

Enabling whole-setting support for communication and language development in the early years:



An evaluation of LEAP's communication and language development services

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Introduction

There is robust evidence that early communication and language skills are a vital building block for children's development, laying the foundations for academic attainment, socioemotional functioning, mental health and a range of other outcomes. Since 2015, LEAP has developed and funded a package of communication and language development services aimed at early years settings. A bundle of 3 services aim to work together to deliver a communication friendly environment for children.

- 1 The Speech and Language Therapy Evelina Award (Evelina Award) aims to improve practitioners' understanding of speech, language and communication (SLC) development, their ability to identify and SLC needs, and the universal, targeted and specialist support they can offer to children in their setting.
- 2 Natural Thinkers aims to improve practitioners' knowledge about the benefits of outdoor learning, and increased confidence to run effective outdoor activities.
- 3 Making it REAL aims to improve the support that practitioners offer around children's early literacy, including offering home visits and in-setting literacy events to support parents to build a positive home learning environment.

Methods

The primary evaluation question for this study was: *To what extent and how do LEAP's CLD services support a whole-setting approach to improving early childhood communication and language development?*

To answer this question, this study included elements of process and outcome evaluation. The process and qualitative outcome findings came from four strands of data:

- + Interviews with key stakeholders – 31 interviews (6 programme leads, 25 settings-based practitioners across 9 settings)

- + A practitioner survey – 55 responses
- + Observation of training sessions – 4 training sessions
- + Routine training, reach, dosage and feedback data
- + Child outcome data – 403 children (Measures: WellComm assessment, Leuven Scales and the Toddler Home Learning Environment).

Qualitative data was coded and analysed using a thematic approach. Quantitative data was analysed in Excel or Stata software. Data was triangulated between different methods.

Findings/Results

- + At least 700 practitioners from 28 settings received Evelina Award training,
- + At least 142 practitioners from 24 settings received Natural Thinkers training, and
- + At least 99 practitioners from 24 setting received Making it REAL training.

Most practitioners received some training. However in some settings very few practitioners had been able to engage with the amount of Evelina Award training they were intended to. These settings struggled with capacity issues, high turnover and the immediate and ongoing impact of COVID-19.

Feedback identified **that longer-term, in-context and bespoke training helped practitioners to change their practice.** In particular, the ongoing coaching and accountability from a consistent trainer led to greater reported benefits than one-off training. Sharing practice with other settings was also well received. Online and 'cascade training' approaches were less well received.

The bundle of services drove **improvements in knowledge, confidence and practice** around intended outcomes, particularly when settings management was involved and integrated new practice into day-to-day processes.

Medium-term outcome data indicated **a positive change for children at these settings.**

- + WellComm scores (a 10-point measure of language attainment for a child's age) increased by an average of 0.8 points between children's first and most recent assessment. Children who scored amber or red at their first assessment (those with the highest level of need) saw an increase of 1.5 points, while children who scored green (language skills appropriate for their age) saw no change

- + The Leuven scales to assess wellbeing and involvement, used in the Natural Thinkers service, has a 5 point scale from extremely low to extremely high. Scores for wellbeing increased by an average of 0.55 points, while scores for involvement increased by an average of 0.62
- + Making it REAL Home Learning Environment Index scores between children's first and last home visit increased by 3.7 points for under 3s (not statistically significant), and 7 points for 3-5 year olds (statistically significant).

Conclusion

Early years practitioners are crucial to ensuring that children are exposed to communication-friendly environments, where all are supported to achieve positive outcomes and speech, language and communication needs are identified and addressed promptly. However, they face several challenges, including low existing knowledge and confidence around supporting speech and language development, and increasing contextual challenges around limited capacity and high staff turnover.

That most settings and practitioners reported significant improvements in their ability to support children's speech and language development, literacy and outdoor learning as a result of LEAP support suggests there is clear scope for improvement in the support and training offered to practitioners. Evidence of improvement in medium term child outcomes also points to the effectiveness of the services.

