

# Early Words Together at Two

Evaluation report – May 2018



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T: 020 7587 1842 W: [www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk) Twitter: @Literacy\_Trust Facebook: nationalliteracytrust

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## Introduction

Early Words Together at Two aims to help to improve the home learning environments of families of two-year-olds. It is designed for settings, including private and school nurseries and children's centres, who serve low-income families or any children with language and communication difficulties. Between January 2017 and March 2018, the programme was supported by a grant from the Department for Education, in consortium with three other early years charities: Peeple, National Children's Bureau and Foundation Years Trust. This evaluation report focuses on the activities of the National Literacy Trust in 20 settings in deprived areas of Bradford and Leicester.

In order to evaluate the programme, we used a pre- and post-survey for participating parents measuring outcomes for families (including children). Some of these measures were agreed with a consortium of three other national charities working with children. We also used a pre and post-survey for practitioners, measuring confidence and other attitudes around supporting children and interacting with parents. And finally, we conducted seven group discussions with practitioners: five mid-way through programme delivery, and two at the very end of the programme cycle.

From the parent surveys, we obtained a sample of 93 pre-survey responses and 79 post-survey responses, of which 50 matched. We analysed both the matched and unmatched samples. Overall, we found that Early Words Together at Two appears to have a positive effect on children and parents taking part, with children being more likely to enjoy and engage with songs and rhymes, talk, and reading or sharing stories. The results are statistically significant, suggesting that this effect is not due to chance.

From the practitioner survey, we obtained 47 responses at pre, and 28 at post, of which 19 matched. We analysed the matched responses only and found that overall, the programme seems to have had a positive impact on practitioners' confidence in interacting with parents and supporting children's language development. The group discussions also highlighted that despite some initial difficulties with the delivery of the programme, practitioners gained in their ability to form positive relationships with parents and carers in their settings.

## Parent and child outcomes

### Parental behaviours and attitudes

Parents are their children's first educators, and extensive research has demonstrated how a positive home learning environment can impact on children's educational success from a very young age. Indicators of a strong home learning environment include parents chatting with their children, sharing books or stories, singing nursery rhymes, and mark-making. Early Words Together at Two aims to equip parents with the behaviours and attitudes they need to best support their children's language development.

After completing the programme, 77.3% of parents say they are more confident than before in sharing books and stories with their child, 74.3% say they talk with their child more often, and 84% say they now better understand how important it is for them to talk with their child (see Table 1). In addition, 74.7% of parents say they now sing songs and rhymes with their child most days, compared to 60% before Early Words Together at Two (see Table 2). There was also an increase of more than 50% in the percentage of parents who share books or stories with their child most days (from 40% to 64%) (see Table 3).



**Table 1: parents' reported confidence levels and behaviours before and after the programme**

	<b>Less than before</b>	<b>Much the same</b>	<b>More than before</b>
I am confident in sharing books and stories with my child	2.7% (2)	20.0% (15)	77.3% (58)
I talk to my child about something they are interested in	2.7% (2)	23.0% (17)	74.3% (55)
I understand how important it is for me to talk with my child	1.3% (1)	14.7% (11)	84.0% (63)

**Table 2: how often do you sing songs and rhymes with your child?**

	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>
Not at all	2.7%	0%
Sometimes but not every week	18.7%	8.0%
Once or twice a week	18.7%	17.3%
Most days	60.0%	74.7%

**Table 3: how often do you share books or stories with your child?**

	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>
Not at all	6.7%	0%
Sometimes but not every week	22.7%	10.7%
Once or twice a week	30.7%	25.3%
Most days	40.0%	64.0%

## Child outcomes

Evidence shows how interest in reading and mark-making, and engagement with language and communication before the age of five plays a determining role in academic and life success<sup>1</sup>. Early Words Together at Two aims to target the gap in language attainment

<sup>1</sup> Law J., Charlton J., Asmussen K. for the Early Intervention Foundation, *Language as a Child Wellbeing Indicator*, 2017

between poorer children and their more affluent peers<sup>2</sup> already apparent from a very early age<sup>3</sup>, by improving children’s enjoyment of literacy activities as early as possible.

The outcomes of the programme on children were measured via parent surveys before and after taking part in the workshops. 70.7% of parents have found that their child seems to enjoy mark-making and drawing more after taking part in Early Words Together at Two, and 62.2% report that their child spends more time making marks and drawing at home than they used to. Mark-making is an age-appropriate first step towards developing writing in later years.

On a five-point scale agreed by all partners in the consortium, children scored 2.5 on average for songs and rhymes before taking part in Early Words Together at Two, and they scored an average of 3.0 after completing the programme. As for books and stories, children scored 2.43 on average before the programme, and 3.02 after.

As can be seen in Table 5, there was a statistically significant difference in children’s interest and engagement in books as a result of them taking part in Early Words Together at Two, with 57.3% of children scoring 3 or above on the five-point scale for books at post-survey, compared to 35.2% at pre-survey - a 62.7% increase. Similarly, as can be seen in Table 6, there was also a statistically significant difference in children’s interest and engagement in songs and nursery rhymes as a result of them taking part in Early Words Together at Two. Only 36.5% of children scored 3 or above on the agreed five point scale at pre-survey, which increased to 59.8% at post-survey - a 63.8% increase. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that among children who only scored 1 or 2 at pre-survey for books, 52.9% improved and none have regressed. Of those who scored 1 or 2 on nursery rhymes and songs, 50% improved.

**Table 4: parents’ perception of children’s attitudes and behaviours around mark-making**

	<b>Less than before</b>	<b>Much the same</b>	<b>More than before</b>
My child enjoys mark making and drawing	1.3% (1)	28.0% (21)	70.7% (53)
My child spends time making marks and drawing at home	1.4% (1)	36.5% (27)	62.2% (46)

**Table 5: which of the following best describes your child when it comes to books?**

	<b>PRE</b>	<b>POST</b>
Shows no/very little interest in books	17	3
	19.3%	4.4%
Enjoys a book for a short while if very active – e.g. lift- the-flap or noisy press button book. Points to pictures.	40	26
	45.5%	38.2%
Repeats some words or phrases from familiar stories. Makes	11	18

<sup>2</sup> Waldfogel J. and Washbrook E. for the Sutton Trust, *Low income and early cognitive development in the U.K.*, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Education Endowment Foundation and Public Health England, *Early Language Development: Needs, provision, and intervention for preschool children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds*, 2017

comments. Can fill in missing word in well-known story. The porridge was too...	12.5%	26.5%
Shows sustained engagement – joining in, sharing and talking about a book with an adult. Turns one page at a time.	9	9
	10.2%	13.2%
Listens, shares and talks about books eagerly. Requests favourites over and over again. Chooses to look at books alone.	11	12
	12.5%	17.6%

**Table 6: which of the following best describes your child when it comes to songs and rhymes?**

	PRE	POST
Shows no/very little interest in rhymes and songs	17	3
	20.0%	4.5%
Enjoys rhymes, tries to sing or gesture along with favourite action rhymes (words may not be clear)	37	24
	43.5%	35.8%
Recognises and joins in with rhymes. Can fill in missing word in rhyme. Twinkle, twinkle, little ...	14	18
	16.5%	26.9%
Says/sings all of a simple nursery rhyme. Notices deliberate mistake.	1	4
	1.2%	6.0%
Knows and can say/sing several nursery rhymes/songs	16	18
	18.8%	26.9%

## Practitioner outcomes

Research suggests that practitioners and early settings can play an important role in mediating a strong home learning environment for the families they work with<sup>4</sup>, and that positive communication and language practices in settings can make a significant difference in bridging the vocabulary gap between disadvantaged children and their peers<sup>5</sup>. However, National Literacy Trust has found in previous programmes that practitioners lack confidence and knowledge around engaging parents/carers in their setting. One of the objectives of Early Words Together at Two is to improve practitioner knowledge of children’s language development and their confidence to form strong and positive relationships with the parents and carers of the children who attend their settings. This is to embed best practice for supporting language development sustainably throughout participating settings and lastingly improve parents’ engagement with and children’s attendance at their early years settings.

<sup>4</sup> Department for Education, *Provider influence on the early home learning environment (EHLE)*, 2010

<sup>5</sup> Ofsted, *Are you ready? - Good practice in school readiness*, 2014



### Survey results

The surveys revealed a positive impact of the project on practitioners. Practitioners were more confident after taking part in Early Words Together at Two when it comes to supporting parents to enhance their child’s early home learning environment, and the difference was statistically significant. Table 7 shows that the percentage of practitioners feeling very confident to support parents has increased from 21.28% at pre to 53.57% at post.

Likewise, we found a statistically significant improvement in how often practitioners encourage parents to play with their child, to support mark-making and drawing, to use environmental prints, and to visit the library with their child. For example, as can be seen in Table 8, 57.1% of practitioners say they encourage parents to play with their child very often in the post-survey, compared to only 14.9% in the pre-survey. Likewise, 61.4% of practitioners often encourage parents to create opportunities for their child to mark make after taking part in the programme, whereas only 29.8% did so before. There has also been a clear increase in how often practitioners encourage parents to take their children to the public library (from 2.1% to 39.3% for “very often”).

**Table 7: how confident do you feel in supporting parents to enhance their child’s early home environment?**

	PRE	POST
Not confident	6.38	3.57
Fairly confident	72.34	42.86
Very confident	21.28	53.57



**Table 8: how often do you encourage parents to do the following?**

		1 Very often	2	3	4	5 rarely or never
Play with child	PRE	14.9%	14.9%	55.3%	8.5%	6.4%
	POST	57.1%	10.7%	21.4%	7.1%	3.6%
Mark making	PRE	12.8%	17%	46.8%	17%	6.4%
	POST	39.3%	32.1%	17.9%	7.1%	3.6%
Use environmental print	PRE	4.3%	23.4%	31.9%	14.9%	25.5%
	POST	32.1%	32.1%	21.4%	14.3%	0%

### Qualitative findings

The two group discussions conducted at the end of the project present a very positive picture of the impact of the project on families and on practitioners. Additionally, parent qualitative feedback on surveys and in interviews captures the impact of the programme on families and children.

Practitioners report that they have updated the messages they give to parents about communication and language:

“We need to explain (to parents) that language development doesn’t mean just talking, responding; language is about listening.”

“Go into more details when you do crafting activities and narrate as you go along.”

“Do silly voices when you’re telling a story.”

“Developing language is not just about reading a book, it’s also just sharing stories or singing and chatting.”

They seem to be better able to give parents a well-rounded view of what language and literacy entails for two-year-olds, which in turns may improve parents’ practices at home with their child.

Some practitioners themselves seem to have improved their understanding of the literacy needs and abilities of young children:

“We’ve learnt more about what literacy is. It’s not only about books, it’s also about language and chatting with the children. So we’ve got more knowledge now about literacy.”

All practitioners state that they now have better relationships with parents who took part in the programme, and that they have generally improved how they communicate with parents beyond the programme as well. Most agree that they have grown in confidence and have therefore become more comfortable engaging parents:

“Confidence is the biggest thing.”

“It’s about sharing not telling. Parents don’t want to be told.”

“A way to engage parents is to show how much we (the staff) are enjoying the activities and having fun. It allows the parents to relax and have fun too, which in turn is positive for the children.”

“We have better relationships with parents. It’s more of a partnership now.”

A few practitioners said that, when leading sessions, it was the first time they had spoken in front of a group, and took charge. This was challenging at first, but they are proud to have grown their confidence as group leaders over the duration of the project.

As a result, practitioners have noticed a difference in how parents respond and engage as well:

“Parents are more comfortable at the setting in general now because they’ve been coming to the sessions. They know some of the practitioners better and so have more of a relationship.”

“Parents are asking more questions.”

“Parents are more receptive to advice.”

Parents said that the sessions helped improve their confidence and knowledge to support their children, and that they now engage in language activities more often at home. As a result of the sessions, parents said they also notice their child is more interested in singing songs and reading at home.

‘I have been trying to read more often with him for only as long as he is interested. Prior to these sessions I didn’t read as often thinking he is not interested because we didn’t get to the end of a book.’

‘The session helped me and my son to be more confident.’

‘Attending these sessions has helped me pick up on my own skills to kind of pass onto my children as well...it’s got me out of my shell...I don’t feel awkward singing along with her anymore.’

‘I have understood the importance of reading with my child.’

‘Seeing him here [in nursery] and seeing him at home before the sessions was like two different things...it was like he was smarter when he came [to nursery]...we had to kind of [change] at home a bit...reading to him, story time, making him do things around the house.’

‘My daughter is singing a lot more enjoying sharing books more and confidence has grown.’



A few anecdotes which were shared at the group discussion illustrate the change that happened both for parents and for practitioners. One concerns two families newly arrived in the UK from Eastern Europe who did not previously engage much with practitioners or the setting. They agreed to take part in Early Words Together at Two sessions, and since then, both the children and the parents have become friends with each other. Practitioners in the settings have noticed that the parents stay longer when dropping off and picking up their children, smile more, and chat a little more with the staff. Another was told by a young practitioner who said she recently organised and delivered a session with parents and children where they decorated biscuits. She said it was fun and engaging and everyone seemed to enjoy it. She went on to say she would never have thought of doing such a thing before the programme, and she also would never have dared to lead a session with several families, telling them what to do and organising everything. She gave this as an example of how much more confidence she has interacting with parents after leading Early Words Together at Two sessions.



All settings appear to have integrated the Early Words Together at Two activities and workshops into their regular practice and shared learning across the setting among practitioners, including those who did not directly take part in the programme. At least two settings ran formal Early Words Together at Two training sessions for all other staff in the setting. This indicates that the benefits of the programme for the settings and its staff members may last beyond the immediate scope of the project into sustainable positive changes. One setting manager noted that the programme had played an important role for practitioners' continued professional development, in a landscape where she found there was little on offer to train early years staff:

**“Early Words Together at Two makes for better practitioners.”**

## Notes on process

The group discussions we conducted halfway through the delivery of the programme were an opportunity for practitioners to share preliminary findings on the outcomes of Early Words Together at Two, which were encouraging. But they were also a chance for practitioners to point out challenges in implementing the programme. Their feedback was recorded and transcribed, and we produced an interim report highlighting issues and points which could be addressed and improved, either during the further development of the programme, or through the creation of additional projects and resources within the National Literacy Trust's offer to early years practitioners. Below is a summary of this interim report, excluding notes on the impact for parents and practitioners which has been covered above.



## Session plans

Practitioners in both Bradford and Leicester said they thought the session plans were useful, overall, mainly because it helped them focus on particular topics.

“Pre-planned sessions are brilliant.” (Leicester)

“I do think the actual toolkit itself ... the way the session plans are planned out is fine, it's easy to read, it gives you all the ideas and examples and everything else, which is fine...” (Bradford)

Unsurprisingly, most said they had to adapt the plans to fit the needs of their setting, their children and families. Specifically, practitioners didn't keep to the time suggestions and adjusted activities based on children's movement needs, parents' needs and resources available in the setting.

“The singing, we went on for a lot longer, because they were loving it. So, we just did a couple more.” (Leicester)

“We do adapt the activities based on our available resources. So it may not be the same activity, but it has the same meaning.” (Leicester)

“...we’re just choosing to simplify it, because of the type of parents that we have and the families that we have.” (Bradford)

Practitioners in both locations also said they simplified the prompts for parents based on the needs of the parents and children in the setting. Further investigation is needed to know whether this was to suit parent needs or because of discomfort on the part of the practitioner.

“Some of them we just cut down a little bit.” (Leicester)

“We made the discussion with parents more to the point.” (Bradford)

In some cases, practitioners said they **provided supplemental take-away materials for parents** or translated materials for MLL families. In one setting, they weren’t able to get parents to stay for the sessions so they put together their own take away sheet with activity ideas for parents. They said this was really useful for parents.

“[We] send colouring sheet home with crayons.” (Bradford)

“We ask parents to find and do (shaker activity) at home.” (Bradford)

Finally, based on project manager observation, the programme requires two practitioners at each session, at least in the beginning while practitioners are getting comfortable with parents and the material.

### **Supporting families who are multilingual learners (MLL)<sup>6</sup>**

In both areas, practitioners said they adapted the session activities, or the number of parents attending, in order to better accommodate families who have MLL. In addition to the comments below, the project manager observed that at least three practitioners used translators or translated themselves for MLL families in the sessions. Another practitioner sent home nursery rhyme lyrics in advance of session two so parents could learn and practice the nursery rhymes. One setting wanted bilingual books for parents to take home and read with their children, but she didn’t have time to find any.

“Early Words Together at Two is helping us reach out to EAL parents, even the ones who are not in the sessions.” (Leicester)

“[We wrote in Urdu] to invite parents who have English as Additional Language.”

Other practitioners seemed more hesitant to engage MLL families because they didn’t know how to handle the language barrier.

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<sup>6</sup> We are using the term ‘multilingual learners (MLL)’ in place of the term ‘English as an additional language (EAL).’ This emphasises the benefits of knowing more than one language rather than the deficit of not having English as a first language.

“For our first cycle we thought, “Let’s do it with parents who understand English and then for our second one, maybe we’ll try and get other parents.” (Leicester)

“Yes, even for me to translate it in the language I do speak. I don’t speak Polish and I don’t speak Slovakian, so that was very difficult.” (Bradford)

### **Parent recruitment and retention**

Issues with recruitment varied greatly by setting and area. Some practitioners recruited families easily. Unsurprisingly, comments suggest that practitioners were more successful with recruitment if they had existing relationships with parents.

“We got more at the second and then more at the third. So, we’ve managed to add families onto our list that we originally had. So, it’s been quite good.” (Leicester)

“If you’ve got good relationships with your parents, the parents know you’re wanting the best for their child...” (Bradford)

Other practitioners had more difficulty recruiting and retaining families.

“Full house on 1<sup>st</sup> session (7 parents), but only 1 parent came to the second one.” (Bradford)

When recruiting, many practitioners in both areas extended the universal offer because of concern that parents would feel judged.

“Inviting families on one-to-one basis is ‘too judgy.’” (Leicester)

“We invited everyone so they feel it’s normal.” (Leicester)

“We need to make sure the parents don’t feel judged, either when recruiting or when delivering.” (Bradford)

“You have to explain things in such a way that they don’t feel like they’re being targeted and second, they’re being accused and thirdly that there’s something in it for them. So, it’s such a battle.’

Whereas other practitioners, particularly in Leicester, thought parents were motivated to get involved when parents whose child had a language delay were targeted.

“We’ve invited the parents who were worried about their kids into the sessions. To help them.” (Leicester)

“Most of them realise that there’s a language issue with their children, so they’re proactive with wanting to engage with us about the language issue.” (Leicester)

Practitioners said they used a variety of techniques to encourage parents to attend. In addition to comments below, the project manager observed that some practitioners created displays in nursery to engage new families. Others ran sessions as part of an already scheduled stay n' play or nursery session.

“[We’re] reminding parents of sessions the week before and the day before. Parents can come to afternoon session if not morning – flexible.” (Bradford)

“[We’re] planning to run sessions in afternoon an hour before pick-up, hoping it will allow more parents to come earlier to pick children up to attend sessions.” (Bradford)

### **Initial training and professional development section of the toolkit**

Many practitioners in Leicester said that the initial training and professional development materials in the toolkit were useful for preparing them for sessions.

“It kind of gave you top tips before you even thought about the session, of how you were going to approach the parents, what to say to the parents and getting them to a point where they understand what they’re signing up for was really good.” (Leicester)

In contrast, practitioners in Bradford said that they needed additional support to work with families of two-year-old funded places.

“Training doesn’t quite prepare you for actually delivering the programme. Facing all the challenges of EAL families.” (Bradford)

**Initial training:** Of 28 practitioners who attended the initial trainings, practitioners most commonly said that the following topics were ‘most valuable’: resources in the toolkit (27%), ways to involve parents (21%), and sharing practice with other practitioners (15%).

**Meeting #2:** 6/9 practitioners in Leicester said that exchanging information with other practitioners was the most valuable part of the mid-project meeting. The project manager received multiple phone calls from practitioners asking how others ran particular sessions.

Support from local leadership may have an important role in success of the programme. The project in Leicester was led by the local authority, and the lead scheduled multiple visits to each nursery to check in and provide support, which may be needed

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Early Words Together at Two appears to be an effective programme which yields positive outcomes for families, improving the home learning environment for two-year old children, and impacting positively on early years practitioners’ ability to engage with parents to create a sustainable supporting relationship.

Elements of the programme could be improved. The toolkit, for example, was deemed difficult to access by practitioners, and details on how to adapt activities for children of different abilities have been integrated for future versions of it. Meanwhile, the recruitment and retention of families has proved a significant challenge for the settings who may therefore benefit from running the workshops without set targets in terms of recruitment and deliveries. Finally, practitioners have pointed out the difficulties they face with families for whom English is an additional language, particularly in communicating with parents, a challenge which the National Literacy Trust will seek to address in future delivery of our early years programmes.