

Small Talk Baseline Findings 2019

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This evaluation highlights the need and the effect of the Small Talk behaviour change campaign in the two target areas of Peterborough and Swindon. It uses survey data from a national sample and compares it to data collected in these two specific local areas. In these target areas, fewer parents say that they engage in positive home learning environment behaviours, such as chatting, playing and reading, regularly compared with parents at the national level.

However, parents who have been exposed to the Small Talk campaign messages either through the website or by attending an event were more likely to engage in some of these positive behaviours on a daily basis compared with those who couldn't remember hearing about the campaign. This suggests that the campaign has been to some extent effective in closing the gap in the quality of the home learning environment for these areas in need.

This report is the first step in an ongoing evaluation of the campaign, and provides details on the methods used and the future steps that will be taken to assess the effectiveness of the approach.

Key findings	Key stats
<p>Parents from the local sample were significantly less likely to engage in behaviours which promote a positive home learning environment.</p>	<p>These parents were significantly less likely to chat to their child at least once a day (65% vs. 90%).</p> <p>Parents in Small Talk areas were only half as likely to play with their child at least once a day (48% vs. 76%).</p> <p>They were also less likely to read to their child at least once a day (58% vs. 66%).</p>
<p>Parents in target areas with young children (0-2) were less likely to have engaged in positive home learning behaviours than their peers with older children.</p>	<p>Parents of younger children were less likely to chat to them at least once a day (75% vs. 55%).</p>
<p>Parents in households with no adult in employment were less likely to engage in positive home learning behaviours.</p>	<p>Parents in households with no adult in employment were almost half as likely to have played with their child (52% vs. 27%) or to have sung songs or shared poems or nursery rhymes daily in the past week (48% vs. 25%).</p>
<p>Parents in the target areas who have been exposed to Small Talk campaign messages engaged more frequently in some behaviours that promote a good home learning environment.</p>	<p>Parents who had been on the Small Talk website were more likely than their peers who had not accessed the website to read to their child at least once a day (69% vs. 55%).</p> <p>Parents who had attended an event were more likely to read to their child on a daily basis (72% vs. 56%) than those who did not.</p>

The Small Talk campaign

Small Talk is a behaviour change campaign designed by the National Literacy Trust in partnership with the Department for Education. The campaign encourage parents to engage in behaviours which are known to create a positive home learning environment (HLE). Ongoing research has emphasised the importance of the HLE in a child's development, which is defined both as the physical home and the interactions in and around the home which implicitly and explicitly support a child's learning¹. In fact, data shows that one explanation for the intergenerational low literacy across the country is that these children are not experiencing a good-quality HLE in their early years². We know there is a link between income and early years language and communication development since children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds start school with language skills which lag behind their more affluent peers³. This may in part be due to the fact that less affluent families face barriers to providing an enabling HLE to their children in the early years, as evidenced by studies which explore the relationship between household income and the quality of the HLE⁴. However, it is encouraging to know that raising the quality of the HLE can help less affluent children escape from intergenerational cycles of low social mobility; research has shown that the quality of the HLE is the single most important factor in determining a child's later success in life, even more than their parents' socioeconomic status⁵. Having considered this evidence, the Small Talk campaign is designed to foster social mobility by raising awareness and changing behaviours in wards with some of the highest levels of literacy vulnerability, coupled with some of the lowest levels of social mobility⁷. The baseline findings in this report confirm that a behaviour change campaign is needed in these target areas since children are less likely to experience an enabling HLE than the rest of the country.

Small Talk addresses this issue through tested messaging in these communities, and through a series of events which aim to model positive behaviours and raise awareness. The main goal of the campaign is to increase the frequency of these positive home learning behaviours in

¹National Literacy Trust and HM Government, 2018, *Improving the Home Learning Environment* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/756020/improving_the_home_learning_environment.pdf

² House of Commons, 2019, *Tackling Disadvantage in the Early Years* <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmeduc/1006/1006.pdf>.

³ Charlton and Asmussen, 2017, *Language as a child wellbeing indicator*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tarelli and Stubbe, (2010). *Home Literacy Environment and Reading Achievement: A Model for Determining the Relationship between Socio-Economic Status, Home Literacy Environment and Reading Achievement*.

⁶ Hayes et al, 2016, *Trajectories of parental involvement in home learning activities across the early years: associations with socio-demographic characteristics and children's learning outcomes*, Early Child Development and Care.

⁷ National Literacy Vulnerability Index. An index of wards in England compiled using Experian consumer data, employment statistics and percentage of adults achieving a level 3 qualification in English.

the target wards. Findings from the first year of the evaluation show that the campaign has been effective in generating some change in this key metric.

The need for Small Talk

The data below highlights the need for a behaviour change campaign in the Small Talk local areas of Peterborough and Swindon. Research has shown that a good quality HLE is one where parents engage in positive behaviours on a frequent basis. Our study is based around the frequency of seven parental behaviours which are deemed to be essential in ensuring that children start school at the expected level of development⁸.

The survey asked parents to report how frequently they had engaged in these specific behaviours over the past week on a scale from “more than once a day” to “not in the past week” (see the full questionnaire in Appendix 1 and details on instrument design in Appendix 2).

As seen in Table 1, compared with parents from the national sample, parents in the Small Talk local areas engaged less frequently in all of the seven behaviours that are essential to a good HLE. Differences between the behaviours of the national and local sample were statistically significant ($p > 0.05$) (see Appendix 2 for more information on the statistical methods used).

Table 1: National sample vs local sample, frequency of self-reported parental behaviours

	More than once a day in the past week	Every day in the past week	On 5 - 6 days in the past week	On 3- 4 days in the past week	On 1-2 days in the past week	Not in the past week
Read Local	22%	36%	13%	19%	7%	3%
Read National	33%	33%	11%	8%	8%	7%
Chat Local	42%	23%	11%	14%	8%	2%
Chat National	67%	23%	5%	2%	1%	1%
Play Local	24%	25%	22%	17%	10%	2%
Play National	49%	27%	12%	6%	3%	3%
Sing Local	21%	23%	17%	21%	13%	5%
Sing National	40%	28%	13%	9%	5%	4%
Alphabet Local	15%	22%	19%	19%	13%	11%
Alphabet National	24%	27%	16%	10%	8%	15%
Paint Local	12%	14%	15%	23%	22%	13%
Paint National	17%	22%	17%	12%	14%	18%
Activity outside the home- Local	10%	12%	14%	23%	23%	17%

⁸ National Literacy Trust, (2011). *Literacy: A route to addressing child poverty?*. Retrieved from: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/literacy-route-addressing-child-poverty-2011/>

Activity outside the home- National	20%	21%	15%	12%	17%	15%
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Studies have shown the importance of chatting, playing and reading with young children every day and preferably multiple times a day. The research shows how regular, quality interactions of this kind are pivotal to the development of the child in these early stages, which will in turn affect future life chances⁹. The discrepancy between the national average and the local sample show that there is a gap in the quality of the HLE for children in these target areas, which may have lifelong implications for these children. For example, playing with your child and engaging in pretend play is essential to developing their social and emotional skills as well as their physical and cognitive development¹⁰. As seen in Table 1, parents from the national sample are almost twice as likely to play with their child more than once a day than parents from the target areas (24% vs. 49%). Similarly, chatting with your child from an early age by elongating their sentences or repeating words is essential in supporting their language and communication development. However only about 4 in 10 (42%) parents from the local survey told us they engage in this behaviour more than once a day, compared with almost 7 in 10 (67%) in the national poll (see Table 1).

It can be argued that in a good HLE parents engage in chatting, playing and reading with their child at least once a day or more, however it may be sufficient to engage in other activities such as playing together outside the home e.g. at the library or a playgroup. For this reason the next section will focus at the percentage of parents who report engaging in the activities at least once a day (“more than once a day” and “every day” combined).

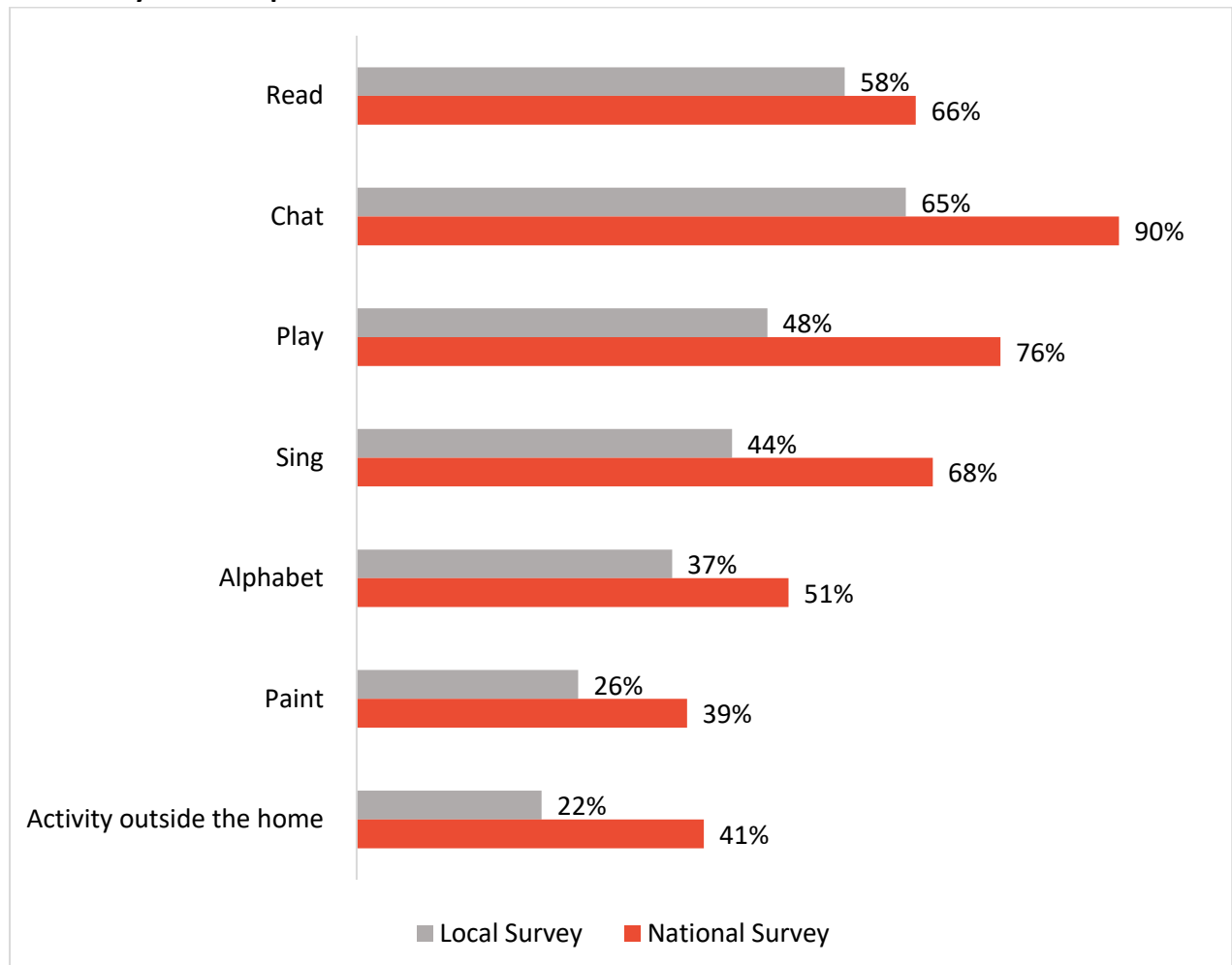
One of the most concerning findings is that parents in the target areas are significantly less likely to chat to their child at least once a day. 9 in 10 (90%) parents from the national sample talk to their child on a daily basis, but only 3 in 5 (65%) of the local sample do so with such frequency.

It is clear that fewer parents in these local areas engage daily in a range of behaviours that are known to promote early language and communication development compared with parents nationally. The graph illustrates how this trend is true across seven different behaviours (see Figure 1). For example, parents in these local areas are less likely to sing songs or share poems or nursery rhymes at least once a day with their child (68% vs. 44%). Moreover, these parents are also far less likely than the average parent to engage on a daily basis with activities outside the home that can support their child’s learning, such as playing together at the library or a playgroup (41% vs. 22%, see Figure 1).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ National Literacy Trust and HM Government, (2018). *Improving the Home Learning Environment*.

Figure 1: Percentage of parents who report they have engaged in these behaviours at least once a day over the past week



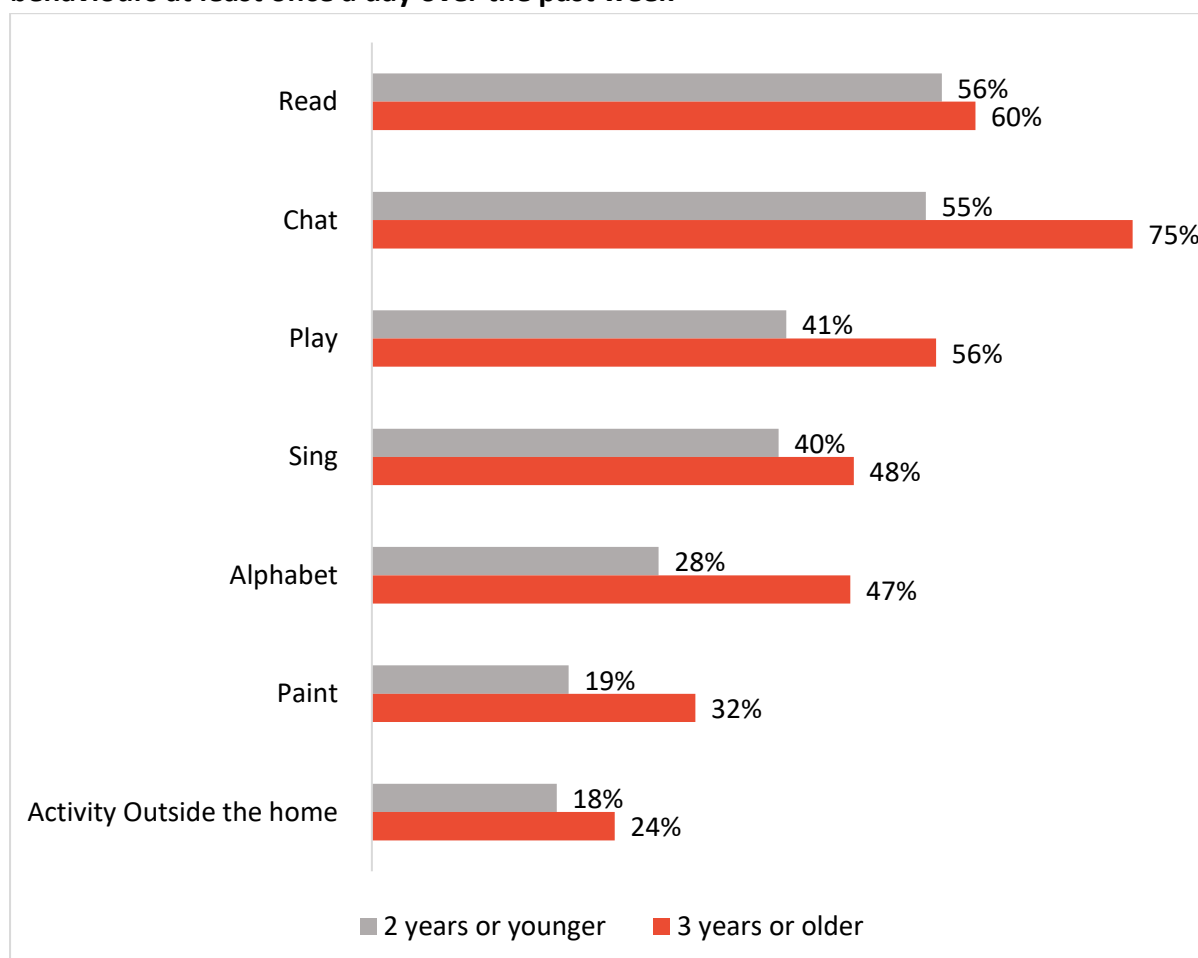
It is essential that babies and toddlers are stimulated by a positive HLE before they start school. However, this is often not the case because parents are unaware of the benefits of interacting with their infants from such an early age¹¹. For example, a carer might be less likely to talk to their baby frequently as they might think the baby does not understand them. Families with higher household incomes are more likely to engage in these behaviours with their child; this may be due to the fact they tend to engage more with various services and information outlets which guide parents in the phase between birth and pre-school¹². The findings from the survey echo this dynamic, with parents in the local areas whose youngest child is two or under engaging less frequently in these enabling behaviours. This is problematic since the research shows that parental engagement prior to the age of two has a greater impact on a child’s future wellbeing than any other factors including parental

¹¹ Hoff, (2010). *Context effects on young children’s language use: The influence of conversational setting and partner*. *First Language*, 30(3-4), 461-472.

¹²Becky Gulc et al (2016). Report for the Social Mobility and child poverty commission: *Parents’ experiences and information in the early years*.

education and household income¹³. As seen in Figure 2, households with babies (age birth to two) are less likely to engage daily in these positive home learning environments compared with those with older children. Parents of younger children are less likely to chat to them on a daily basis: 3 in 4 (75%) parents would chat to a toddler (age three to five) on a daily basis, but only just over half (55%) would chat to a baby (age birth to two) that often. Parents are also less likely to paint, draw or make something together with their babies compared with parents of toddlers (32% vs 19%). This is troubling because such activities are essential in developing the fine motor skills in young children¹⁴.

Figure 2: Focus on child age: Percentage of parents who reported engaging in these behaviours at least once a day over the past week



Our research also looked at the effect of employment on the likelihood of parents in these local areas engaging in these positive home learning behaviours. The survey asked parents whether at least one adult in their household was in full-time employment¹⁵. As illustrated in

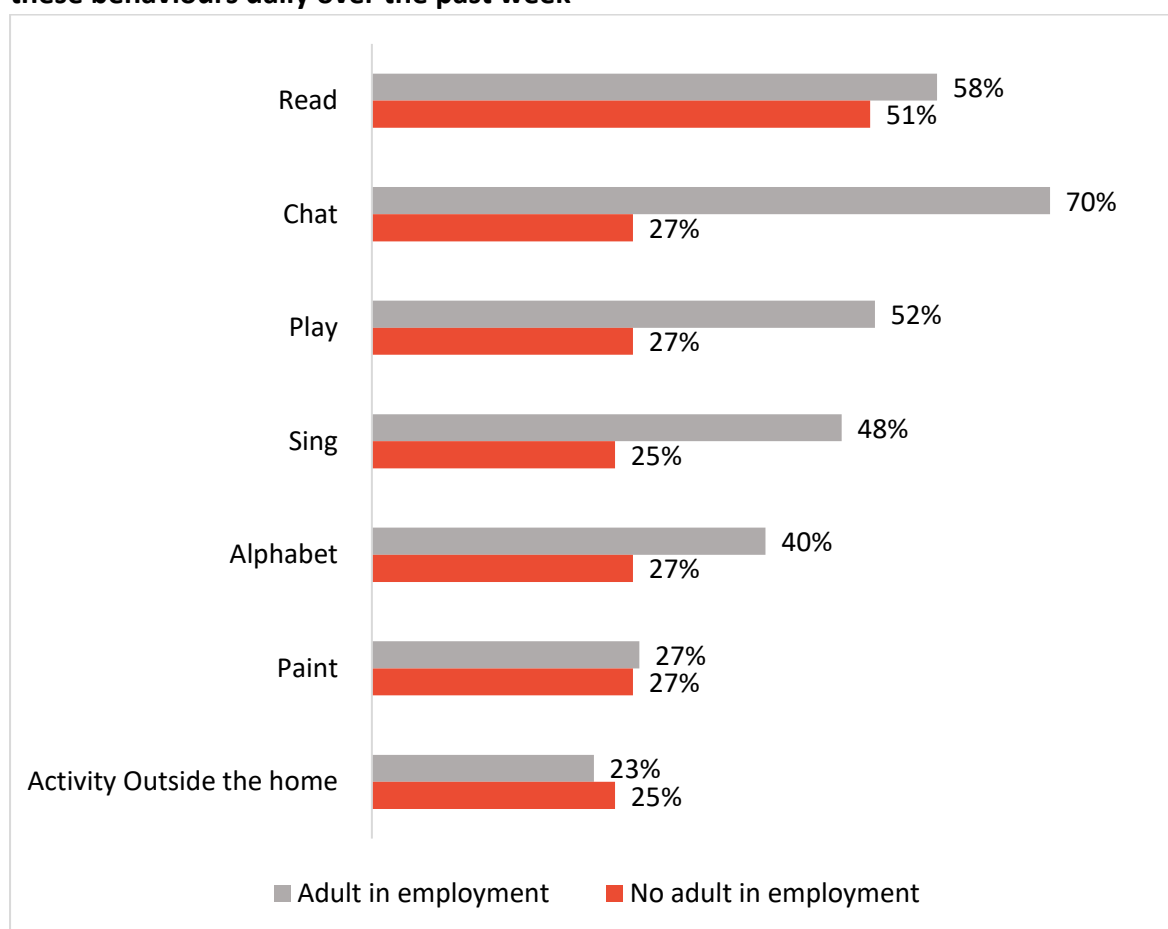
¹³ Hoff, (2010). *Context effects on young children’s language use: The influence of conversational setting and partner*. *First Language*, 30(3-4), 461-472.

¹⁴ Suggate et al, (2016). *Relations between playing activities and fine motor development*, *Early Child development and Care*.

¹⁵ Having at least one adult in the household in employment was chosen as proxy for socio-economic background upon recommendation from the Department for Education.

Figure 3, parents in a household with no adult in full-time employment were substantially less likely to engage in these behaviours than their peers. For example, they were only half as likely to report playing with their child (52% vs. 27%), singing songs or sharing poems or nursery rhymes (48% vs. 25%) daily in their past week. These findings corroborate previous research, which found that households with no adult in employment were significantly less likely to engage in positive HLE behaviours¹⁶. In this analysis we looked at whether the family had an adult in employment as an indicator for socioeconomic background. The findings indicate that families who are excluded from the labour market are also facing higher barriers in providing an enabling HLE for their child. This may provide some insights into the underlying causes of intergenerational low literacy and poverty in these communities.

Figure 3: Focus on employment status: Percentage of parents who reported engaging in these behaviours daily over the past week



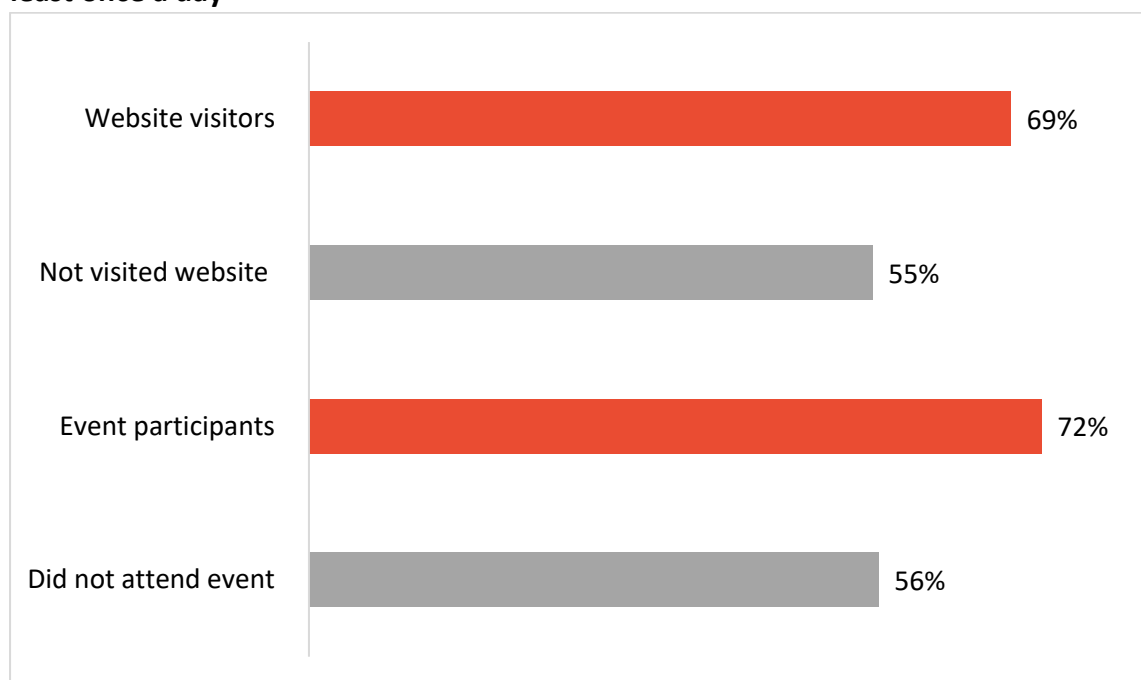
¹⁶ Hunt et al, (2010). Department for Education report: *Provider Influence on the early home learning environment* https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/3998/1/3998_DFE-RR142.pdf.

Small Talk campaign outcomes

The survey asked parents in the target local areas whether they had been exposed to the Small Talk campaign either by visiting the Small Talk website or by attending one of the local Small Talk events.

The data suggest that parents who have been exposed to the Small Talk messages are more likely to read frequently to their child than those who have not been exposed to these messages. As seen in Figure 4, parents who visited the Small Talk website are more likely to read to their child than their peers (69% vs. 55%). This trend is also true when looking at those parents who have attended an event: they are also more likely to read to their child on a daily basis (72% vs. 56%). Over 7 in 10 parents (72%), who took part in a Small Talk event read to their child daily, compared with only half (56%) of parents who did not attend an event.

Figure 4: Focus on campaign exposure: Percentage of parents who read to their child at least once a day



Parents who have been exposed to Small Talk messages were also more likely to have looked at the alphabet or recognised words with their child daily. As seen in Table 2, 42% parents who visited the Small Talk website engaged in this early literacy activity daily, compared with 36% of those who did not visit the website. Moreover, as many as 1 in 3 (33%) parents who visited the Small Talk website brought their child to a local activity e.g. at the library or a playgroup at least once a day, compared with only 1 in 5 (19%) of those who had not attended an event (see Table 2). It is possible that these two behaviours are linked since parents who make use of community assets such as the library might be exposed to behaviour change

messaging and receive more guidance¹⁷. This potential link will be further explored in the qualitative research.

As represented in Table 2, Small Talk also seems to have encouraged parents to paint and draw with their child. The table illustrates how parents who have been on the Small Talk website are substantially more likely to have drawn with their child on a daily basis in the past week (34% vs. 23%). In fact, over a third (34%) of parents who visited the website engaged in these creative activities with their child at least once a day, compared with less than a quarter (23%) of those who didn't visit the website. This is particularly interesting since, as seen in Table 2, parents of younger children are considerably less likely to paint or draw with them (only 19% of the total sample reported doing so on a daily basis). However we know mark-making and painting are essential activities to support the cognitive and physical development of children¹⁸.

Table 2: Percentage of parents who engage in these activities at least once a day: Focus on campaign exposure

	Attended Small Talk event	Never attended an event	Website visitors	Never visited website
Read	72%	56%	69%	55%
Chat	50%	66%	44%	69%
Play	38%	48%	41%	49%
Sing	34%	44%	36%	46%
Alphabet	38%	36%	42%	36%
Paint	28%	25%	34%	23%
Activity outside the home	23%	21%	33%	19%

At this point there has not been a measurable positive impact of the campaign on some of the behaviours such as chatting (see Table 2 for full results). However, this may be explained in a variety of ways. Firstly, parents who participated in Small Talk events would have engaged even less frequently in these behaviours before being exposed to the campaign. Longitudinal data will be collected through follow-up surveys, which might provide further insight into this issue. Another explanation for these trends is the response shift bias, meaning that parents who engaged with Small Talk may be more self-critical of how often they engage in quality chat and play with their child, and therefore less likely to say they do so frequently. This area will be further explored in the qualitative research, with future steps for this evaluation discussed below.

¹⁷ Gulc et al (2016). Report for the Social Mobility and child poverty commission: *Parents' experiences and information in the early years*.

¹⁸ E.g. Lambert <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09575140500251855>

In summary

Firstly, this report highlights the need of the Small Talk campaign in the target local areas. Parents in two of the Small Talk target areas, Peterborough and Swindon, are significantly less likely to engage in positive home learning environment behaviours than a national sample. Moreover, the report provides more detail on how parents in these areas are less likely to engage in these behaviours if they have a child aged two or under. Parents in this sample who reported living in a household with no adult in employment were less likely to engage frequently in these behaviours compared with their peers. The second part of this report shows that those who have been exposed to the Small Talk campaign by attending an event or visiting the website were more likely than their peers to engage in some positive behaviours. These behaviours included reading to their child, painting with their child and taking their child to an activity outside the home such as visiting the library. These baseline findings are encouraging, nonetheless, it will be necessary to complete the evaluation by issuing a follow-up survey and gathering in-depth qualitative data from the beneficiaries.

Next steps in the evaluation

Qualitative data collection: The National Literacy Trust research team will conduct semi-structure in-depth interviews with beneficiaries from the Small Talk campaign to gain clarity on the effectiveness of the campaign activity on behaviour change. Qualitative data will be recorded and thematically analysed with support of text analysis software.

Longitudinal data collection: A follow-up survey will be issued one year after the first survey was completed by the local sample. This will be possible to monitor if those exposed to the campaign have seen an increased frequency in these behaviours. Moreover, these results will show if more parents from our local sample have been exposed to the campaign.

Appendix 1: Methods and sampling

Sample

This report looks at survey data on parents' self-reported frequency of a positive home learning environment, using a national baseline survey featuring a nationally representative sample of n=2,000 parents and comparing it with a local area survey conducted in Peterborough and Swindon, which recruited n=424 parents. We commissioned OnePoll to gather information from parents nationally, which was conducted in July 2019. The local area survey was conducted internally by the National Literacy Trust between May and September 2019. The local area sample was recruited by asking parents to voluntarily opt-in with an incentive. The survey was advertised in community spaces such as GP surgeries and nurseries within the target wards of the campaign. Respondents to the survey were offered a £10 Amazon voucher for taking part. The fact that this is a convenience sample who opted into the survey may present some slight limitations to the validity of these findings. Posters advertising the survey were disseminated through local community contacts including the borough council, family services, libraries and nurseries. These were identified by having

worked with either the Small Talk team on the campaign or with the National Literacy Trust's Hub network.

This is a convenience sample which may present limitations, primarily self-selection bias, since more engaged parents who are more time rich are more likely to complete the survey. However, studies have shown that offering monetary incentives is an effective way to obtain responses from participants who are not interested in the topic of the survey¹⁹.

Instruments

The questionnaire was designed by the National Literacy Trust research team in partnership with the Department for Education early years team (see Appendix 2). The questionnaire is a self-assessment tool that invites parents to reflect on how frequently they engaged in specific positive home learning environments in the past week. The activities have been selected to correspond to the research into what specific activities constitute an enabling home learning environment²⁰. The response scale has been specifically designed to mitigate issues which are normally associated with self-reported measures. In particular, it aims to minimise social desirability bias and respondent variability. By focusing on the past week, as opposed to a typical week, the survey encourages parents to be more honest.

This study has adapted the questionnaire, based on the widely recognised Early Home Learning Environment Index²¹ (EHLEI) as a measure of early home learning activities. This is an aggregate score of the frequency with which seven cognitively orientated activities involving the child take place in the home.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were conducted on parental self-reported behaviours. These results are presented both in percentages.

Given the non-parametric nature of the data, Krusal Wallis tests were used to test for statistical significance between the national and local samples for each of the seven target behaviours.

¹⁹ Grove et al, (2004). *The Role of Topic Interest in Survey Participant Decisions*, Public Opinion Quarterly.

²⁰ National Literacy Trust and HM Government, (2018). *Improving the Home Learning Environment*.

²¹ Hunt et al, (2010). Department for Education report: *Provider Influence on the early home learning environment*, https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/3998/1/3998_DFE-RR142.pdf.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Thinking back to the last 7 days, how often have you or another adult in your home done any of the following activities with your youngest child?

	More than once a day in the past week	Every day in the past week	On 5 - 6 days in the past week	On 3- 4 days in the past week	On 1-2 days in the past week	Not in the past week
Read books, e-books or looked at a picture book	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chatted with your child, for example by responding to their words, babbling or gestures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Played together, for example played pretend games or took turns in fun activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sang songs or shared poems or nursery rhymes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Looked at the alphabet or recognised words	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Painted, drew or made something together	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Played together at an activity outside the home e.g. at the library or a playgroup	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>