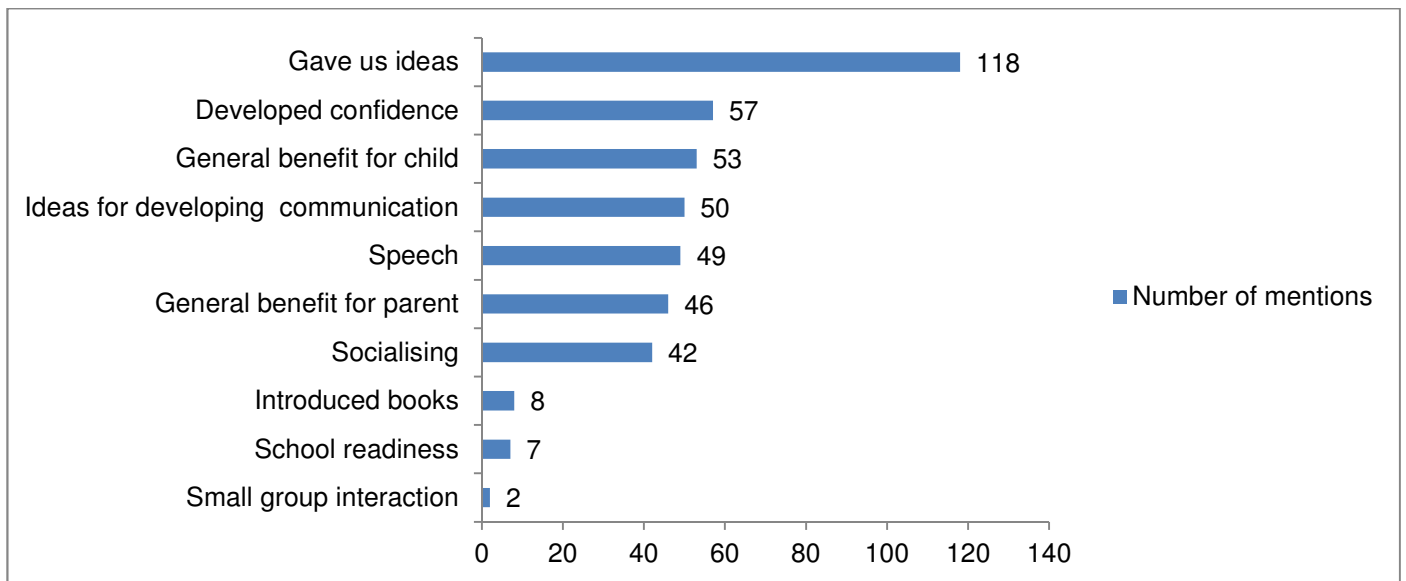
*'Like when we go into Sainsbury's when he sees a wet floor sign we have to go up to it and ask what he says, same about road signs, so we are doing a lot more stopping we are reading and learning a lot of more words'* (Sutton)

To help to validate our analysis of the focus group data, we also analysed the parents' toolkit explanations for changes in their children's book sharing for evidence of school readiness indicators. These are also shown in Figure 14 above. From these data it is clear that Early Words Together impacted on the social and emotional development of the children who participated as much as it impacted their literacy and language-related skills.

**Key Outcome 5: Referral of other families into Early Words Together**

**98.5% of participants said that they would recommend the programme to friends or neighbours.** We were interested to see the extent to which referral of other families had already occurred by looking for spontaneous (i.e. unprompted) mentions of referrals in the toolkits. Based on this, 1.8%% of the parents mentioned that they had already referred friends or family members onto the programme. It should be noted that this is likely to be an underestimate, as this was not directly assessed.

**Figure 15: Reasons why parents would recommend Early Words Together to other parents.**



Parents were asked to explain the reasons why they would recommend the programme, and these data are presented in Figure 15. The main reasons given related to the way the programme gave parents ideas for things to do with their children, the development of confidence and communication skills, and general benefit to parent and child.

## Key Outcome 6: Impact of volunteer-led engagement on home learning environment and engagement with the programme

In most of the sessions volunteers ran the sessions. From the comments made, their involvement in the programme was key:

*'I think the success of the project is the volunteers, the volunteers is very important. The programme is nice, it would not be the same without the volunteers.'* (Lambeth)

*'She was fantastic, always interested in what X was doing, anything he wanted to do she was involved in.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'You see at the time X was interested in airplanes and trains, very interested in transport, so she actually brought in little things for us to do, some made an airplane with him, spilt pin trains, she actually made things with him around his hobbies, his ideas and interests.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'He become very bonded to that person after a couple of weeks he was very attached. When he came into the CC he would run over to her.'* (Sutton)

*'The lady he had based it all on what he wanted to do. She would do a mixture of things with him and he would tell her what he wanted. She was bringing games from home.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'They put a lot of, you could tell they put a lot of thought and effort into each session and planned it well and prepared it.'* (Rochdale)

By working with a volunteer on a one-to-one basis, parents mentioned how they had become friends with the volunteers, which had benefited them further:

*'I even made friends with X who was her volunteer.'* (Rochdale)

*'A friend. I enjoyed the company, adult company.'* (North Yorkshire)

The importance of the volunteers and the positive impact they have had in comparison to a centre worker is evident by EWT sessions that were run by either centre workers or by a less enthused volunteer:

*'The volunteer we had wasn't one of the parents, it was someone who worked here, so you felt after a time she was often doing other things as well, so it made it a bit difficult.'* (Sutton)

*'It was meant to be led by volunteers, but they didn't seem to materialise. It would have made the course different, and have a different experience.'* (Rochdale)

*Just left us to do what we wanted to do.* (North Yorkshire)

*She wasn't very engaged. If you want us to be honest from what I saw, compared to other parents who had that one-to-one with their volunteer, [...] just stepped back and sort of let them do what they wanted to do.'* (North Yorkshire)

From talking to a small number of volunteers, their enthusiasm for the project and the parents was clear to see:

*'The family I have worked with, it was the dad of the child who came, they were very much into technology, so on the iPad I showed them some resources online and they were amazed. The son would come into the sessions singing all the nursery rhymes and about letters, and daddy was amazed how did I never find out about this, thank you very much.'*

## Part 4: Recruitment, Expectations, Participant Profiles and Experience of Participation

### Recruitment of Families

The majority of the parents were informed about Early Words Together by the Children’s Centre workers signposting them to the programme or advising them to attend the session. The signposting either occurred at the Children’s Centre in other sessions or when visiting local nurseries and schools:

*'I only saw it because I come here, I don't think I have seen it anywhere else, need posters to advertise it.'* (Rochdale)

*'One of the staff showed me this programme. I was in Chatter Matters and X said there was a similar type of session that we could go to.'* (Sutton)

*'They did a door-to-door survey of who in the local area would be interested in it and we were really up for it.'* (Wiltshire)

Others opted to attend the sessions from reading a Children’s Centre timetable:

*'I found it because they send me a programme.'* (Sutton)

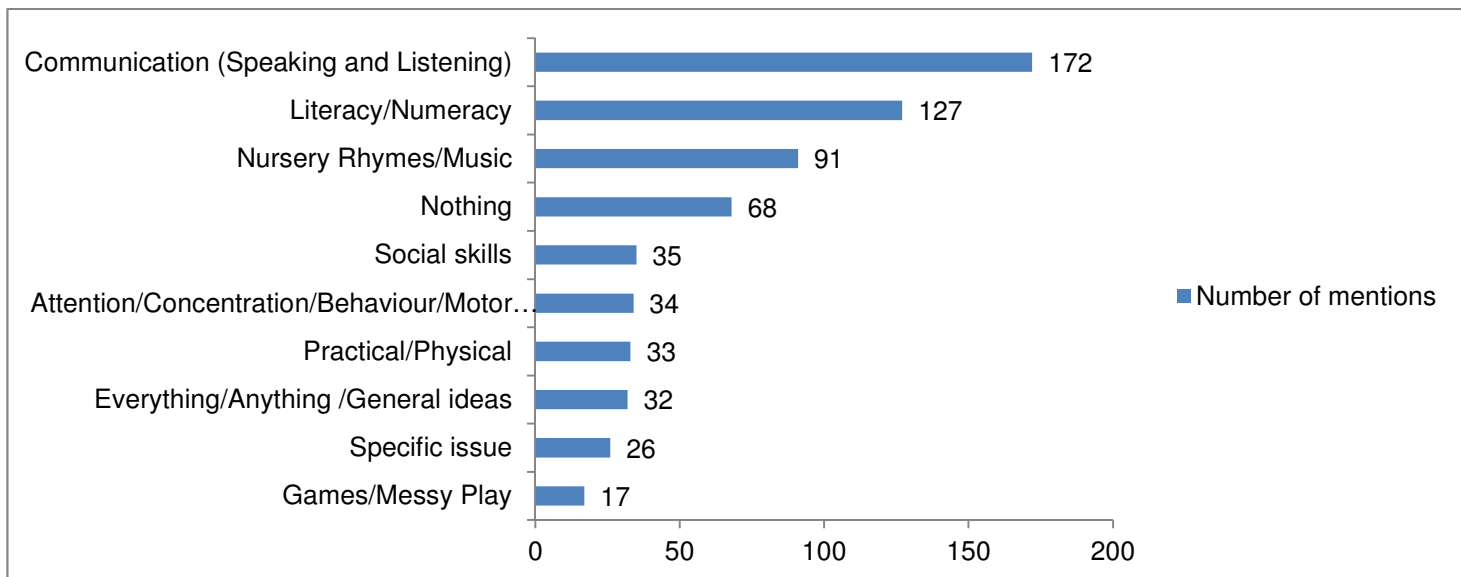
In one case a pro-active volunteer was recruiting families from the local community by informing them about the programme in an informal conversation:

*'For me it was X, as we go to a different Children’s Centre and she said there is this six week programme, would you be interested?'* (Lambeth)

### Reasons for Attending

In the first session, volunteers recorded what the parents wanted ideas on, and the majority of responses related to communication skills and literacy / numeracy activities. These data demonstrate that there is a demand for early years programmes that support the development of language and basic skills (see Figure 16).

**Figure 16: Parents’ requests for areas where they wanted ideas and support from the programme**



This pattern of results was borne out at the end of the programme. From the focus group discussions there appeared to be two main motivations for parents to begin attending Early Words Together: to improve either their children's literacy or communication skills:

*'Basically we were told to go [to] it because at his two year check he wasn't saying enough words. We did Chatter Matters and this.'* (Sutton)

*'I hoped that X would become more confident, because his speech is a bit slow anyway, so I hoped that reading in a group would help him.'* (Sutton)

*'I hoped that X would do more reading and listening.'* (North Yorkshire)

Some of the parents thought it just sounded like fun:

*'I thought it would be really interesting for her to do, something else, to learn more about letter and numbers, which she did.'* (Lambeth)

*'It sounded fun and I thought X would get a lot of enjoyment out of it.'* (Rochdale)

However, in some cases it appears that some parents were not clear about the nature of Early Words Together, as it was presented to them as a course to support children with speech delay:

*'I approached the Sure Start Centre to see they could help me and then they introduced me to this course but I actually thought it was a one to one based specialist course, but it wasn't. It wasn't what I expected but it was good.'* (Rochdale)

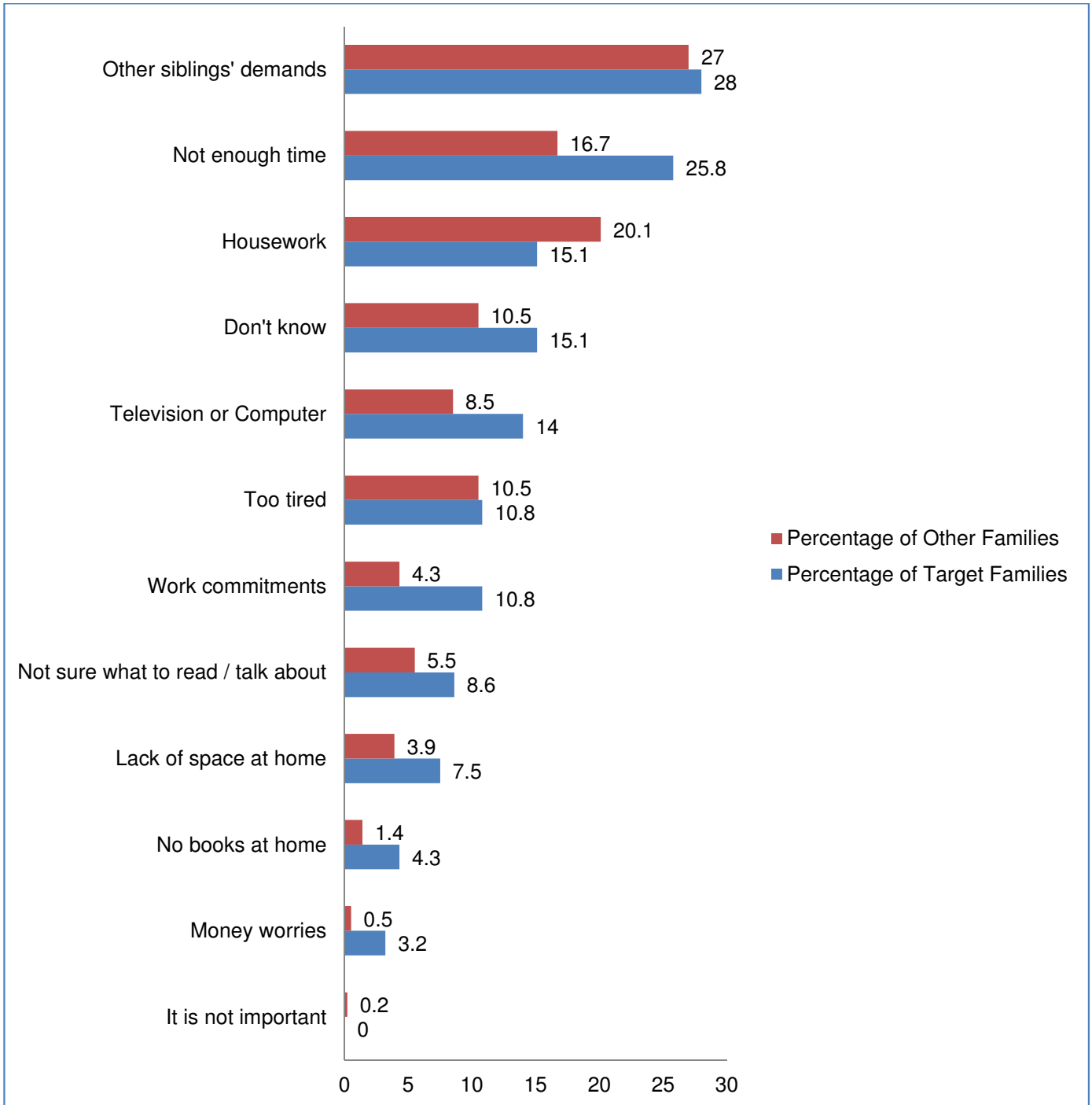
*'I think I misunderstood what it was, because I was worried about his speaking, I thought there would be more focus on words, saying particular words and how to encourage them more.'* (Rochdale)

*'It wasn't what I expected and what I thought it would be, because I thought it was more to do with speech, and with his 'S's, which is what he is struggling with.'* (Wiltshire)

The pressure on Children's Centres to recruit participants into the programme was apparent in some responses. For example, at one centre the parents were told that *'we would be helping the programme rather than the programme helping us.'* (North Yorkshire).

Also of interest were the barriers reported by parents at the start of Early Words Together regarding interacting with their child (sharing books and chatting, specifically). The responses indicated that the demands of other children in the home was the most commonly reported barrier, followed by a general lack of time available for such engagement, and housework. To enable more effective understanding of the barriers experienced by target families, a separate analysis of the responses from these parents is presented in Figure 17 below, and the responses from other families are reported alongside for comparison purposes. For target families, lack of time, other siblings' demands, and housework were still the key barriers. Notable differences in responses between the two groups of parents were in relation to availability of time, the computer or television representing a barrier in the home, and work commitments. Although more rarely mentioned, key differences were also observed in relation to lack of knowledge about what to talk about, lack of space in the home, lack of books, and money worries.

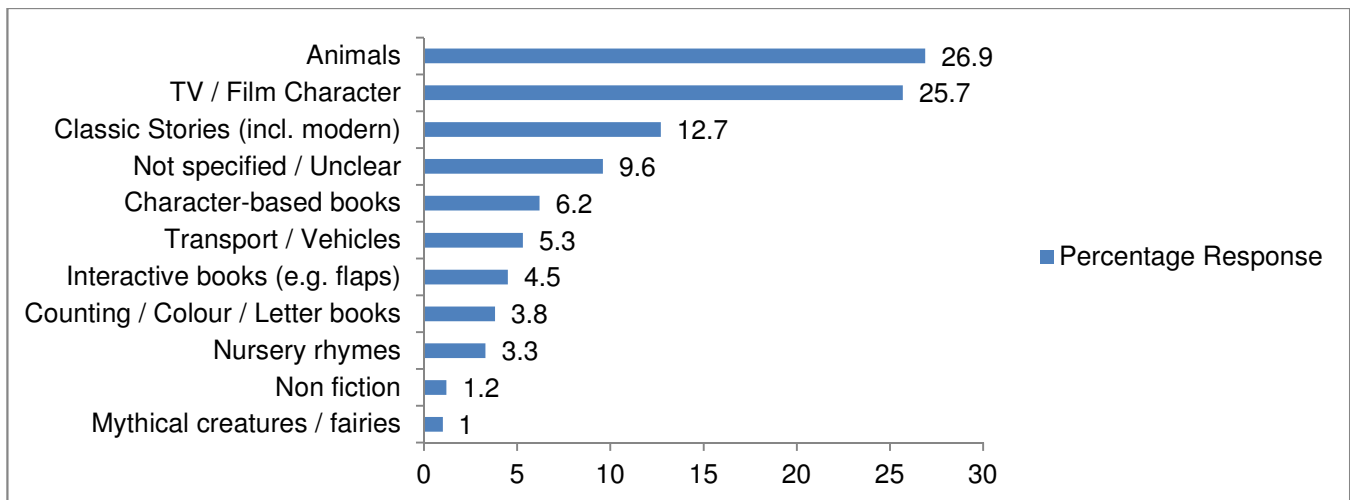
**Figure 17: Percentage of Parents' Responses to 'Things that get in the way of sharing books with your child or chatting together, presented by family type.**



### Profiling the knowledge and interests of the children

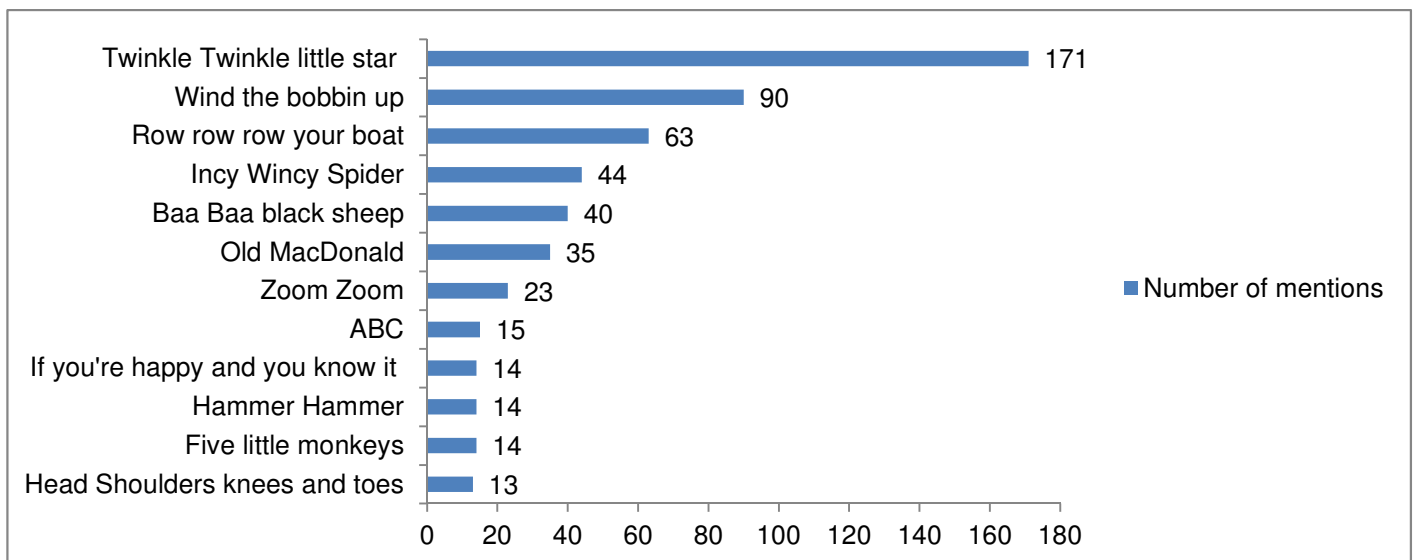
At the first session, parents were asked to name their child’s favourite book, if they had one. We then attempted to characterize these responses into broad categories of children’s literature, as specific book titles were not always provided as responses. As can be seen from Figure 18, the most popular types of books were either TV or film related, or related to animals. The most popular response received referred to the *Peppa Pig* book range. The next most popular response was *The Gruffalo* (coded here as a modern classic text).

**Figure 18: Categories of Favourite Books at the beginning of Early Words Together**



Similarly, the parents were asked to provide details of their children’s favourite songs or rhymes. Here more specific responses were received, and the top 12 most popular rhymes mentioned are presented in Figure 19 below. It should be noted that there was also reference made to TV theme tunes and rhymes from EAL children’s first language.

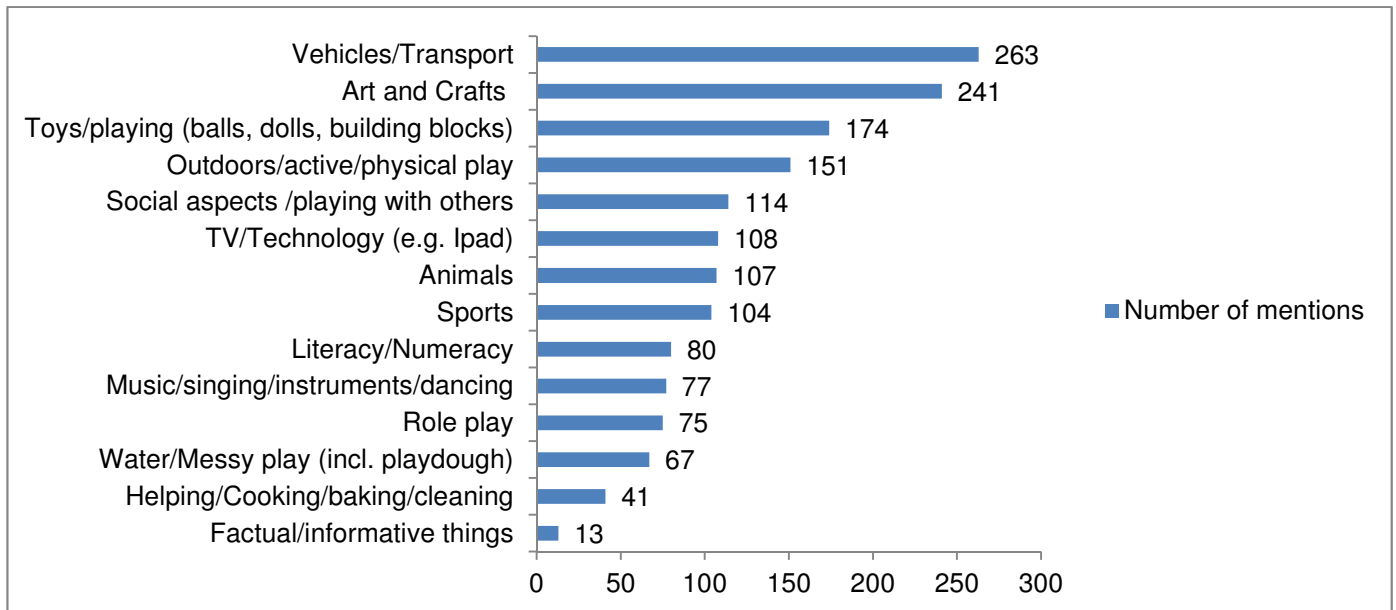
**Figure 19: Top 12 most popular nursery rhymes**





Parents were also asked in the first session to give the volunteer some idea of the sort of things their children were interested in. These responses are given in Figure 20 below. Transport-based activities were most frequently cited by parents, followed by art and craft activities and general play.

**Figure 20: Parents’ descriptions of what their children were interested in at the beginning of the programme**



### Delivery of the Programme

From the qualitative data and informal observation of sessions, the delivery of Early Words Together differed across regions and within regions, with each Children’s Centre running their own version of Early Words Together. At many of the sessions the core activity of the programme was evidenced by the vast number of comments noting a change in reading habits from participating in Early Words Together. However, noting the differences in delivery is equally important. In some centres, Early Words Together was run one-to-one with a volunteer, in others it was run in small groups of two to four parents, and other centres organised sessions with up to eight families. As a result, experiences differed greatly. Furthermore, due to the challenges in recruiting and retaining volunteers the sessions were occasionally run by Children’s Centre workers.

Activities in the sessions differed greatly; below we include quotes from parents who described the activities on offer in the Early Words Together sessions they attended.

*'We focused on different stories, and focused on the rhyme of speech like clapping her name.'* (Rochdale)

*'Coloured, painted, read stories, interacted with the parents and the other children.'* (Rochdale)

*'When we came to the sessions there were activities that were set out, so in one week it would be goldilocks and the three bears, which we loves again from the programme, and there would be toys set out for him to role play.'* (Sutton)

*'I liked doing the activities with the books, because I thought that brought the book to life for them.'* (Rochdale)

*'A lot of it involved strengthening the muscles that would be used to make sounds, like blowing bubbles and making shapes to form the sounds.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'We played with play-doh, put the cars through paint and painted a picture doing that and he tried to draw a dinosaur.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'They taught them storytelling and rhymes, but also getting them involved in cooking.'* (Lambeth)

## Distinctiveness of Early Words Together

Early Words Together was considered by the parents interviewed to be different to the other sessions organised by the Children's Centres. Firstly, the focus on **literacy in a structured** session was deemed by some parents to be a novel feature of the programme:

*'In Early Words Together they write, they open a book, they write, they take the storybook and read the books, in the other sessions we just play, messy play, it is different they teach.'* (Lambeth)

*'It is a lot more structured.'* (North Yorkshire)

Some parents mentioned that it was different to the courses they had been invited on before, and despite initial reservations, they enjoyed the programme and observed positive changes in their children.

*'To be honest we thought oh no not another course because we have been on so many in the past, and they have been, but we have really enjoyed this one'.* (North Yorkshire)

Although the sessions were considered to have an element of structure, parents mentioned them being **child-led** and that aspect was considered a positive aspect of the programme. The activities, the support the volunteers provided, and the involvement of the parent were led by the child and their interests:

*'I enjoyed the fact it was child-led, he could move around and do different things.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'It has been focused around the children rather than the adults. The children haven't felt pushed into it, the children didn't have to do anything they didn't want to.'* (North Yorkshire)

Many of the parents explicitly stated that the **smaller groups** were a distinctive and important feature of Early Words Together that should remain:

*'I liked the one-to-one, as you got extra help.'* (Wiltshire)

*'The group tended to be smaller than for other sessions, so it is quite nice as the children get to know each other and play along really nicely.'* (Volunteer - Lambeth)

*'The smaller groups are nice.'* (North Yorkshire)

The smaller groups ensured there was a focus on the task at hand, and there was a great focus on the child, leading to improvements, especially in concentration levels.

*'He got a lot more out of it being a small group. He came on really well rather than say being with loads of kids.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'If the groups were much bigger you couldn't concentrate on the individual. You don't want to do it totally on your own because there would be no other children for him to interact with. It is about right the balance is good.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'Smaller group has more focus.'* (Croydon)

When the delivery was not one-to-one or small group-based the impact of the sessions appeared to be compromised:

*'There were only X and X in the group, but when they were doing something the other children wanted to join in and that was fine. It ended up, with the treasure hunt, it ended up being the whole setting.'* (North Yorkshire – delivery in a nursery school setting)

*'It was a little bit disorganised. I don't know how many children there were, eight children and there were all these mums with volunteers mums, there was a lot of people.'* (Sutton)

Also considered unique to Early Words Together was the way in which **parents were encouraged to be involved** in the sessions or the activities, in a way that differed to, for example, messy play:

*'I did think the kids enjoyed it more with us getting involved with them, rather than them just doing it themselves as we sat back.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'When all the activities were out, they encouraged me to get involved with the painting as I don't normally know where to start, but it helped me.'* (Rochdale)

Toolkit data revealed that EAL parents found it a positive experience with helping to learn English, and for their children:

*My son is singing more, my son would like sing to me both in English and Spanish*

*He is trying to use his words and sing along with both languages in his contexts*

*Now we read more English books than before*

*Yes, I feel more confident talking in English and I really love the dial language books*

*X speaks more English at home*

*X. enjoys looking and playing with other children. He is listening to the language as we speak two languages at home (Polish and English)*

*Yes, now I can use the mobile library and have more Polish/English books to share with N.*

*She tries to speak more English and she is more confident when listening English speakers*

*She is more confident in speaking with peers in English as it is her second language*

*She knows and enjoys more English songs*

## Improvements to the Programme

The parents we spoke to and the children we observed enjoyed Early Words Together. When asked if there was anything that could be changed, in all interviews/focus groups an extension of the project was mentioned, either in terms of changing the duration of sessions or the length of the programme, supporting the positive experiences noted in the comments above.

Many of the parents interviewed explicitly stated they would have liked longer sessions or more sessions. The longer sessions were requested because the hour seemed to go quickly for the children, and at times activities were not completed. More sessions were indicated by some of the parents, as their child had enjoyed the sessions and the programme appeared to come to an abrupt end. Follow-up sessions, or a session of a similar nature, could be part of the Children's Centre timetable. One volunteer discussed holding a popcorn day where all the families and volunteers could come together again to maintain the contact and relationships that had been built:

*'It could possibly do with being a bit longer maybe, apart from that it is good.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'Just because we enjoyed and missed it when it was finished. It was probably enough, but it would be nice for a session to be like that one all the time.'* (Rochdale)

*'It is only one hour, he wants to stay here longer. He starts colouring or reading a story and it is over, needs to be longer.'* (Rochdale)

*'For the majority of us that did go the children were really into it, you tried to tell them it was time to go home, but none of them wanted to go home, they all wanted to stay a bit longer. Just extend by an hour and a bit, none of the children wanted to go, they wanted to stay and do more.'* (Wilshire)

*'I think the sessions themselves should be longer, because by the time you have got settled down and started doing something it is time to pack up and go.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'I would may be extend it to eight weeks, the hour session seemed to go so quick I don't know if it was because we were so engaged, learning and playing. I would put on a couple of more sessions.'* (Sutton)

*'He was upset when it finished, he keeps asking am I going on my mini bus to see X. Yes he was gutted because it wasn't long enough.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'I think an hour and half, they would have more time to play, my son was always telling me he doesn't want to go home. An hour is too shorter a session for him.'* (Sutton)

*'Six weeks is not enough for the kids. An hour and a half it needs to be longer.'* (Croydon)

*'I did the full thing, but I still think it should have been longer. You seem to get right into it, your start to form a relationship with your child, they sort of come around to the idea and start to interact and then suddenly it stops, so longer sessions.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'I think six weeks is too short.'* (Lambeth)

Not all Children's Centres were able to recruit or consistently use volunteers to run the sessions, especially during the early stages of the programme delivery, and the general view seemed to be that more effort should be made to ensure that the sessions were run with volunteers rather than Children's Centre staff. For example, this parent participated in one of the very early sessions run in his region, which (it should be noted) subsequently showed excellent deployment of volunteers in their Early Words Together sessions:

*'It was meant to be led by volunteers but they didn't seem to materialise. It would have made the course different, and have a different experience.'* (Rochdale)

## Part 5 – Concluding Comments

The evidence presented in this report has shown that Early Words Together exceeded the targets set by the Department for Education in relation to:

- 50% improvement in home learning environment (achieved: 91.3% improvement in shared book activities in target families; 85% improvement in frequency of songs and rhymes in target families and 88.5% improvement in likelihood of owning or borrowing books in target families)
- 75% increase in enjoyment and awareness of books and print (76.7% achieved across all families)
- 50% increase in literacy behaviours (85.8% increase in parent-child talk achieved across all families, 77.7% improvement in joining in with rhymes and songs in target families)
- 50% increase in listening and joining in with stories (79.7% achieved across all families)
- Positive changes in attitudes, confidence, knowledge and skills in 75% of parents (78.3% of target families reported increased confidence in sharing books with their children and 68.5% reported increased knowledge of the importance of talking to their children).

Overall we found that programme participants valued the programme:

*'Get more programmes like this. I think it is great, focus on the kids and get them to where they need to be.'* (Sutton)

*'If everyone can enjoy reading, can be read to; read for themselves, it is something that everyone can do together.'* (North Yorkshire)

*'I hope that it (Early Words Together) will continue, because I think it is just the beginning of how to interact with books.'* (Sutton)

*'Its[sic] really nice project, it is great bonding experience with your child & there is lots to learn.'* (Toolkit Quote)

*'In my opinion if this course is compulsory for reception parents it helps a lot.'* (Toolkit Quote)

## Points for Future Action and Reflection

### 1. Use data on children's interests to engage children with books and a wider range of books

The information provided by parents at baseline on their children's areas of interest could be used as the basis for reviewing the books to be provided via the book gifting aspect of the programme. For example, transport was noted to be a high interest area, and an area of limited book ownership (in terms of the children's favourite books), so there is scope to engage children further by addressing their interests and ensuring their inclusion in the range of books provided. Children's television is well represented in favourite books, and so should be used as a way to engage children with more reading based on familiar characters, but there is also scope to use the areas of interest to widen children's interest in other authors, genres and book formats.

### 2. Review nature and content of programme in relation to impact on boys

The impact of the programme on the children's vocabulary scores was more pronounced for girls than boys, and so some reflection on this differential outcome would be recommended. It was noted that mothers were typically programme participants, and this may have also been reflected in the gender of volunteers too. This may result in a more feminized experience for the boys who participate. Alternatively, behavioural expectations of boys may be different than those of girls, resulting in a more permissive atmosphere for boys who could have been allowed to disengage from activities in the sessions more readily or generally be more boisterous ('Boys will be boys') – this was noted by some of the evaluators who attended sessions. Whether the content of the sessions could be tailored more strongly to reflect the enthusiasms and interests of boys should be considered, as should the idea of potentially

running some sessions exclusively for boys. These could, ideally, be run by male volunteers and / or have greater involvement from male family members.

### **3. Review ways of improving impact data in relation to parental confidence**

Parental confidence was not as strongly impacted as the National Literacy Trust had anticipated, and the reasons behind this finding also need to be examined through additional focus groups and interviews. This may have been attributable to a more inclusive recruitment strategy than planned in the early stages of the project, resulting in more parents who were already quite confident in running shared activities with their children. However, it would be worth considering the characteristics of parents who might lack confidence and use this to develop a revised picture of who might benefit from Early Words Together. The reasons why parents lacked confidence were not examined in this evaluation but some development work could consider this further. What we can say, however, is that parents with weaker oral language skills / literacy levels would seem to benefit from this programme. First time parents also emerged as a group who lacked knowledge and skills around knowing how to interact with their children, and so could also be more strongly targeted in recruitment.

### **4. Capitalise on the social and emotional impact of Early Words Together on parents and children in the marketing of the programme**

Related to the above, the social support aspect of Early Words Together was clearly an important feature of the programme for many parents. The ability to befriend someone who was either another parent in a similar situation, or a volunteer who could offer advice and support, was important for many parents. The social contact for the children in the programme was also evident: Not only did the children's literacy and language skills develop, but their social and emotional skills also developed in ways which meant that they were better equipped to cope with school and the challenges of learning in more formal settings. The marketing of Early Words Together should capitalize on this aspect.

### **5. Review messaging in relation to Early Words Together**

One of the areas for future action that also emerged from the report was the need to review messaging around the programme. It was clear that there was a need for a minority of Children's Centre staff to have a clearer idea of what Early Words Together was designed to achieve and who it was intended to help. The data show that parents of children with speech and language difficulties / delay attended the programme based on a misapprehension that the programme was a type of speech therapy course. Other parents appeared to have expected the programme to offer something akin to a crèche facility and some parents (again, a minority) did not expect to stay or participate in activities. Some parents expected a more hands on approach from the volunteers and appear to have misinterpreted the child-led aspect of the activities as reflecting disinterested / disengaged volunteers.

### **6. Review advertising and recruitment strategy**

Advertising of the programme needs to be reviewed. Families reported that if they were not already Children's Centre users they would not have been aware of Early Words Together, and the majority appeared to have been recruited through advertising in Children's Centres or day care settings. There was limited evidence of personal referrals. There could be increased support for volunteers to help them in promoting the programme and recruiting families from their local networks'

### **7. Consider the development of legacy programmes and events in Children's Centres**

We would recommend, based on the comments made by parents, that legacy events could be developed by Children's Centres to enable parents, children and volunteers to maintain contact with each other in order to maximize the benefits of the programme and to keep parents engaged with the Children's Centres.

## Appendix A – School Readiness Checklist<sup>7</sup>

### Social skills

- Uses words to solve problems or conflicts
- Uses words like please, thank you and excuse me
- Adjusts to new situations
- Attempts new tasks knowing it's okay to make mistakes
- Shows pride in accomplishments
- Follows a simple direction
- Stays with an activity to completion
- Asks for help
- Interacts appropriately with adults and peers
- Respects the rights, property and feelings of others
- Works cooperatively (listens to others, shares and takes turns)
- Demonstrates increasing self-control
- Participates in clean-up activities
- Takes responsibility for own belongings (lunch, coat, etc.)
- Is able to dress self
- Adheres to a routine and schedule for personal hygiene, eating meals and going to bed
- Uses good hygiene habits and table manners
- Uses appropriate bathroom skills
- Follows simple safety rules
- Offers to help peers and family
- Tries to regulate emotions properly and articulates feelings in words

### Motor skills

- Puts puzzles together
- Cuts with scissors
- Holds and uses crayons, markers, pens and pencils correctly
- Builds using blocks
- Tries to tie own shoes
- Bounces, kicks, throws and catches a ball
- Rides a tricycle
- Enjoys outdoor activities, like running, jumping and climbing

### Reasoning & concept development

- Matches or groups objects according to size, shape or colour
- Groups objects that are the same
- Understands concepts of in/out, under/over, on/off, front/back, etc.
- Shows an understanding of the passing of time, including concepts of before and after, and today, yesterday and tomorrow
- Experiments enthusiastically with new games and toys, sometimes in a trial-and-error manner
- Describes how objects are the same or different

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<sup>7</sup> Taken from [http://www.newbold-pri.derbyshire.sch.uk/school\\_readiness\\_checklist.pdf](http://www.newbold-pri.derbyshire.sch.uk/school_readiness_checklist.pdf)

#### Language skills

- Talks in sentences
- Follows one- and two-step oral directions
- Uses sentences that include two or more ideas
- Uses descriptive language
- Knows by heart and recites some common nursery rhymes and songs
- Pretends, creates and makes up songs or stories
- Tells or retells stories and/or everyday experiences
- Asks questions and expresses curiosity
- Expresses ideas so that others can understand

#### Reading skills

- Looks at books or pictures on their own
- Pretends to read books by reading the pictures
- Tries to read in everyday situations (signs, labels, etc.)
- Recognizes rhyming words
- Blends sounds into words
- Recognizes some common words in print
- Recognizes many uppercase and lowercase letters
- Recognizes some letter sounds
- Describes characters' actions and feelings in a story
- Relates stories to personal experiences
- Puts events of a story in order

#### Writing skills

- Tries to write, scribble or draw
- Asks you to write words or notes to others
- Attempts to write own name and recognizes own name in print

#### Mathematics concepts

- Compares the size of groups of objects using language such as 'more,' 'less' and 'same as'
- Arranges objects in size order (big to small, or small to big)
- Uses comparison words, like 'bigger,' 'smaller,' 'heavier,' etc.
- Understands concepts of none, some and all and more than and less than
- Identifies and draws a square, circle and triangle
- Correctly counts four to ten objects
- Knows that the final number counted represents the total number of objects in a set
- Recognizes some numbers, 1 – 10
- Can distinguish numbers from letters, and understands that numbers relate to quantity
- Understands the effects of addition and subtraction

#### Science

- Shows interest and asks questions about objects and events observed in their environment
- Notices common properties and differences among objects and materials
- Knows some facts about common plants and animals, such as what they eat and baby names
- Recognizes some objects in the sky such as the sun, moon, clouds and lightning



#### Creative arts & music

- Recognizes and names basic colours
- Draws recognizable shapes and simple objects
- Tells a story with pictures
- Moves to a beat
- Explores with common musical instruments
- Enjoys improvising or copying musical patterns

#### Social studies

- Recognizes basic traditions such as birthdays
- Understands that people live in different parts of the worlds and have different customs and traditions
- Explores simple maps and visual representations of neighbourhoods or communities