

Introduction

The National Literacy Trust has been working to transform lives through literacy for over 25 years. Our mission is to ensure that children from disadvantaged communities have the literacy skills to succeed in life. We deliver place-based responses to the literacy challenge, working with local partners to break the cycle of intergenerational low literacy.

Our early years programme, Early Words Together, has been proven to improve the home learning environment (HLE) of disadvantaged children by equipping parents and carers with the skills and confidence needed to support their child's early literacy, communication and language development. Early Words Together has been designed with adaptations to support children at three different stages of their development: ages 2, 3 and 4-5 years. Parents learn simple daily activities such as shared reading, songs, mark-making and talk that will help them enrich their HLE for their children. Sessions are based around the seven activities known to have the most impact on educational attainment according to the Effective Provision of Preschool Education.

As part of the Mercers' Company Early Years Special Initiative, Early Words Together for London involved collaboration with three boroughs with high literacy vulnerability to identify and engage specific settings in target wards and a selected cohort of children (i.e. two-year-olds, three-year-olds or four-year-olds) in an appropriate version of the programme. At the outset of the project, we envisaged a step-change in our work in terms of developing and offering supplementary digital resources and support alongside our face-to-face programme. Little did we know how vital the digital offer would become when the Covid-19 pandemic caused a national lockdown in March 2020.

The ongoing challenge of the pandemic has obviously impacted the project delivery over the last three years. Responsiveness and adaptability have been key to the success of the project with many lessons learned and innovative new ways of working informing future programme adaptations and sustainability. Online and outdoor delivery was developed and proved impactful, plus new delivery partners such as childminders were identified, enabling us to train and support parts of the early years workforce that were previously under-served, as well as reaching further families.

Reach of the programme

The table below summarises the reach of the programme across the three years of delivery:

Activities and proposed reach	Actual reach
<p>1. Training for practitioners</p> <p>Proposed reach: 150 early years settings 300 early years practitioners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained 237 practitioners from 153 settings across three London boroughs <p>(Fewer practitioners were trained in Year 2 due to COVID-19 staffing challenges and because Children’s Centre staff were working across hubs)</p>
<p>2. Early Words Together programme delivery</p> <p>Proposed reach: 2,250 children/families</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reached 2,549 families through Early Words Together programme delivery Delivered 1,808 Time Together booklet packs to families during lockdowns <p>(Adapted online delivery during lockdowns allowed us to reach more families than originally proposed)</p>
<p>3. Digital resources</p> <p>Proposed reach: 30,000 families</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reached 40,033 families through digital resources Reached 12,502 families through Facebook Live sessions during the pandemic Digital resources for practitioners, such as training videos, were viewed 941 times <p>(Our agility and swift pivot to the development and fore-fronting of our digital resources for families during lockdowns meant that we greatly exceeded original targets for this strand of delivery)</p>

Data used in this report

In order to explore the changes for children, families and practitioners as a result of taking part in Early Words Together, this report uses data from parents and practitioners collected as part of the programme evaluation over the three years of delivery. We used a range of data-collection methods:

Post-reflective parent surveys

All parents were asked to complete a survey at the end of the programme asking them to reflect on changes for themselves and for their child. Overall, these were collected from 141 parents across the three years: 28 in the first year (completed before the pandemic), 73 in the second year and 40 in the final year.

88.5% of the parents who completed the survey were mums, 7.2% dads and 4.3% had another type of relationship with the child (e.g., grandparent). Over 3 in 5 of them were aged between 30 and 39 (62.4%), while 1 in 5 were aged between 40 and 49 (21.8%). 13.5% were aged 20 to 29 and 2.3% were older than 50. 57.9% said they speak a language other than English at home. 1 in 6 (16.7%) said that none of the adults in the household are in employment. Finally, just over half of the participating children were identified as female (55.8% vs. male 44.2%).

Parent interviews

We also collected short interviews with parents after they had taken part in the programme. In July 2020, seven interviews were conducted with parents who had participated in the programme six months earlier. These focused on the benefits of the programme. A further four parent interviews were conducted in May and June 2021. These were more focused on parents' feedback on the programme, and the outdoor element designed as a response to the pandemic. Data from all the interviews are used throughout this report.

Practitioner pre and post surveys

Practitioners were asked to complete a survey before and after the programme that explored changes in their own practice in supporting families. The post survey also explored their reflections on changes for their own practice and benefits for the families and children they work with. Overall, 184 practitioners completed this before the programme (93 in year 1, 44 in year 2 and 47 in year 3) and 62 after the programme (29 in year 1 completed after the start of the pandemic, 14 in year 2 and 19 in year 3). We were interested in matching their responses before and after but we were only able to match 34 practitioners between their pre- and post-programme responses.

49.1% of the practitioners were from PVI settings. All of the practitioners were female. Half of them were aged between 30 and 49 (52.5%), while nearly 2 in 5 were aged 50 or older (37.3%). 10.2% were aged 20 to 29. 37.3% of them were qualified at Level 3 (A-level or Level 3 NVQ) or lower. Just over half (52.6%) had a qualification between Level 3 and undergraduate degree. 1 in 10 (10.2%) had a Master's degree or equivalent. 4 in 5 (79.7%) had worked in the early years sector for more than 10 years, while 10.2% had worked in the sector between five and 10 years, and 10.2% up to five years. Half of the practitioners identified as White British (51.9%).

Training feedback

Practitioners were asked to provide feedback on the training as well as progress reports during the delivery of the programme. Overall, training feedback was collected from 75 practitioners and progress reports were returned by 37 over the course of the three years of delivery.

Practitioner interviews and case studies

We also conducted interviews with practitioners from six settings and two interviews with local authority representatives.

Finally, seven practitioners shared case studies in various formats. These included their reflections from the delivery of the session, examples of how the programme was delivered, including photos shared by families and lesson plans, and thoughts on the programme's benefits for children, families and their own practice. Insight from the case studies is used throughout the report and example case studies can also be found in the appendix of this report.

Key evaluation findings

Overall, the findings from the evaluation of the programme are very positive despite the ongoing challenges in delivery brought on by the pandemic.

Benefits for children's early literacy engagement

- Early Words Together has been successful in supporting children's engagement with stories, songs and mark making:
 - For example, 3 in 4 (74.1%) parents said that after taking part, their child enjoyed singing songs and rhymes more than before, while 7 in 10 (69.9%) felt that their child listened or paid attention to stories more than before. 3 in 5 parents also reported that their child asked to look at stories and books at home more than before (62.0%), enjoyed mark-making and drawing more than before (61.3%), and enjoyed sharing books (59.7%).
 - Parents and practitioners commented on children's language development in particular. For example, many parents suggested that their child had started to use more words, understand more, ask questions and express themselves more as a result of taking part in the programme.
 - Nearly 7 in 10 parents (68.4%) felt their child interacted with other children more after taking part in Early Words Together and many commented on their child's increased confidence to interact with others as a benefit of the programme. This is particularly encouraging in the light of the reduced possibilities for social interaction brought on by the pandemic.

Changes for parents and families

- We also see positive changes for their parents and for families as a whole:
 - For example, 3 in 4 (75.5%) parents said they understood the importance of talking to their child more than before, while 3 in 4 (74.8%) said they talked to their child more about something the child is interested in. 3 in 5 (62.0%) felt more confident to sing songs with their child and nearly 3 in 5 (58.0%) felt more confident to share books with their child.
 - Practitioners also reported they had noticed changes in parents' confidence. For example, nearly 9 in 10 (87.9%) practitioners who assessed changes for parents as a result of taking part indicated they had noticed a positive change in parents' confidence to support their child's language and communication skills at home.

- These changes in parents' knowledge and confidence are also reflected in how they engage in activities with their child. Nearly 3 in 4 parents reported they sang songs with their child more than before (73.0%) and that they chatted together with their child (72.1%) more than before, while 3 in 5 shared stories more than before (59.1%).
- The findings from the parent surveys indicate that the outdoor element was also beneficial for families as nearly 3 in 4 (73.0%) parents indicated that following the programme, they knew how to use the natural environment to support their child's learning more than before while half (50.9%) told us they spent time learning outdoors with their child more than before.
- While the findings on benefits for children and their families did not indicate differences between those who completed the programme before and after the start of the pandemic, or based on child gender and parent age, our analyses indicated that Early Words Together might have been particularly beneficial for families who speak another language at home and for those from households where none of the adults are in employment. For example, more parents who speak another language at home than those who do not said their child enjoys sharing books more than before the programme (67.1% vs. 50.0%). Similarly, more parents from households where none of the adults are in employment compared with those from households where at least one parent is working said their child listened to or paid attention to stories more than before (90.5% vs. 66.1%).

Benefits for practitioners

- The programme was also successful in supporting practitioners with their knowledge and confidence, as well as in improving the practice in the settings that participated in the programme
 - For example, more than 9 in 10 practitioners reported feeling increasingly confident to engage with parents (93.5%) and increasingly skilled to do so (90.3%) after taking part.
 - Similarly, the findings show that the percentage of practitioners who give advice to parents about their home learning environments weekly increased by 59%, from 42.4% before the programme to 67.6% after the programme, and the number of practitioners who encourage parents weekly to engage in playing with their child increased by 67%, from 52.9% to 88.3%.
 - The digital delivery of the programme provided practitioners an opportunity to enhance their own knowledge and skills for supporting parents virtually. For example, nearly 3 in 4 felt their knowledge of using digital resources to support parents at home increased (73.8%) and that they are increasingly skilled to engage parents virtually (72.7%).

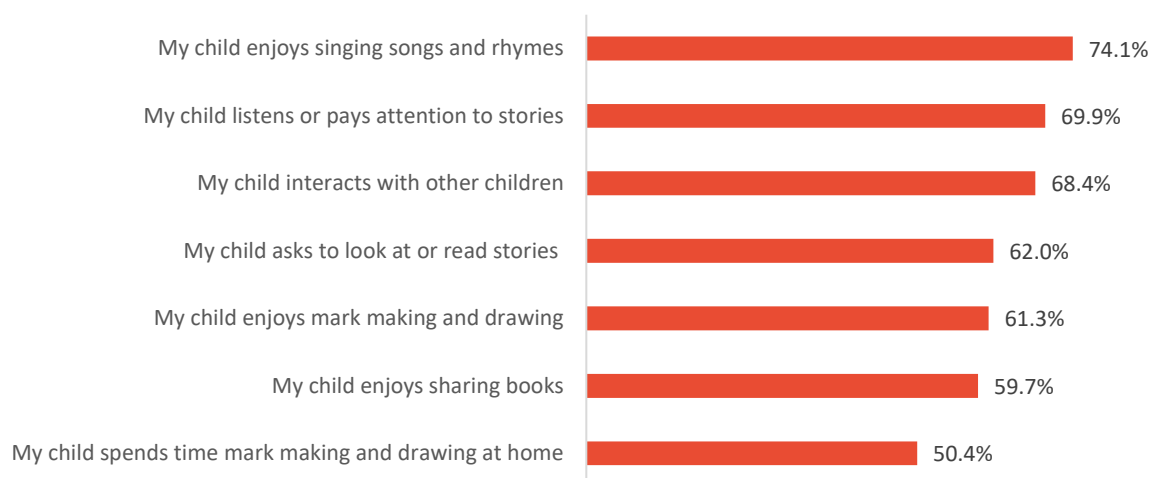
Changes for children and their families

1 in 4 five-year-olds did not achieve the expected level of development in Literacy and Communication & Language in our focus boroughs¹ as our project commenced, with 1 in 3 five-year-olds eligible to receive free school meals not achieving a Good Level of Development, meaning a significant number of children were not sufficiently equipped to start school. Extensive research has demonstrated how a positive HLE can improve a child's school-readiness, and can have a greater impact than families' socio-economic background. Early Words Together sessions are designed to equip parents and carers with the skills and confidence needed to support their child's early literacy, communication and language at different stages of their development. In Year 1 in Barking and Dagenham, we started off the project with Early Words Together for two-year-olds through 21 PVI settings, and Early Words Together for three-year-olds through 24 school nurseries. Unfortunately, the first national lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic swiftly halted normal face-to-face delivery in March 2020, and innovative ways of continuing to deliver the programme to families in need of support in their homes followed. Over the following months and years, we developed versions of the programme to respond to different contexts, such as Early Words Together Online – practitioner-led, Early Words Together Online – NLT-led, Time Together (for those with no digital access), and Early Words Together Outdoors. Case studies for each of these versions are included in this report.

Data collected from parents across the three years of delivery indicated that the programme has indeed been successful in supporting children's engagement with stories, songs and mark-making. 3 in 4 (74.1%) parents said that after taking part, their child enjoyed singing songs and rhymes more than before, while 7 in 10 (69.9%) felt that their child listened or paid attention to stories more than before (see Figure 1). 3 in 5 parents also reported that their child asked to look at stories and books at home more than before (62.0%), enjoyed mark-making and drawing more than before (61.3%) and enjoyed sharing books (59.7%).

¹ 28.2% in Barking and Dagenham; 24.2% in Southwark and 29.8% for the bi-borough of Westminster/Kensington and Chelsea

Figure 1: Percentage of children who engage in positive early literacy more than before Early Words Together as reported by parents



An analysis of parents' open-ended comments similarly showed that children's improved engagement with stories, books and reading was one of the key benefits of the programme. As the following quotes highlight, many parents indicated changes in these areas for their child following the programme²:

"I was overwhelmed with joy when I saw and heard my child reading out loud from the story book."

"The amount of time she sits for reading has increased."

"My child enjoys reading and listening to stories more."

"She sits and concentrates for longer durations during our story times. She initiates story time and gets excited to share books with me."

"She talks about stories all the time now."

"Reading books [has been the biggest change]. My child is more interested in reading and drawing."

"He's started loving books, stories and activities more than before!"

Many parents had also noticed a change in their child's speech and ability to communicate as a result of taking part in Early Words Together. Indeed, many suggested that their child had started to use more words, understand more, ask questions and express themselves more as a result of taking part:

"I have seen a lot of progress with my son – he is talking and understanding more and using new words." (Survey)

² Please note that some quotes in this report have been amended slightly to aid clarity

“I have noticed my child’s speech development has improved so much. She is saying more words and making more sentences now.” (Survey)

“She understands, listening and knowing what we are talking about. She is curious and asks questions.” (Survey)

“I was using more descriptive words, and I have noticed my daughter has been using them a lot more as well.” (Interview)

“The biggest changes that I see is that my child has improved in his communication.”

“My child started making more links and using more sounds of animals and using single words. My child started answering ‘yes’ to different questions as well.”

“She knows more words and make sentences, asking questions.”

“Language is developing. Interaction with friends is developing more. Social and emotional skills are improving.”

“Before, his speech was very simple but now he started talking a lot more as well.” (Parent interview)

Some parents specifically addressed the benefit for their child’s language skills in English. This is exemplified by one of the parents interviewed in May 2021:

“My boys already liked speaking but they also started understanding English really well. We only speak Turkish with them. But that really helped the way that they use the signs as well while they are speaking. And I was using the signs in Turkish, so they match the words.”

Several practitioners also highlighted children’s improved language development in their comments. This was particularly the case for children who do not speak English at home, as several practitioners provided examples of children who particularly benefited from the programme:

“A child with English as an additional language who was really struggling to settle, mum was staying with him every session. After completing the Early Words Together programme, he just began coming in to preschool saying goodbye to mum and communicating using one or two words in English.”

“There is girl who has very limited English and took a very long time to settle in the nursery. She was very immature and struggled to concentrate for a few minutes. Now she has started using short sentences to speak, and has got a lot better in group activities. She has started taking interest in looking at the books independently. Her mother seems a lot happier and tries the activities

at home too. When she came to attend the session, she could see the difference between her daughter and other children of the same age. She learnt other ways to help her daughter.”

“A bilingual child, understood everything but speech was limited. A few weeks after joining EWT the child increased his vocabulary. By giving mum tools to work with the child he was able to learn more words and build up his vocabulary.”

“A bilingual child who loved and memorised lots of the lines in Bear Hunt and was able to explain to his family what was happening and share some lovely describing words as they very rarely heard him speak English.”

“But for the children, especially the EALs, more confident in naming in the everyday objects, especially those that are in the home corner, more confident naming them using the English name rather than just their home language.” (Practitioner interview)

“I think it worked. The children were bilingual. So they realised a lot about how much their children spoke English because at home, they’re mainly speaking in their mother tongue, so they could see how they could go from one language to the other and how responsive they were with us. And I found that it worked really well. So it was definitely worth doing bilingual children – it made us realise how much of an impact English had for them as well.” (Practitioner interview)

“The little Russian boy is talking a lot more. Yes, he is. Yeah, yeah. He was talking and he was like selectively mute almost. And his dad said he can talk English, but no, he didn’t. But now he is chatting all the time. He’s singing. We went out today and he was walking along singing.” (Practitioner interview)

It is also worth noting that Figure 1 showed nearly 7 in 10 parents (68.4%) felt their child interacted with other children more after taking part in Early Words Together. This was also evident from parents’ comments, which indicated that many of them perceived the benefit of the programme particularly in helping their child interact with others and being confident to do so (see quotes below). These findings are particularly encouraging given that many of these families completed the programme during the pandemic, which meant their children had fewer possibilities for social interaction.

“[I would recommend the programme] because it helped my children to communicate and interact with others.”

“My child’s confidence with talking to other children, sharing etc. particularly after the pandemic saw her lose a lot of her confidence and social skills.”

“[My child] shows more confidence interacting with her peers.”

“My daughter’s interactions with others have improved.”

“I feel other families should also take part in Early Words Together sessions as it makes the child more interactive, independent and confident.”

Indeed, one practitioner interviewed specifically linked the benefit of the programme to the impact of the pandemic on children’s speech as well as reduced contact between parents and the setting:

“I think it’s a good programme that should continue because the lockdown has impacted negatively on a lot of children in terms of their speech, and bringing something like this for parents coming together. And I think it’s really lovely for them, for practitioners and for parents to work together in partnership. And I was so happy because we are going to continue with that game, show and tell, and also parents’ collaboration day, it’s come to stay. So it’s part of the thing that we use in the nursery now.”

Changes for parents and families

In addition to changes for children, we also see positive changes for their parents and for families as a whole. As Figure 2 shows, parents are generally more knowledgeable and confident to support their child’s learning. For example, 3 in 4 (75.5%) parents said they understood the importance of talking to their child more than before, while 3 in 4 (74.8%) also said they talked to their child more about something the child is interested in. 3 in 5 (62.0%) felt more confident to sing songs with their child and nearly 3 in 5 (58.0%) felt more confident to share books with their child.

Figure 2: Percentage of parents who indicate they are more knowledgeable or confident to support their child in various areas after taking part in the programme



These changes were also supported by their comments in the survey. As the following quotes highlight, many parents brought up their increased understanding of the strategies that were introduced throughout the programme and the increased knowledge they had in supporting their child as the greatest change for them following the programme:

“For me, I have learnt to use more words and also add more colour to words, my child says. I am able to expand my child’s words. We learn through the activities.”

“I have now understood more the importance of talking about and exploring the surroundings with my child. I also make sure that we do the bedtime reading/story every day. I also let him indulge more in messy play if he wants to do it.”

“I [now] remember to speak and sing clearly with greater emphasis on words.”

“Understanding how important it is to sit down and help my child to learn.”

“Finding our different techniques to help with their speech.”

“Being more understanding of my child’s behaviour, therefore acting accordingly using the tips given.”

“Reinforcement/refreshment of understanding the importance of talking and doing things together with my child.”

Interviews with parents in 2020 similarly suggested that Early Words Together changed the way parents interacted with their children. Several months after completing the programme, parents told us that they were still using methods and techniques they had learnt:

“I found that I am asking a lot more questions to my child, and I am letting him speak. I found that I have become a bit more social with him, asking him: why, how? The communication has become much better. Learning how to communicate was the most important thing. He would say something to me and I would normally give a one-word answer. For example, he would ask me to play cards with him and I would just answer: “okay”. But now, if he asks me, I’ll say: “oh, okay, what card would you like to play with, what games would you like to play?” There is a lot more interaction between me and him.”

“They taught us a way to teach children specific words was by using signs, so we have been doing that in the home.”

It is interesting to note that in addition to increased understanding and uses of strategies to support their child, some parents specifically commented on their improved confidence as a

result of the programme. This related to confidence overall as a parent but also to confidence to specifically engage in activities with their child, as the following quotes show:

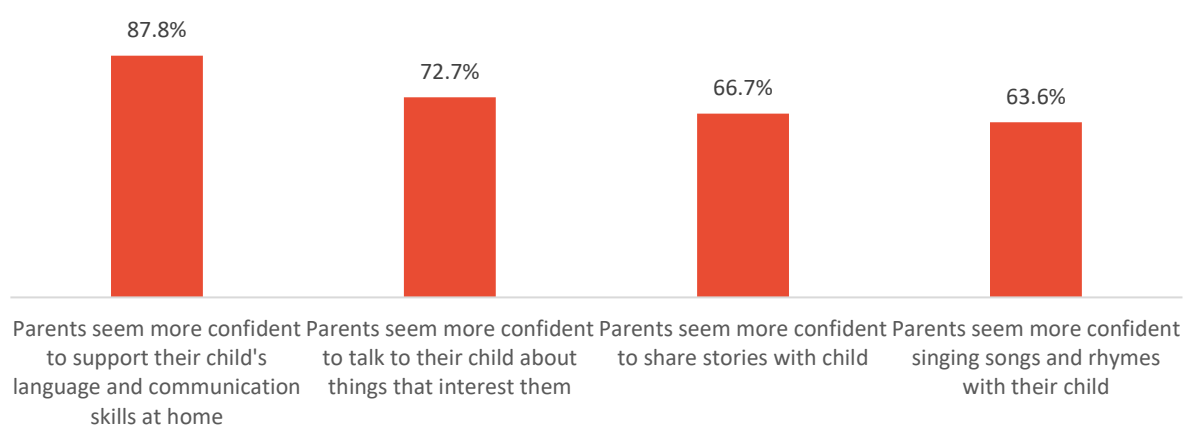
“Confidence in myself as a mother. I was about to give up on reading but this advice has given me confidence in myself.”

“I feel confident engaging my child better.”

“I have made some new friends and now feel more confident to work with my child.”

Practitioners also reported they had noticed changes in parents’ confidence. 33 practitioners who took part in the post survey indicated changes they noticed for parents and nearly 9 in 10 (87.9%) of them indicated they had noticed a positive change in parents’ confidence to support their child’s language and communication skills at home (see Figure 3). In addition, nearly 3 in 4 (72.7%) felt parents were more confident to talk to their child about things that interest them, while 2 in 3 (66.7%) had noticed a change in parents’ confidence to share stories with their child. Over 3 in 5 (63.6%) also noticed a positive change in parents’ confidence to sing songs and rhymes with their child.

Figure 3: Percentage of practitioners who have noticed a difference in these areas for parents after taking part in the programme



It was also evident from practitioners’ comments that many of the parents had benefited from taking part in the programme. As the following comments show, practitioners had noticed changes in their confidence, behaviours and understanding of how to support their child:

“[The programme] allowed mum the time to learn from others and engage with her children through play. We were demonstrating the activities mum could provide at home to encourage exploratory play as her older children did not access any early years provision, therefore she can now provide for her younger children.”

“A lone parent told us that she hadn’t realised that she should play with her child and talk to her about it. She had found that by doing this regularly, the child was talking more.”

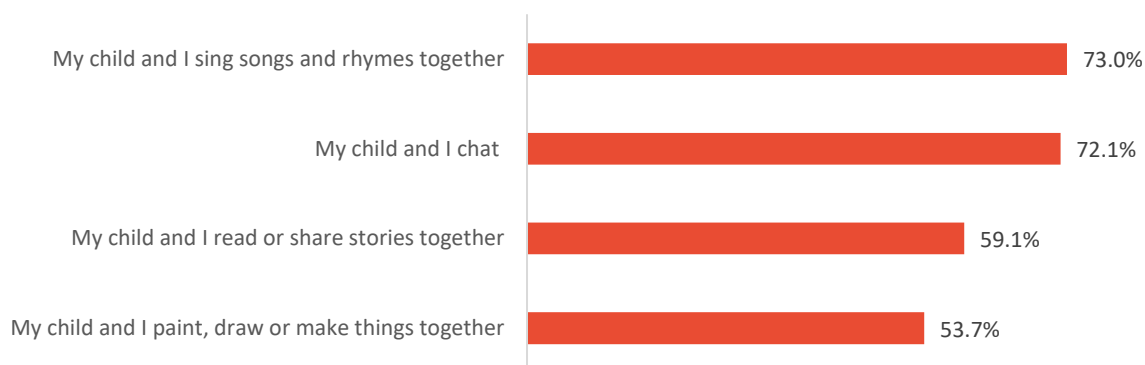
“A particular parent we have supported did not understand about their child’s language developmental needs. We were able to educate her about language development and different targets for different age groups. We were also able to share tips and ideas on how to support both in the nursery and at home.”

“A parent attended who has literacy difficulties herself. She was worried about attending and needed lots of support to come. She really shone in the group, speaking up and saying how she makes time to support her children. We witnessed her becoming increasingly confident. We are now working with her to support her own literacy in partnership with the library service. She became aware of how she can role-model interest in reading. We have donated magazines to begin her journey as a fluent reader. To see her confidence grow has been very special.”

“One particular parent has become more confident in reading English books to her child as well as those in her home language. She now understands that if she cannot read all the words she can look at the pictures and add her own words.”

These changes in parents’ knowledge and confidence are also reflected in how they engage in activities with their child. Figure 4 presents the percentage of parents who engaged in various activities with their child more after taking part in Early Words Together and shows that nearly 3 in 4 sang songs with their child more than before (73.0%) and that they chatted together with their child (72.1%), while 3 in 5 shared stories more than before (59.1%). In addition, more than half reported they paint, draw or make things together more than before (53.7%).

Figure 4: Percentage of parents who spend more time than before doing these activities with their child after taking part in the programme



Parents' comments on the changes for their family further indicate that many of them have begun to engage in more activities that support their child's learning and development:

"I am doing more creative activities with my child and trying to talk to him when we're out and about more."

"We do more things together at home. I have more ideas now that I have seen what the childminder does."

"The biggest part for me is doing more things together with my child."

"I take more time with reading and talk to him more slowly so he understands the words."

"Making the time to talk and play with him around language."

"We listen more to each other."

"We can now act along with stories making them more fun."

Particular families who benefited from the programme

Interestingly, the findings on benefits for children and their families were consistent across all three years of delivery, including before and after the start of the pandemic. This indicates that the programme was equally successful in achieving its aims each year, despite the challenges brought on by the pandemic. Similarly, we did not see differences for children based on their gender or for parents based on their age³.

However, our analyses of families benefiting from the programme based on demographic factors indicated that Early Words Together has been particularly beneficial for families who speak another language at home⁴. Similarly, while the number of parents from households where none of the adults are in employment in our sample was relatively small⁵, the findings indicate that the programme might have been particularly beneficial for them⁶.

Indeed, the survey data from parents who speak a language other than English at home indicated that the programme may have been particularly beneficial for their child's enjoyment of books and songs, and for their own engagement and confidence to support their child. For example, as Figure 5 below shows, more parents who speak another language at home than those who do not said their child enjoys sharing books and singing songs or rhymes more than before. In addition, more of these parents indicate that they now

³ Please note that the initial findings indicate that families who attended the sessions in non-PVI settings might have benefited more than those who attended it in the PVI settings. However, a closer look at the findings showed that among the non-PVI families there were significantly fewer households where at least one adult is in employment. This suggests that the difference between the settings could be attributed to the differences for families based on whether or not at least one adult is in employment, as discussed below.

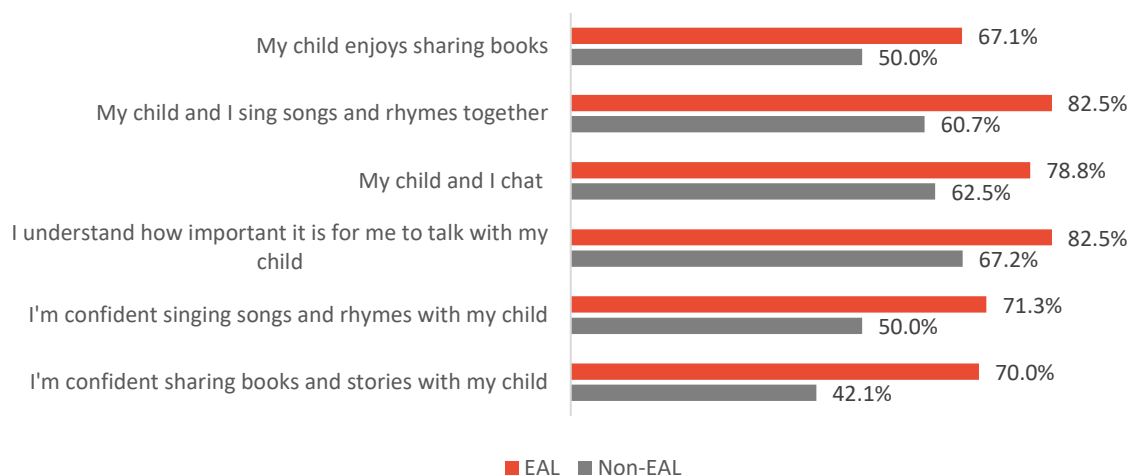
⁴ EAL 57.9%; n = 81, non-EAL 42.1%; n = 59

⁵ Parents from households not in employment: 16.7%; n = 22; Parents from households where at least one adult works 83.3%; n = 110

⁶ It is important to note that the analyses compared parents who indicated they or their child did something more, the same or less than before, and thus do not reflect true change, e.g., we do not know whether certain families already engaged in specific activities frequently and hence they were not able to do it "more".

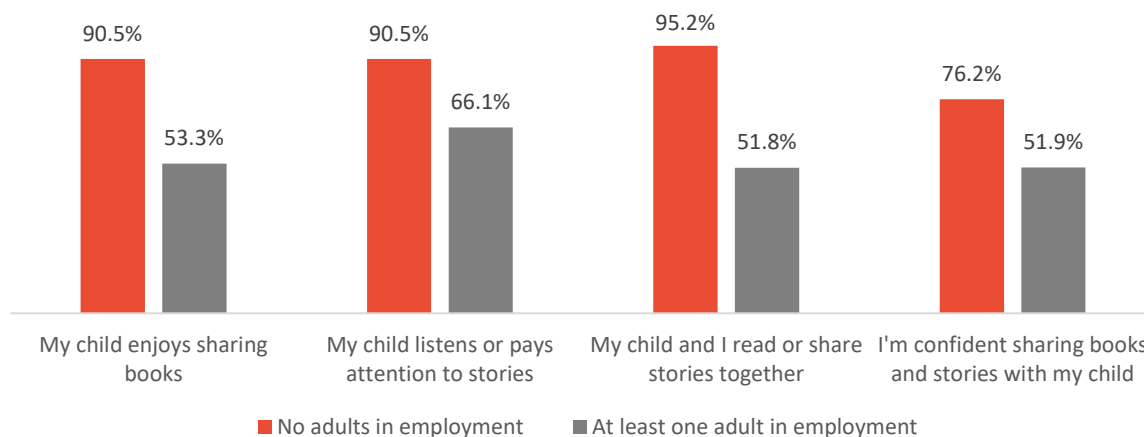
understand the importance of talking to their child and feel more confident to share stories and sing songs with their child.

Figure 5: Percentage of parents who speak a language other than English at home and those who do not who indicated they or their child engaged in activities more after taking part in Early Words Together



In addition to the families’ linguistic background, the programme seems to have been particularly successful in supporting families where none of the adults are in employment. This appears to be specifically the case with reading and sharing stories, as more of these parents compared with those from households where at least one parent is working said their child enjoyed sharing books more than before taking part in Early Words Together, and that their children also listened to or paid attention to stories more than before. More of these parents also reported sharing stories with their child more than before, and being more confident to share stories.

Figure 6: Percentage of parents from households where none of the adults are in employment and those where at least one adult is in employment who indicated they or their child engaged in activities more after taking part in Early Words Together



Focus on supporting families at home during lockdowns

Upon the announcement of the first national lockdown on 20 March 2020, our immediate response was to provide extra books and take-home activity packs through settings to those families who had few or no resources at home. Extra digital resources were added to small-talk.org.uk and a new organisation-wide Family Zone web portal was shared with settings to promote to their families, with a 'Birth to 4' section curated by the Early Years Team (these have both since migrated to be part of our Words for Life website).

In May 2020, we offered the first of many online training webinars to support settings to deliver Early Words Together Online with adapted session plans. It became apparent that some practitioners were much more comfortable delivering online sessions than others, so two iterations were offered: Early Words Together Online (practitioner-led) and Early Words Together Online (NLT-led). The NLT-led version presented a series of Facebook Live family sessions based around a storybook shared online with permission from the publisher, with linked activity sessions that support early language development. Settings delivered storybooks and craft packs safely and directly into families' homes to be used alongside the online sessions.



Feedback from the parent interviews in 2020 suggested that the programme helped families support their child's learning during the first lockdown:

“During lockdown, we really needed to do something, otherwise they are always watching TV. So now we take 2 hours where I say “nursery time!”, and we do the activities that we learnt on the programme.”

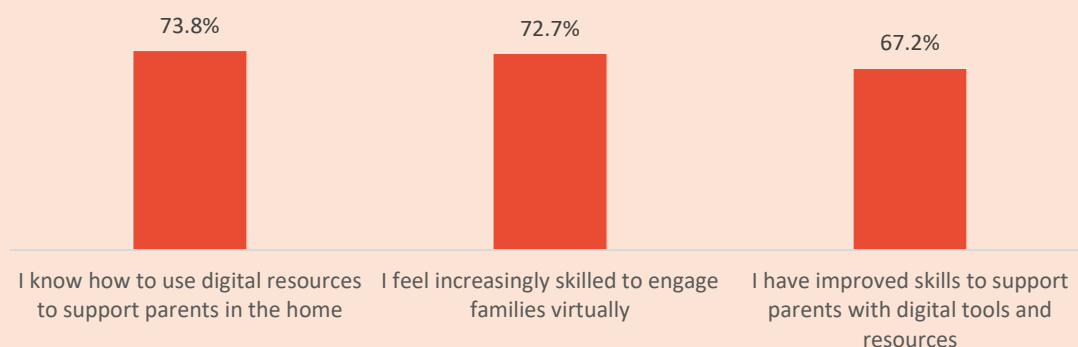
Parent feedback provided through surveys as part of Facebook Live on the Early Words Together Online sessions similarly highlighted that parents had a positive experience with the online offer:

“I thought it was great, especially as we can't get out just now.”

“It's a great activity, very helpful and inspiring in this tough time.”

The digital delivery of the programme also provided practitioners an opportunity to enhance their own knowledge and skills for supporting parents virtually. As Figure 9 suggests, nearly 3 in 4 felt their knowledge of using digital resources to support parents at home increased and that they are increasingly skilled to engage parents virtually. In addition, 2 in 3 felt they have improved skills to support parents with digital tools and resources.

Figure 9: Percentage of practitioners who feel the programme increased their knowledge, skills and confidence to support parents digitally



Practitioners also provided positive feedback on the digital delivery of the programme. In particular, they highlighted that this allowed more parents to engage with the programme, either because they did not have to cover the same staff-family ratio as in the settings or because parents could fit the programme around their other commitments:

“We delivered the programme virtually as this allowed parents who could not attend the sessions due to work commitments to take part.”

“The families that were involved in the programme were mainly working parents. Therefore the online programme has supported their needs and parents were able to deliver the session at home in their own time. However, if the sessions were face to face, parents’ participation on the programme would have been less.”

“The virtual delivery worked well – it allowed more than one person to attend because we did not have to cover staff ratio for a long period of time.”

“Gives opportunity for parents who have work commitments to still take part.”

For those families with no digital access, we adapted our Early Words Together At Home resource to make lockdown-appropriate [Time Together booklets](#) and distributed them to families in need through local food banks or through settings that were open and in touch with families. For families new to English, the booklet was translated into the borough’s priority languages (e.g. Bengali, Urdu, Romanian, Yoruba and Lithuanian in Barking and Dagenham). Practitioners provided follow-up support to targeted families in the most appropriate way, either through phone calls, WhatsApp groups, or socially distanced chats at the nursery gate if the child was attending the setting.





In March 2022, Ukrainian and Russian translations were created and distributed to families displaced by the war as they arrived in London. These were put into welcome packs with books and other resources for two different age groups: families with children up to two years old and families with children aged three to five. 160 packs were distributed through the Ukrainian Welcome Centre In Kensington and Chelsea at an event in July 2022.

Focus on outdoor delivery

Research from the first lockdown suggested children from disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately affected, with less access to books and outdoor space than children in wealthier families. In response, we adapted the programme for the start of the second year of the project and created [Early Words Together at Two Outdoors](#). Being outdoors may be beneficial to children's language development as communication is prompted by new and sensory experiences. Spending time in nature might also lead to improvements in mental health and wellbeing for both children and parents.



In the outdoor version of the programme, Southwark Children's Centres were supported to utilise their outdoor space to provide children with the opportunities they may have missed out on during lockdown. Groups of parents and children were able to come together safely outside while Covid-19 guidelines stipulated they were not allowed to mix inside.

In September 2020, we delivered three outdoor training sessions to 25 practitioners from 15 children's centres in Southwark. The training and new outdoor-session plans, based on Forest School principles, were created in consultation with an experienced Level 3 Forest School leader.

The findings from the practitioner surveys indicate that the outdoor sessions increased practitioners' knowledge and skills to support parents with outdoor learning. As Figure 7 shows, nearly 9 in 10 practitioners felt increasingly confident to support outdoor learning for children and families following the programme, while more than 4 in 5 felt their skills to support families with outdoor learning had improved.

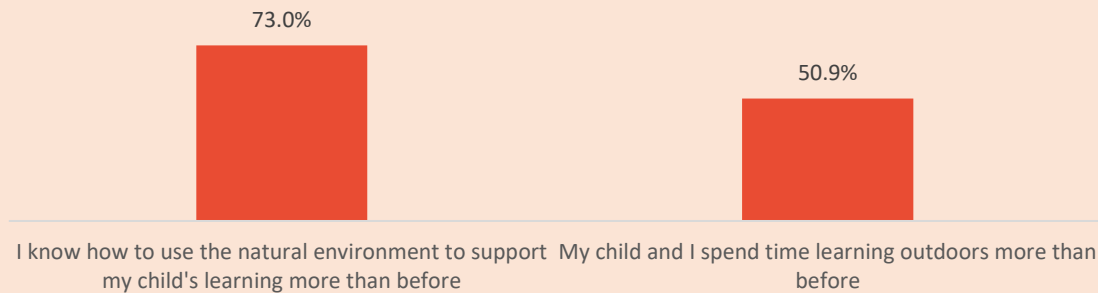
Figure 7: Percentage of practitioners who feel the programme increased their knowledge, skills and confidence to support parents with outdoor learning



In addition to changes for practitioners, the outdoor element was also beneficial for families. As Figure 8 shows, nearly 3 in 4 parents indicated that, following the programme,

they knew how to use the natural environment to support their child's learning more than before, while half told us they spent time learning outdoors with their child more than before.

Figure 8: Percentage of parents who indicate improvement in outdoor learning following the programme



Some of parents' comments from the surveys and interviews similarly highlight the benefit of the outdoor sessions:

"We live in a flat so these sessions have got us outdoors playing." (Survey)

"It was amazing to take part in the outdoor session. It was full of fun for us and my child loved to take part in the bear hunting activity in a nearby park along with some of his nursery friends and their parents. He felt more confident with my participation in the session." (Survey)



"[I would recommend the programme] because the outdoor sections allow the children to freely move around and explore on their own." (Survey)

"The outdoor sessions were fun and the kids were learning through fun activities." (Survey)

"Yes [I liked the outdoor sessions]. I mean, they have variety of things. They play with dough, they play with water, you know, the things that you sometimes do not do at home, because that's gonna be messy. We had chance to do and practice here or get more encouraged now to do that at home, because I see that if they get the good instruction, they don't mess around. Yeah, it's amazing. And we pretend the role plays of the story has really helped me do the same thing at home."

Benefits for practitioners

Practitioner training was delivered in phases across the three years of the project. The standard Early Words Together training helps practitioners understand the research around the importance and impact of a positive home learning environment and early communication, language and literacy support, as well as practical strategies to encourage language development in under-fives, to empower and grow parents' confidence in supporting their child, and to deliver Early Words Together sessions. During the pandemic, adapted trainings and practitioner support networks were delivered online in bite-size sessions at least once a month, and they explored different methods and platforms for engaging families remotely. From September 2020, outdoor training sessions were developed in consultation with a Level 3 Forest School leader. By September 2021, we were able to offer all forms of practitioner training and support with the most appropriate selected for the particular type of Early Words Together being delivered. A full suite of training and professional development opportunities has evolved and been developed through this programme funding. Additional practitioner support has been ongoing throughout the project timeline and has included phone and email support, network sessions, site visits, session observations and celebration events.

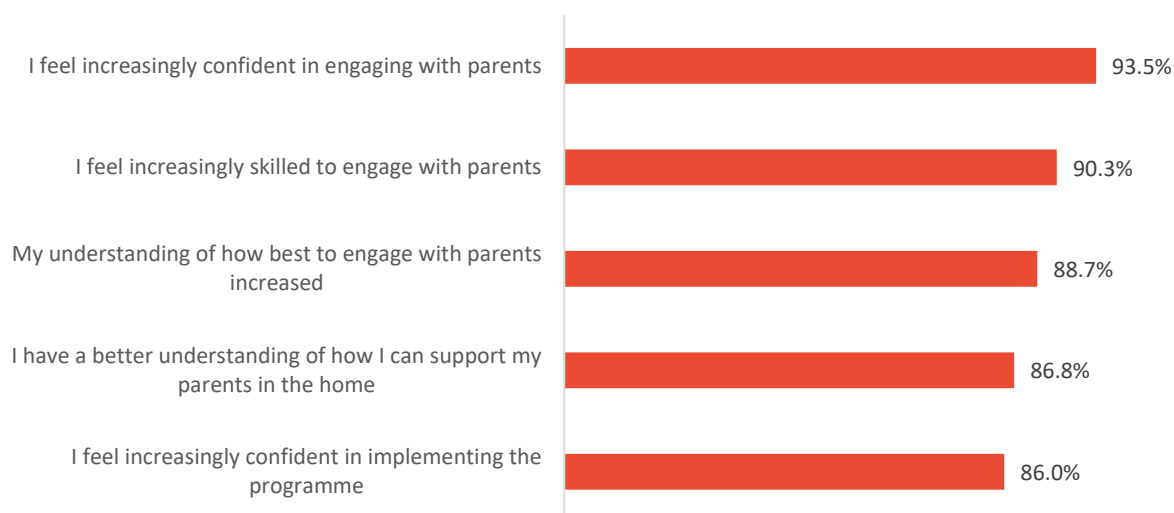
The positive changes for children and families are underpinned by changes in practitioners' knowledge and confidence, and improved practice, to support parents in engaging with their child's early language and literacy development. These changes were observed for all practitioners, regardless of their qualifications or setting⁷.

Practitioners' knowledge and confidence to support families

The changes in practitioners' knowledge and confidence were evident from the reflective questions in the post survey. For example, more than 9 in 10 felt increasingly confident to engage with parents (93.5%) and increasingly skilled to do so (90.3%; see Figure 10). In addition, nearly 9 in 10 (88.7%) felt that their understanding of how best to engage with parents has increased.

⁷ The post-survey results for practitioners were analysed by whether they had qualification up until Level 3 (A-level or NVQ Level 3) or higher (higher education certificate or a degree). We also compared practitioners from PVI settings and other types of settings. We were unable to assess changes by experience as 4 in 5 had more than five years of experience and thus the number of participants early in their career who took part in the survey was only 12.

Figure 10: Percentage of practitioners who feel the programme increased their knowledge and confidence to support parents in their setting



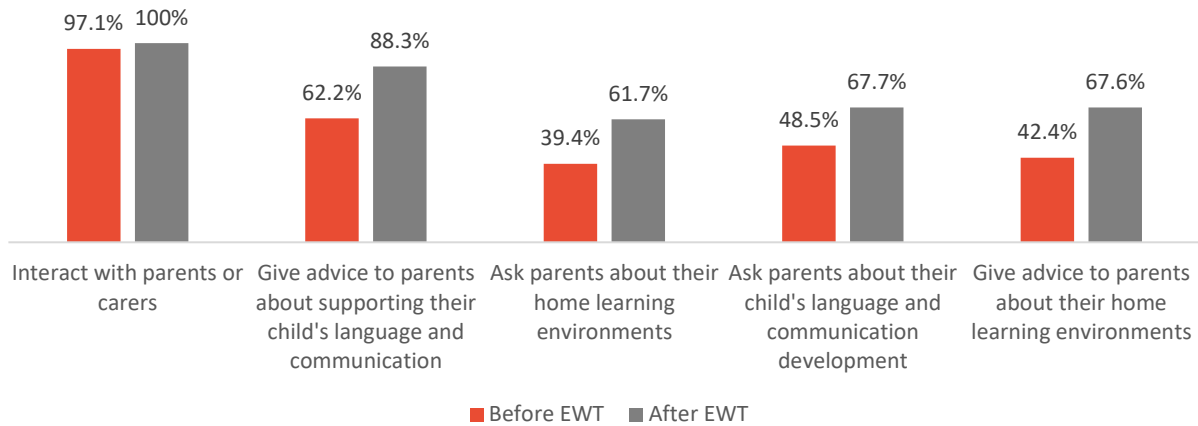
The increased confidence and skills to support families was exemplified in a case study provided by a practitioner in Westminster:

“My confidence after delivering the first set of sessions grew and I was positively encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive energy from the parents and children. They looked forward to the next session. By the time I had delivered the third round of EWT in my session, the session plans came very naturally to me and I was confident adapting them while still keeping the main learning goal a priority. I could see how each session built on the previous sessions’ learning goals and culminated in the wonderful Bear Hunt session at the end. I was able to post photos of each session on each child’s Tapestry page. This made the sessions even more of a special memory for the child and their parents to look back on in the future.”

Changes in practice

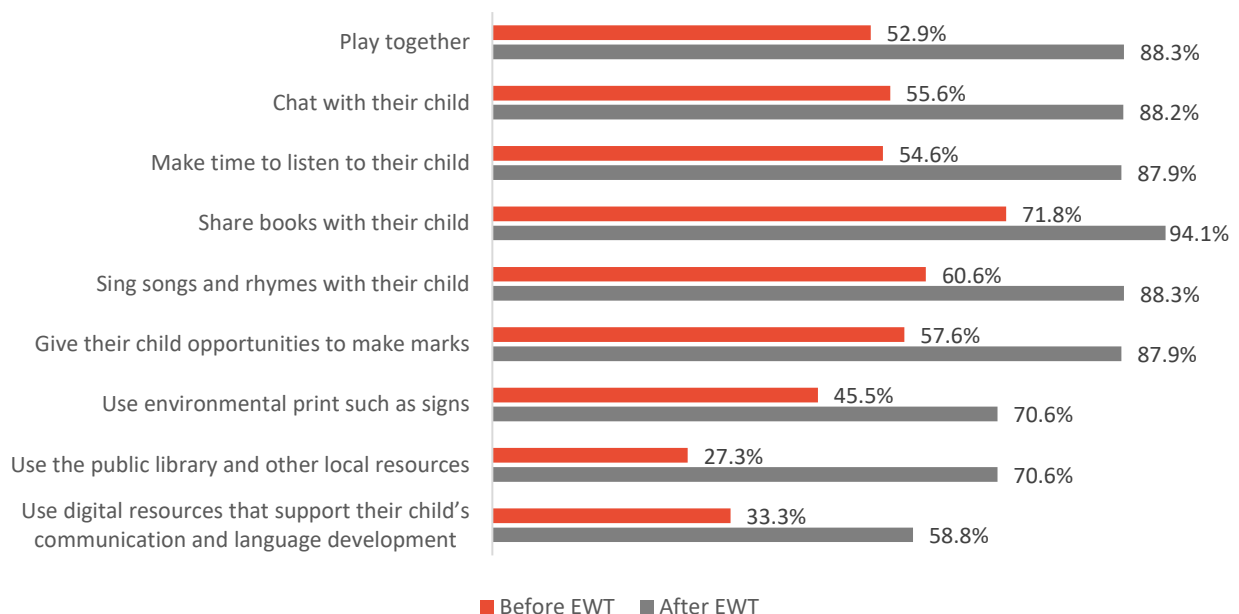
In addition to practitioners’ confidence and knowledge, the data also indicate that the programme was successful in improving the practice in the settings that participated in the programme. For example, Figure 11 shows that the percentage of practitioners who give advice to parents about their home learning environments weekly increased by 59%, from 42.4% before the programme to 67.6% after the programme, and the number of practitioners who give advice about supporting their child’s language and communication weekly increased by 42%, from 62.2% to 88.3%.

Figure 11: Percentage of practitioners who engage in positive behaviours supporting parents in the setting weekly before and after the programme



The findings also show that the percentage of practitioners who encourage parents weekly to engage in various activities with their child increased. For example, as Figure 12 shows, the percentage of practitioners who encourage parents weekly to engage in playing with their child, chatting with their child and sharing books with their child increased (by 67%, by 59% and by 31% respectively).

Figure 12: Percentage of practitioners who encourage parents to engage in positive behaviours supporting their child weekly before and after the programme



A case study provided by a practitioner in Westminster similarly highlights the benefits of the programme on the regular practice in the settings. They described the benefits on their own practice as:

“Participation in the project was hugely influential to me as an Early Years Lead in my school. Going back to the basics of key communication and language skills being embedded in Nursery Class Practice was powerful for me to report to parents and SLT. I plan to continue delivering the Early Words Together at Three in my Nursery Class next year. My partnerships with the parents have increased and my confidence in delivering small, direct interventions with parents and their child has grown. I feel a better balance between online home and face-to-face workshops with the teacher will be a priority in my Early Years Practice next year. Parents value one-to-one time with their class teacher and it is powerful for the children to see their teacher and parents working together.”

Another practitioner based in Southwark who provided a case study described the benefit on their own practice and for the practice of the team as a whole as:

“Being involved in this project promoted our personal growth as practitioners as it benefited and aided us in gaining deeper knowledge and understanding of literacy, communication and language development. As a team we gained more confidence and flexibility in delivering the sessions to the children and being able to communicate with parents about the activities they were doing at home together. Participating in this project has made us aware and remember how we can adapt and change things easily as it does not have to be done one particular way. For example, in the first session, we came across a challenge when one child did not want to participate with rest of the group. We decided to try the session one to one with him which has shown the child having more interest in getting involved. Also, we extended the activities further for all children by continuing this in the rooms.”

Case study: Benefits for local authority

“Southwark always has the residents, the children, the parents, all at the heart of what they do. And I think this programme is highlighting that even more. And we’re going to keep on going in that it’s going to be with us forever. It’s going to be a legacy.”

Through our interview with a local authority representative in 2021, we were able to gain insight into the programme and its benefits from their perspective. Overall, the representative felt that the programme was beneficial to families in the area and, after the introduction, settings were also eager to take part.

The local authority also worked with the settings to decide how the programme could be delivered safely but with maximum impact. The settings were very creative in implementing the programme and their participation and confidence to deliver it grew over time. The local authority representative was very proud how settings could overcome challenges and managed to deliver the programme during the pandemic.

The programme was perceived as having a big impact and its legacy will remain in the borough. The local authority representative felt settings now engage with the parents in different ways, communicating in a more meaningful, deep and purposeful way, especially in regards to speech, language and communication. Two-way communication has been established, with much better mutual respect and understanding.

“You know, they were talking to the parents about the importance of speech, language and communication, the importance of reading to your children at bedtime, and different times during the day singing and so on. So I think they saw parents in a very different way. I think parents saw them in a very different way.”

At the time of the interview, settings were planning to start another cycle of delivery in the coming academic year and the local authority representatives were committed to delivering the programme across the borough. Going forward, they are going to drive a focus of speech, language and communication throughout the borough. After the initial delivery of the programme, the local authority representative works with colleagues to create their own programme, ‘The Early Communicator’, which is working with interactions, environment and intervention, building on the learning from Early Words Together. They also now facilitate a forum for settings that have participated. Through this, settings meet every six to eight weeks and each delivers something to the other settings linked to speech, language and communication.

“You started us off. And we now want to go and bloom and create this pathway that comes on the back of National Literacy Trust and all the things you equipped us with. You’ve inspired us now to create our own pathway around speech, language and communication.”

Case study: Lasting legacy of the programme

Barking and Dagenham has one of the highest child-poverty rates in London⁸ and many families need support. As our focus borough for year one of the project, we partnered with the local authority's early years team who identified the PVI and school nurseries to be trained. Throughout the pandemic we continued to support these settings with further trainings for adapted delivery of the programme, eventually adding childminders into the trainings in year three. Early Words Together was positively perceived by the local authority leads, who highlighted that the programme has had a positive impact in the borough:

“The programme has had a really big positive impact. It has given settings the status of working with National Literacy Trust, but also in terms of the outcomes the programme is for. The programme has helped us to narrow that gap and we know statistically all children are really vulnerable compared to the national average.”

In addition to the immediate benefits, the programme has also been seen to have a lasting legacy in the borough. Reflecting on the longer-term changes for settings that took part in the first year of delivery, the local authority leads suggest that settings have continued to embed the learning from the programme:

“What they've carried on is that understanding of the importance of sharing those stories and some of them are sharing related songs, or YouTube links to the story and things like that. So I think that's kind of embedded practice more now in quite a lot of settings, which is good.”

The interview with the local authority leads also gives a sense that many of the settings are looking to continue delivering the programme or the learning from it going forward:

“When I've talked to managers, they'll talk about sessions. So they know the impact and they want to do it again. So I think that will definitely come back.”

The programme has also worked well for childminders in the borough. The local authority leads highlight that the programme has impacted all parts of their provision. As a result of the programme, childminders have sent home story packs, used puppets, shared stories, and songs and rhymes with parents. They have also started going to the library and encouraged families to join. The model that the childminders have used has also been successful in engaging working parents who are not able to come into the setting:

“It has been really effective for parents within their work context. So they can be more involved with what their child is doing and learning but not need to take any time out of their working day.” Local authority lead

“We will continue to share sessions with parents and will start EWT again when new children join us.”

⁸ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2022>

Case study: Impact on childminders

Childminders across the three boroughs were trained in an adapted version of Early Words Together, specifically designed around sharing the key messages of the programme digitally with parents. Childminders often lack access to high-quality professional development. A childminder in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea gave some feedback about the training in a network meeting:

“I don’t get to go to many training courses so this one was so useful. Just to hear about the theory and talk to other childminders about what they are doing and to find out about the programme.”

The childminders received a small resource fund to support them with the cost of running the sessions and to provide take-home packs for families. The childminder explained in an email that parents have engaged very well with the programme:

“We’re delighted with how the children enjoyed the stories and activities. We got great feedback from most parents who shared the stories with the children that we sent home also using the laminated props that we had made. They were very impressed how well their children knew what was happening and were able to memorise some of the lines of the stories.”

During the training and subsequent network meetings, we discussed how the sessions could be adapted to cater for the range of ages that they may have in their care and how to embed communication, language and literacy activities into their daily provision. The childminder talked about the positive impact of the programme on the children involved.

“Before we started to introduce the EWT programme we found it quite difficult for the children to focus on a circle time (they are 2-3). Since we have introduced some favourite books with props and activities they have become very involved and fetch the cushions to sit down themselves! We now have a book of the week and the children enjoy activities based around that.”

The childminder appreciates the benefits of the programme and intends to continue delivering the key messages:

“Thank you so much for giving childminders the opportunity to take part in this exciting and valuable programme that has also helped parents to be more involved in their children’s learning.”

Indeed, the local authority leads would also like to see childminders continuing with the programme in the future:

“We think that as well as settings, it would be really great for childminders to continue with the programme. Maybe the ones this year could become

mentors. That would be a really good incentive for them. They could link up with a few childminders each and we would support them too.”

Challenges and solutions

COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic obviously impacted many areas of project delivery, both for us as an organisation and for our delivery partners. At the National Literacy Trust, the immediate change to remote working, and a swift organisational-wide change in direction to offering support directly into children’s homes rather than through schools and settings, was successfully navigated with minimal furloughed staff, and did not halt project delivery. Challenges for our delivery partners in the early years sector were greater, and in the first instance meant that their usual partnership with parents and way of engaging with them was severed:

“Due to the current situation and social distancing we were limited to communicate and engage with parents as usually we do. Our parents strongly prefer one-to-one [feedback] and face-to-face sessions, rather than online or videos. This is due to the fact as told by them they feel they learn more and are able to participate more rather than only observing...

"As a result of our coronavirus policy we are unable to invite parents in to the setting. Therefore, we were only able to pre-record a session and email it over with a written description. I feel this can sometimes hinder the real feel and benefit of the sessions compared to real face-to-face interactions. Also, sometimes parents may not always show an interest in participating and it can take a lengthy time to convince parents to join.”

Frequent check-ins with practitioners to see how things were going and get their feedback were invaluable during this time, and helped us all develop ways to encourage parental engagement in online activity, so that the impact of the programme and outcomes for children and parents were not adversely impacted (as shown by the findings in this report).

Early years settings remained open throughout the pandemic, but staff shortages were an enormous challenge:

“Some members of staff had to isolate and others shield due to the current pandemic. Ratio was affected and we had the need to improvise and think outside the box as we did not want to cancel the programme.”

"Some of the challenges encountered included: Staffing issues due to staff isolating due to Covid, and parents are not yet able to attend sessions with children due to nursery Covid risk assessments.”

Following the first lockdown when we created Early Words Together Outdoors, challenges continued and included reduced numbers of families engaged, and also a realisation that relationships between parents and their children had been affected:

“Restrictions due to COVID 19 on how many families that could attend and also the weather as we have only been able to run sessions outdoors. [A] Few sessions have had to be cancelled because of rain and having to re-arrange sessions. Parents less engaged with their children, so having to model good parent/child interaction.”

“It has been challenging with some of the children’s behaviour. Some of the parents who have attended the sessions have needed lots of support with parenting skills and behaviour management.”

Data collection throughout the pandemic has been challenging, and we were mindful of the extreme strain that early years practitioners were under. Therefore, we did not push for them to complete surveys and feedback, resulting in less data to analyse than originally planned. We implemented strategies to make data collection as easy as possible for them, such as providing stamped addressed envelopes for returning paper surveys easily, and voucher incentives to complete surveys online.

Child assessment data challenges

In order to evaluate the direct impact of the programme on young children’s language and communication development, we proposed to use child assessment data that practitioners gather in their settings and compare it with assessment data of children not taking part in Early Words Together. In year one in Barking and Dagenham, the collaborative process of developing an appropriate tool and creating a data-sharing agreement was a lengthy process within local authority processes, and delayed the gathering of children’s attainment data. Despite this, data was collected from 293 children across the borough in autumn 2019. However, the first lockdown and subsequent pandemic restrictions made it impossible to continue using child assessments. Assessments were also stopped nationally.

In year three of delivery, we invited settings in Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster to provide data from the Wellcomm toolkit, which the bi-borough had recently introduced. During the training session, we established that the tool was being used inconsistently across the borough with some settings using it for focus children and others using the tool to assess all children. We developed links with settings that were using the tool across their cohort and provided support in terms of data-protection practices. Despite regular contact with the settings and some sporadic data sharing, none of them shared a full year of data, so we were unable to use any child assessment data to add to our findings on the impact of the programme. Feedback from practitioners was that this was due to staff absences and staff changes, and concerns about consistency of their assessment.

Feedback and suggestions for improvement

Parent feedback

All parents who took part in the programme would recommend it to other families. Their comments show that they would recommend it because their child seemed to enjoy it, because they received tips and advice, and because of the perceived benefits for their own and their child's learning and development. One parent specifically highlighted that they appreciated the opportunity to learn without feeling they were being judged:

“Extremely helpful in every situation. They advise us accordingly. I do not feel judged and always receive expert advice.”

A small number of parents shared ideas of what could be done differently. These included evening or weekend sessions, sharing learning from parents who had previously attended, more activities during the sessions, and an app in addition to the Words for Life website:

“It would be great to have ideas in an app in addition to the website.”

“More activities during the session.”

“Evening or weekend sessions would allow employed couples access.”

“The sessions were good. It would have been useful at the start of the group to talk about how parents had got on with activities from previous weeks.”

Practitioner feedback

The practitioner interviews indicated that, overall, the programme was well received by them:

“I was excited and when I see the joy in the face of the parents. You know, they are very happy and I thought, oh my god, they love it. So it was lovely. I really like it and that also motivates me as well. To do more.”

“And after the first one, they were really so enthusiastic, and joined in and everything. So the second one, just, and the third and the fourth, and the fifth just flowed after that. So, um, so it was really good. We got the parents really involved.”

“I just, it was a pleasure to be part of it. And it's really opened up our eyes that we can offer, because you always talk about and you think about parent partnership and how you can do it and things like that. But actually, when you have got a deadline, if you have to do something, because you don't always know where to start. And then this was an amazing guideline... we'll definitely be taking it forward. Definitely. It will be part of part of us. Yeah, definitely.”

“I definitely would encourage anybody to do it. But because it's not even about the children, it's also about you, you learn so much within yourself.”

Practitioners' feedback from the training similarly indicated that they had a generally positive experience. 94.0% of those who attended rated the training excellent or very good, and 97.3% would recommend it to others.

The digital resources developed in the first year of the project included a suite of videos created to showcase each particular session of different Early Words Together adaptations. Practitioners' comments show that they greatly valued the videos as part of the training, as many mentioned these when asked what they liked about the training:

“The step-by-step guide of the planning and the video demonstration.”

“Videos and discussions around them are very useful, to be able to see + doing the activities with our minded children. Give us examples.”

“The videos as they gave me more ideas to implement in my setting.”

“Looking at the session plans in detail and watching the videos to see how they were delivered.”

“Watching the demonstration videos and talking with like-minded practitioners.”

“Taking us through each session and the activities planned, the videos were useful as an example of how to do the session.”

“The most useful parts I found is the toolkit and website videos. It helped me understand more about the programme.”

The training was also successful in achieving its aims. 91.7% of the practitioners felt the training improved their understanding of the programme and 97.3% found the resources provided useful. 90.6% felt confident about putting what they learned into practice. This was true for all practitioners, regardless of whether they worked in an early years setting or as a childminder.

In terms of improvements, some practitioners highlighted that the information provided in the training was already familiar with certain groups of practitioners. Future work could explore the possibility of tailoring the training for various groups or asking practitioners beforehand what their specific training needs are. At the time of training, some practitioners suggested an opportunity for a reflection session and learning from a practitioner who has already completed the programme:

“I was happy with the training. It would be good if there is the capacity to touch base with the trainer for a reflection session to see how we are putting theory into practical.”

“Maybe hear from a teacher who has completed the programme recently.”

These suggestions were weaved into the delivery timeline as part of our practitioner network sessions, and proved invaluable in the professional development for practitioners as they heard and learnt from others as the project progressed.

Conclusion

This report shows that parents and practitioners alike had a positive experience of the programme. Crucially, it also shows that Early Words Together brought about changes for children and their families, across all the forms of delivery. This indicates that our responsiveness to the changing circumstances and our innovative ways of delivering Early Words Together during the most challenging times have been successful. Going forward, these new ways of delivering the programme will be part of the regular offer to settings, providing them with an opportunity to adapt the programme based on the needs of their families.

More specifically, data from the surveys with parents suggest that the programme made a difference to their children's literacy engagement and their language development. In addition, the programme has been successful in supporting children's interaction with each other, which, given the restricted opportunities for socialising during most of the years of delivery, is particularly encouraging and suggests the programme has been valuable in supporting families in areas where support is needed the most. We also see benefits for the parents, many of whom have increased their knowledge and confidence around supporting their child at home, and their engagement in various positive home learning environment activities with their child.

Research has indicated particular concerns about the impact of the pandemic on children's language and communication, and socio-emotional development⁹. These positive findings and the lack of differences between the different models of delivery for Early Words Together over the past three years suggest that our adapted delivery during lockdown might have supported children who may otherwise have been adversely impacted in their development.

The changes for children and their parents are underpinned by the positive outcomes for practitioners. The programme successfully supported practitioners to increase their knowledge and confidence, and improved their practice both in their settings and in their use of digital resources to engage families virtually. This is crucial for creating a more sustainable change and ensuring the settings can continue providing the best possible support for children's early literacy development as part of their regular offer. These positive outcomes were found for all practitioners across all types of settings, including childminders who became involved in the project after the development of the online version of the programme, and thus were new delivery partners for our Early Words Together programme.

⁹ <https://www.niesr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/The-impact-of-Covid-19-on-childrens-language-educational-and-socioemotional-skills-Interim-Briefing.pdf>

Through this project, we have had the opportunity to offer different versions of the programme to local authorities and work in partnership with them to fit the programme in to the ecosystem of their early years provision and the support offered to different groups of practitioners. We have learnt a lot from this aspect of the project and have thus built sustainable relationships with local authorities in London and hope to continue to work with them in the future.

We would like to thank Mercers' Company for funding the Early Words Together programme in London and making a difference to young children and their parents' engagement with early literacy during the challenging years of the pandemic.