

First Words Together delivery models

**A look at how First Words Together has been
implemented within settings across Birmingham**

July 2024

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June 2024

First Words Together

Adapted from National Literacy Trust's Early Words Together programme, First Words Together (FWT) supports babies and toddlers who may need early help with speech, language and communication before the age of two. Babies communicate long before they start to talk, through gestures, showing and giving objects, pointing and vocalising. Sharing books and interacting with books from when babies are very young supports communication and language development. The universal programme builds parents' and carers' awareness and confidence in supporting early communication leading up to babies' first words.

The programme also builds knowledge and confidence in early years practitioners and professionals. Practitioners are trained to deliver weekly sessions that include evidence-based, fun activities based around five top tips, to build the foundations of communication that parents can easily repeat in the home. This then encourages positive change to a child's home learning environment. Each week families are gifted a free book linking with the session, so by the end of the programme families will have built a mini library in their home. Speech and Language Therapists are employed on the project too, offering support and advice for practitioners and families taking part.

Running of a First Words Together session

In a standard FWT session, practitioners begin with an opening carpet session lasting around 5-10 minutes. This includes a welcome song to relax families and children, followed by a recap of previous talking tips. The key message from the current talking tip is then shared with parents. Next, a table or floor-based activity, lasting around 10-15 minutes allows parents to try out the strategy with their child. Practitioners model engagement techniques, emphasising the talking tip. Finally, the session ends back on the carpet, revisiting the strategy and providing families with a takeaway sheet and book to take home.

Stepping Stones, SEND group

The Rookery Children's Centre in Perry Barr, Birmingham has been implementing the FWT programme since 2021. They contacted the National Literacy Trust to seek permission to specifically apply this programme as an intervention tool for a special educational needs (SEND) group called Stepping Stones. As an organisation we wanted to assess the impact of the FWT programme on both the children and families within the SEND Stepping Stones group, examining its effectiveness in a context beyond its typical use. The FWT programme focuses on supporting early communication in babies and toddlers, emphasising gestures, interactions, and shared book experiences to build language skills before a child's first words. It aims to enhance parents' and carers' confidence in supporting their child's communication development. Additionally, the programme can be particularly beneficial for children with SEND, providing early intervention support for those at risk of speech and language disorders.

The Rookery Children's Centre utilises the FWT programme within the Stepping Stones group to assist parents and caregivers of children with potential special educational needs (SEND) in addressing communication and language requirements. These children exhibit developmental gaps in learning but lack an official diagnosis or external agency support. Notably, they do not attend early years settings such as nurseries.

When children are identified with communication and language concerns during their two-year developmental checks, they are referred to the centre's Little Talkers group. This group employs a speech and language intervention programme to address the identified gaps, following the NHS speech and language pathway recommended for early years settings in Birmingham.

However, the Little Talkers group is not suitable for children who not only have communication and language concerns but also present other developmental or learning challenges. Consequently, the centre recognised the need for an alternative intervention to support these children and their families. Many of these children would not have access to a normal FWT programme as they are older than the recommended age of 0-2 years.

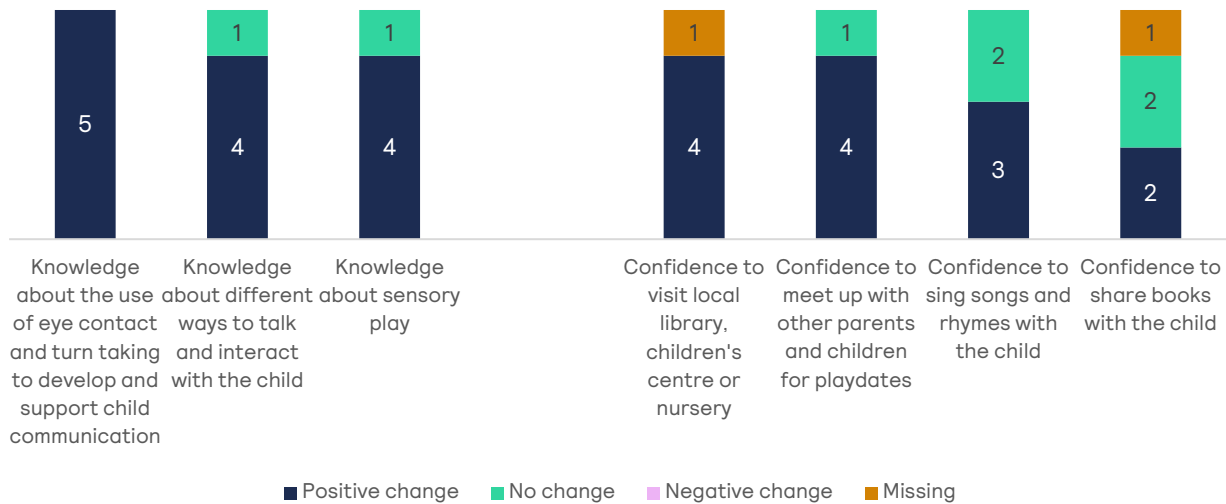
When delivering a FWT session for the Stepping Stones group, practitioners follow similar principles to the original model but with adaptations. Children with complex needs do not start on the carpet, as it was felt this wouldn't benefit them. Instead, they freely engage in a range of indoor and outdoor activities, all demonstrating the five talking tips. Practitioners move around families, discussing previous tips and explaining the current strategy. They model the talking tip during play activities. The whole session lasts approximately 50-60 minutes, ending with an interactive story (using sensory experiences and Makaton) and a personalised goodbye song for each child.

Like a standard FWT programme, measuring success in the Stepping Stones group relies on parental feedback. Parents assess themselves against a set of criteria at the programme's outset and again after session five. Additionally, practitioners monitor and record individual progress for each child, considering any targets set as part of their special educational needs.

The results obtained from the Stepping Stones group were comparable to those achieved in a typical FWT programme delivery. Parent surveys indicated:

FWT Stepping stones tables, version 1 – knowledge and confidence collapsed in the same table

Table 1. Changes in parents’ knowledge and confidence after First Words Together



Parent comments:

“I have found new ways to talk and interact [with my child] and was given resources to help their develop[ment]. Best/favourite part: the support and help given by Lynne and Marie – although it has been great for the boys, I have got a lot out of it.”

“The session was helpful, I have learned how to interact and talking tips.”

Practitioners who conducted the FWT programme sessions were surveyed to assess how they perceived the programme’s impact on the Stepping Stones group and the attending children and families.

How do you feel the FWT programme supported the Stepping Stones SEND group?

“Stepping stones – First Words [Together] has supported the send group by allowing us to support the children who are developmentally working at the age of birth – two years, this has allowed us to give the talking tip which parents have taken away and have expressed how supportive they have been with being able to implement something at home.”

Which elements of FWT were easy to deliver in the sessions and why?

“We believe all elements of FWT was able to be used in the session as the talking tips were adaptable for us to meet with different ways for the parents to use them for their child’s needs. The books were lovely and sensory and were enjoyed by all children as they all were using and taking away different things.”

Which elements did you need to adapt to meet the needs of the children and families in the group and why?

“We did not physically adapt any of the paperwork we just adapted the ways we told parents to implement the activities and adapted the way we delivered the stories so that we could have sensory experiences and enjoy a story in ways that gets their attention.”

Would you recommend using FWT programme to others and if so, why?

“Yes, we would recommend FWT, this is because the talking tips are so simple, but they are really effective and supportive to children at the start of development and of course receiving online videos and different languages and the lovely books.”

A Project Manager overseeing the First Words Together programme in Birmingham settings observed a Stepping Stones FWT session. Here are her findings:

“During my observation, I noticed that Marie and Lynne’s personalised welcome approach had significant benefits for both parents and children in the Stepping Stones group. The quality interactions between practitioners and parents were evident. They engaged in one-on-one discussions, reviewing the talking tip with families. For those who had attended previous sessions, they recapped on previous tips. Additionally, bags containing parent tips and books were prepared and given to parents. While doing so, practitioners demonstrated how the tip could be practically applied and provided guidance on engaging with their child using the talking tip. The individual conversations with Marie and Lynne allowed parents to seek support and address any queries or concerns they might not have been comfortable discussing in a larger group setting.”

“I noticed a sensory activity for children that correlated with one of the stories from FWT programme (specifically, Dear Zoo). It was heartwarming to witness activities directly linked to the texts accessible to the children. Several families actively participated in this activity, with parents getting down to their child’s level and imitating their interactions with the animals. This integration also seamlessly connected with the closing activity.”

“During the final part of my observation, I noticed that there was no pressure on the children to sit down for the end carpet session, which was brilliant considering their individual needs. However, parents felt relaxed enough to join in. It was lovely to see each child engage with the songs in their own unique way—some watched from the sidelines, while others came running over when they heard a song they obviously loved. Lynne and Marie’s excellent use of signing contributed to inclusivity. The goodbye song, personalised with each child’s name, beautifully signalled the end of the session. Notably, the children who had been attending for several weeks were clearly accustomed to this structure, as evidenced by their engaged participation.”

Based on observations by the National Literacy Trust, practitioner feedback, and parent surveys, implementing the First Words Together programme to support children with both communication and language needs, as well as additional complex needs, was beneficial. Even though these children were older than the recommended age of 0-2 years for the standard FWT programme, they gained from accessing the strategies provided by the FWT talking tips. This support also helped families address identified communication and language concerns, contributing to developmental progress.

Little Sheep Stay and Play (in association with the Early Years Alliance).

Haymills CC is a Congregational fresh expression church based in Yardley, Birmingham. They run various community-based groups, including Little Sheep Stay and Play, a parent and toddler group. This group meets every Thursday and Friday (except bank holidays) from 10:00am to 12:00pm.

The challenge they faced was wanting to implement the FWT programme for parents and children attending their group. However, due to space and staffing limitations, they couldn't run a separate FWT group. Instead, they decided to integrate the FWT programme into their regular stay and play sessions.

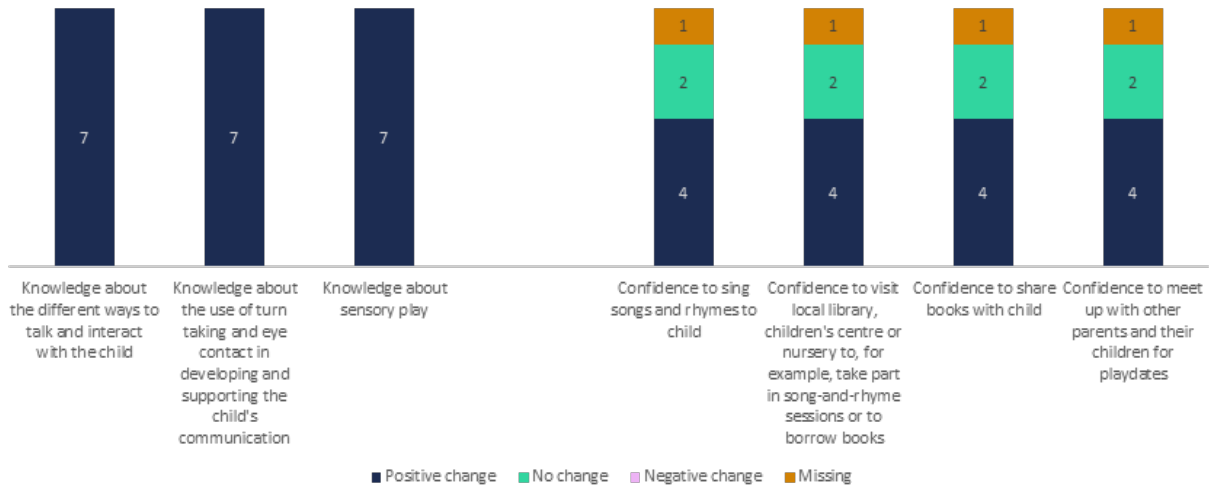
As an organisation we explored how Haymills CC successfully incorporated FWT within their existing stay and play context. We also examined the benefits and challenges arising from this approach.

At Haymills CC, they organise two stay and play sessions at their Little Sheep setting, which takes place in an open-plan, pack-away church hall. The staff attended training on delivering the FWT programme, facilitated by the Early Years Alliance (EYA) in March 2024. Previously, an EYA representative had delivered the FWT programme during the stay and play sessions. However, the staff noticed that the busy environment during these sessions didn't optimise FWT delivery, as it was confined to a specific area of the church hall and was often overshadowed by the hustle and bustle of the other activities taking place across the room. After discussions with an EYA lead practitioner and the Early Years Project Manager for FWT in Birmingham, they decided to trial a holistic approach by delivering FWT to the entire group of attendees at the setting.

At Little Sheep stay and play, parents are invited to sign up for the programme. This allows attendees to choose whether they want to participate in FWT or simply engage in regular play and stay activities. The session begins at 10:00 AM, with parents signing in during the next half-hour upon arrival. Children have access to various activities set up by practitioners, all of which relate to the weekly talking tip (see observation notes below for an example). Practitioners actively engage with parents, caregivers, and children, promoting both current and previous talking tips. Around 11:30am, snack time is indicated for the children. Parents are encouraged to participate in this activity, aligning with the face-to-face talking tip. At approximately 11:45am, families gather in a designated area at the back of the hall. Those who opted out of the FWT programme leave at this point. The remaining group listens to a shared story (often the gifted book) and participate in songs. Families receive parent talking tips and the free book, while practitioners also share other relevant messages related to young children and families in the local community.

Like a standard FWT programme, the success of the Little Sheep group is evaluated based on parental feedback. Parents assess themselves against specific criteria at the programme's start and again after the fifth session.

The results obtained from the Little Sheep group were comparable to those achieved in a typical FWT programme delivery. Parent surveys indicated:



Parent comments:

“I have been to two of the sessions so far. I love them. Has been great to see my grandson grow in confidence just over the two sessions. He used to just play with the car [a ride along vehicle] when he came to the playgroup, but since having these activities he joins in with them...he loved the musical instrument making one last week. I was so proud to tell his parents how confident he has become.”

“This is my daughters second FWT session and it is lovely that they get a book as she finds it hard to engage with them. I like that I get to learn new things to do with her and how to help her speak better. I also like that I get to meet other people too.”

“My child is 22 months and is not saying much. He is an only child, and I was worried about his speaking. I have benefited from these sessions because I like the tips and they have been helping me and his dad to help him at home with his communication.”

The Project Manager also spoke with a parent of a 16-month-old who was currently attending the FWT programme. She had previously attended a FWT session at the setting when her child was 11 months old following the traditional delivery model. She said...

“I found my child was restless and didn’t want to stay at the activity that had been provided ...she couldn’t focus on what was going on because she just wanted to go and play with other things [talking about the standard model attended a few months back]. But now I prefer this way of the programme as it works better for my child. She gets to play with any of the activities, but we get the FWT message through them, so I know how to help her communicate better. I like how I can speak to other parents too whilst our children play, and we are joining in with them.”

Practitioners who conducted the FWT programme sessions were surveyed to assess how they perceived the programme’s impact on the attending children and families and their own practise.

“It was lovely to see the parents who don’t usually interact with their child at these sessions actually getting on the child’s level and actively being with their child.”

“Parents loved the craft activity when they made the musical instruments. Usually, the craft table is very quiet and is not used by the children or families but on this occasion it had almost all the families visit the activity at least once. It was also nice to hear them talking about it again the following week and how much they and their child had benefited from the activity together.”

When asked what feedback they would give to others who were in a similar situation and were thinking of running a FWT programme in their own setting the lead practitioner said:

“It works really well and is inclusive. You are using the model of what you are already running but it is still accessible to everyone who attends the setting. Even if they don’t choose to stay at the end for the takeaway and the free book, they have been getting the FWT talking tip messages throughout the few hours they have attended the stay and play group. You must have all staff on board, and it helps that they are all trained in FWT delivery.”

A Project Manager overseeing the First Words Together programme in Birmingham settings observed a session at Little Sheep Stay and Play Group. Here are her findings:

“At Little Sheep stay and play, Jane, the lead practitioner, has a clear understanding of the session aims and the weekly talking tip. She collaborates with her staff to create a plan that outlines linked activities for children and families during the stay and play sessions.

During my visit, I observed two craft activities related to the FWT talking tip ‘wait, give your child time to respond.’ The first activity involved bookmaking, which aligns with the FWT programme activity and can be found in the practitioner toolkit. Additionally, children had the opportunity to create lion masks using paper plates and coloured strips. Practitioners actively engaged with children and encouraged parents to talk to their child during these activities, allowing pauses for the child’s responses.

Throughout the setting, there were further opportunities related to using books and waiting for children to respond. These included plastic animals, a Noah’s ark, a storybook about Noah’s ark, a settee with various books and animal hand puppets, a train track featuring Thomas the Tank Engine books, and a mini role-play kitchen area with cookery books and food-related reading materials.”

The evidence from observations by the National Literacy Trust, practitioner feedback, and parent views supports the integration of the talking tip into all activities during the session. Little Sheep stay and play ensured that families not enrolled in the FWT programme could still access this crucial information. The staff played a vital role in emphasising the importance of these tips to parents and caregivers, modelling them when they noticed a decline in engagement between parent and child, regardless of enrolment in the programme.