# Building early learning journals on parents' views: speech, language and communication

There is significant research to demonstrate that children's early years experiences set the foundation for all the learning that follows. This learning takes place in both the early years setting and also in the child's home and family environment.

We know that, currently, many children are arriving in reception without the communication and language skills expected for their age (over 50% in many disadvantaged areas). This may be related to a long-term speech, language and communication need (10% of all children), developmental difficulties with communication and language, or a lack of experience in communication and language skills.

Many parents may not feel confident in being able to:

- provide beneficial learning experiences for their child
- recognise the progress that their child is making
- know how the progress relates to expected stages of development.

So how can we support parents to enable strong communication and language skills, and to share the progress of their child with early years settings?

And how can we make sure that we share views of what is happening at home, as well as in early years settings, to get a full picture of the individual child?

## Supporting parents to support their child

Parents have the most profound impact on the outcomes for their child. They have more impact than early years settings and schools, even when the child is attending these full-time. So, it's important to get parents 'on-side' right at the beginning.

It is also important that you build, and demonstrate, a feeling of mutual respect and trust. By far the majority of parents want the best for their child and we can support them to achieve this.

Parents may, themselves, have a range of difficult issues to deal with, aside from their child's needs. These can range from job-related issues, financial pressures and house management tasks, through tiredness and difficulties juggling home concerns, to drug and alcohol use and domestic violence.

## Anything that gets in the way of a parent feeling that they can manage easily will affect their ability to support their child's development

Therefore, anything that you can do to support the parent will ultimately support the child. It is useful to have information about places you can signpost parents to eg. regarding benefits, domestic violence, financial help, SEND.

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Parent Talk - Support for Parents from Action For Children is a useful website. Details of a helpline are also available on this link.

## Building trusting relationships with parents

Close working relationships with parents require effort to build. They have been described by the Genuine Partnerships organisation as relying on four cornerstones:

- welcome and care
- value and inclusion
- communication and
- working in partnership.

It is worth researching these cornerstones and finding out from parents what you, as early years setting staff, can do to build closer working relationships with parents.

Only if there are genuine close working relationships will parents feel valued and able to contribute their views on their children's development. This also builds parents' confidence and provides more opportunity for more developed learning opportunities for the child in the family environment.

## Creating a full picture of a child's development

As an early years practitioner, you will need to understand the level of a child's development including in the prime area of communication and language. Parents have a significant role to play as joint-researchers, helping you to identify what children are able to do well and where they might be struggling.

Sharing with parents what is expected of children's development at different ages supports them to come to their own conclusions about whether their child is 'on-track' or not. An open, close working relationship will enable you both to provide evidence to help with this.

Regular two-way communications with parents will make it easier for the early years setting and the parents to share their views on how the child is developing. This will also make it easier to have more difficult conversations if there are concerns about the child's development.

If it is apparent that the child has some level of speech, language and communication need (SLCN), a two-way conversation about this is needed as soon as possible. An action plan of appropriate support will also need to be organised. This is much easier if parents have been part of the process of identifying need,

A video, developed by The Communication Trust, helps build practitioners' skills in sharing news of development concerns with parents (The Communication Trust - A Professional Development Video: Talking to parents).

## Making two-way communication easier

- **Being approachable** at the beginning and end of the day will help develop trusted relationships and make ongoing communication easier.

- **Regular, frequent two-way conversations** about children's progress will also enable parents to contribute their views of their child's development. This will make more difficult conversations easier, as they will not be seen as anything out of the ordinary.

- **On-line learning journals** are useful. Ask questions of parents to encourage them to post their views. Ensure that you comment positively on what the parent has posted on their child's on-line learning journal.

- Ensure that there are **translator services** available for parents whose home language is not English. Encourage them to bring an English-speaking friend or involve a member of staff who speaks the same language.

- Make available, in a variety of languages, **messages to parents about what to expect** of children's development and how they can help. Some I CAN resources and those available from the National Literacy Trust are translated in written form. (Note that speakers of different languages are not always readers of that language).

- If parents are **living separately**, ensure that you engage with both parents and encourage information sharing from both parents about their views on their child's development. This will help create a more rounded picture of the child.

## Involving parents in identifying children's speech, language and communication progress and any needs

Here are some steps to involve parents:

### Step 1 - Develop positive relationships with parents

We tend to listen best to people who we trust. Building positive relationships with parents helps to build this trust.

Some parents might feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of parenting, or they may feel under-confident in what they can achieve.

- Take opportunities to comment on positive examples of interaction that you see between a parent and child. Try phrasing this from the child's point of view e.g. 'Ah, he loves it when you do that. Look at his smile'.

- Make time to listen to any concerns that the parent brings to you. Signposting to additional support can be very helpful.

- Let parents know how much difference they make to their child's learning, by sharing information about building brain connections. Useful information is available through the BBC's Tiny, Happy People; the DfE's Hungry Little Minds; and NSPCC's Look, Say, Sing, Play.

### Step 2 – Let parents know what speech, language and communication progress to expect

As well as reassuring parents that they are the expert on their own child, parents need to have access to the type of information that early years practitioners also have access to.

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This will help the parent (along with the early years practitioner) to monitor a child's development. It will also help identify gaps, where additional support is needed.

- Provide clear, consistent messages to parents about what to expect – share posters such as the **ages and stages of language development**, or **first words**. Use booklets such as **talk-together** (ican.org.uk) or **Universally speaking**.
- Have regular conversations with parents about the child's progress (making sure that you ask what the parent knows about the child from examples at home). Provide information in these conversations about where to find out what is expected of children's communication and language development. Signpost to on-line information such as I CAN's Talking Point , speech and language development information or checks such as Progress Checker home (ican.org.uk).
- Be sure to involve the parent and health visitor through an Integrated Review at 2 – 3 years (when you complete the 2 ½ year progress check).

## Step 3 - Give ideas for activities to support speech, language and communication

Many parents have identified that they're not sure how to talk to their child, especially before their child can talk. The same tips that are used by early years practitioners can be useful for parents: and try Communication skills strategies or top-techniques-poster (ican.org.uk).

- Try focusing on a top technique each week. Share this with parents and ask them to try too. Ask them to let you know how the child responds.
- Let parents know about specific activities that will help their child's speech, language and communication skills to progress. Search on the Tiny Happy People or Hungry Little Minds websites above or link with resources such as Early Talkers Boxset (ican.org.uk).

## Step 4 - Make sharing information about progress easy

Try these suggestions to make sharing information about progress easier:

- If you use an on-line learning journal, encourage parents to share what their child is doing at home on here.
- Have a home-setting book where you let parents know what the child has been doing in the early years setting. Encourage them to write in or add photos about what the child is doing at home too.
- Have regular meetings to share together information about the child's progress. Make sure that you ask open questions to parents about what their child is doing at home, for example 'How does your child get their message across at home?'.

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- Share resources that parents can fill in, colour in or write on to give examples of their child's progress (see below).
- Have a postbox in the setting for parents to drop in pictures or information about what their child has been up to at the weekend.
- Make sure you comment positively with the parent about feedback that they have given.
- Make sure that you follow up the activities and information that you share with parents: Comment on what the parent has said. Ask how the child got on with the activity. Find out how easy or difficult the parent found it to do.
- Let parents know how great it is to see the child's progress at home and how important it is to support this together.

## Useful tool to gather examples of how a child is progressing with their speech, language and communication

- Print off the following speech, language and communication model (next page) for each child and share with the child's parents.
- Talk to the parents about making sure that the child progresses through all stages of the pyramid, rather than racing to get to the top.
- Encourage parents to give examples of the child's development at the stage they are at.
- Regularly review this evidence together with the parents, listening to what they are saying and talk about what you are seeing in terms of the child's development in the setting.

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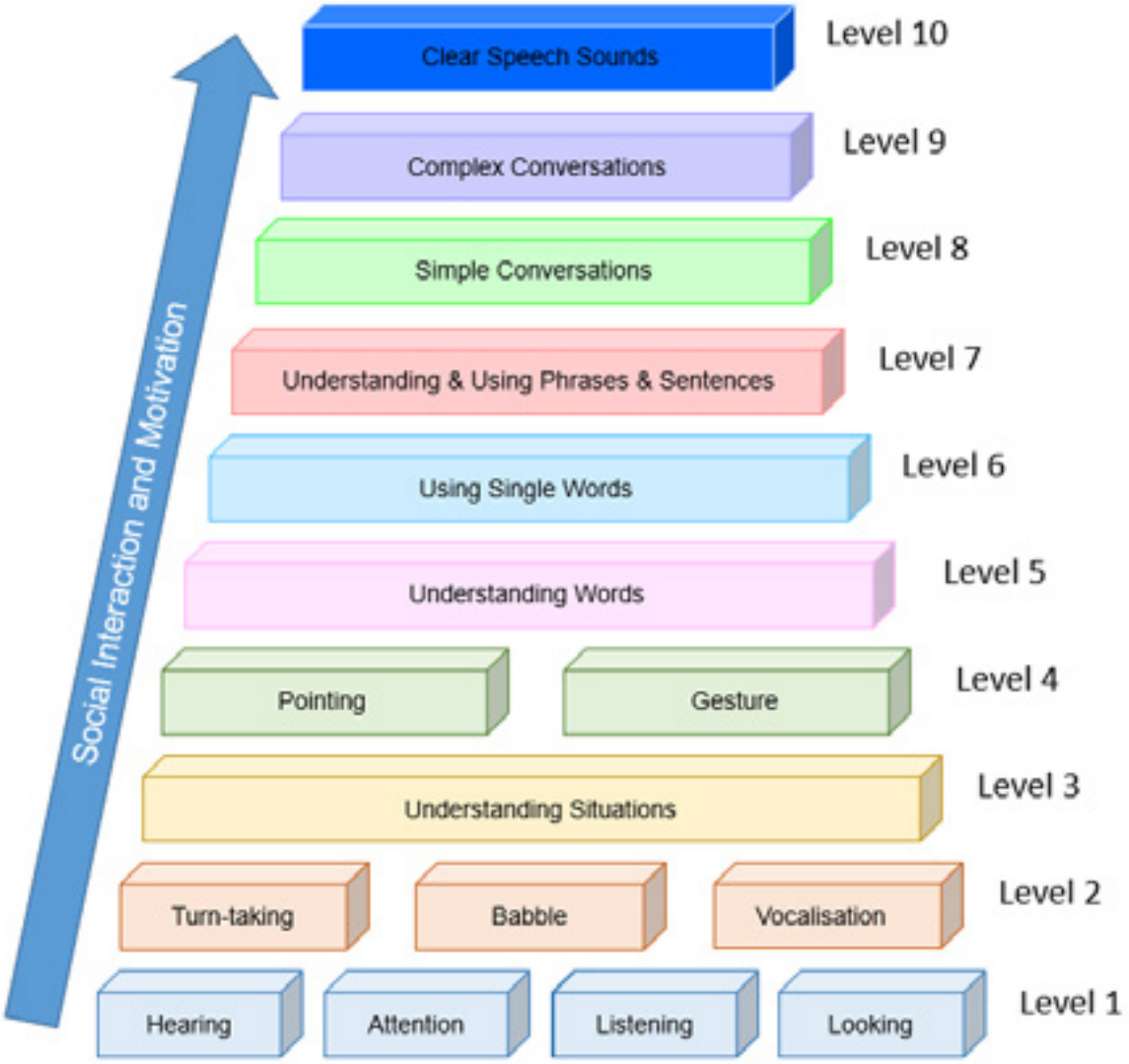
## Building Blocks of Language | NHS GGC

Parents, please give examples of what your child can do for the different sections. This will help us all to see the progress your child is making.

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