

First Words Together in Cornwall

Evaluation report

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Created by the National Literacy Trust in 2021, First Words Together is a unique family learning programme focussing on early communication, developed with Speech and Language Therapists and delivered by trained practitioners to families with children up to the age of two. We upskill practitioners to deliver First Words Together with a bank of carefully designed resources with full session plans and specific training on age-appropriate language development. Families attend five themed sessions built around a series of structured 'Top Tips for Talking'. At each session they learn simple, fun activities that they could easily replicate at home and receive a free book and parent takeaway. We employ a Speech and Language Therapist on the project team to assist training and give advice and support to both practitioners and carers. We were delighted to receive funding from The Goldsmith's Company Charity to bring this programme to Camborne and Redruth in Cornwall, a disadvantaged area of high need, with noted early years language delay following lockdown, and with a long waiting list to access speech and language support.

In our bid we had intended to work with six local Family Hubs, which are new centres being developed through the national Family Hub transformation initiative. However, Cornwall Family Hubs were not quite ready to launch as we started this project. So instead, building on our strong network of local contacts through the National Literacy Cornwall Hub in Camborne and Redruth, we recruited local community settings, school nurseries and practitioners working with families with babies and toddlers. We connected with the newly formed Best Start in Life team (now renamed Foundations for Life team) who work one to one with families in the home as part of the Health Visiting team. The Infant-Parent Lead of the Cornish Charity, WILD Young Parents (who support teenage parents of under twos) was very keen for WILD to join the project. Following the training, which focusses on working with parents to enhance communication and language development for under twos, the programme quickly

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established a positive reputation locally. Several groups operated a waiting list for parents to access the programme.



The project Speech and Language Therapist regularly visited the family sessions and on occasion co-delivered the programme. This ensured the programme remained in line with speech and language therapy recommendations and good practice, addressed specific concerns, and built confidence in the strategies to improve child communication outcomes. To continue to upskill the trained practitioners, we held regular online support meetings for the Foundations for Life team. The project team of Jo Knuckey (Cornwall strategic overview), Alison Tebbs (Project Manager) and Liz Royall (Speech and Language Therapist) joined well-attended network meetings every half term to give advice and support. These network meetings were popular and valued, and some practitioners commented specifically on the value of professional connections and support the programme provided:

“I have really enjoyed delivering the programme one to one with my families. The top tips are clear and engaging, it’s been great to run the activities and leave the sheet and the book each week. Also brilliant to be part of the network as a professional.” (Practitioner post-programme survey)

“My colleagues and I have really enjoyed delivering the course, meeting new members of our community and building stronger relationships with those we know already. Jo Knuckey has been very supportive, checking on how we are doing and even delivering resources when I forgot to let her know! Liz’s S< advice has been much appreciated and I know some families in particular appreciated the expert advice and encouragement.” (Practitioner post-programme survey)

“I have felt so incredibly well supported throughout the entire journey. Alison Tebbs and Jo Knuckey couldn't have done anymore to make feel confident and competent in delivering the programme. It has been a brilliant

programme to be involved with and I am excited to run it again in the Autumn.” (Practitioner post-programme survey)

“Really valuable to meet all the other amazing professionals involved and get a glimpse of what they do, practical tips and sharing best practice.”
(Practitioner post-programme survey)

Practitioner feedback also noted how the multiagency collaboration of First Words Together had helped break down barriers for vulnerable parents to access support and link in with other agencies:

“We worked alongside Liz, Speech and Language Therapist, and this was amazing for our families, and as she was wearing an NHS ID, broke down some of the myths and stories some of the families carried around health professionals being judgmental, unapproachable, and inaccessible.”
(Practitioner post-programme survey)

Over the course of the year, First Words Together reached a total of 90 families. Sessions have taken place one to one with the Foundations for Life team, in small groups through Pre-school, Stay and Play, and Nursery settings, and in larger groups for WILD Young Parents. WILD delivered the programme very effectively over a whole morning or afternoon to support their vulnerable young parents. WILD also provided a crèche to enable focus on the session theme, core messages and top tip and further broke down these messages through modelling words and positive activities. The babies and toddlers returned to the group for parents to ‘practise’ and try out what they had learned, with new knowledge skilfully scaffolded and validated by the staff team.

Feedback from families has been overwhelmingly positive too. Parents are empowered by new understanding of the value of a language-rich home learning environment and equipped with a range of practical activities and ideas to support their child’s developing communication skills:

“Amazing safe place to explore different techniques to communicate with your child and different ideas you may not thought of or tried” (Parent post-programme feedback)

“This course has been very helpful and informative and we love the books and resources that have been provided for us. Fantastic opportunity for our community - thank you” (Parent post-programme feedback)

“It's been a fantastic course and really helpful with tips for communicating better with my child. The books have been great as well.” (Parent post-programme feedback)



Alongside the First Words Together sessions, other families in Camborne and Redruth have benefitted from the local community behaviour change campaign. Messages from First Words Together were publicised locally, shared widely and fully understood. We attended live events such as the Ready Steady Eat weaning programme delivered by Healthy Cornwall twice a month to reach of around 180 families a year. Family groups regularly invite us to provide workshops on early communication and book sharing and we also attend baby weighing clinics to give advice and support. Top tips for talking posters and books are gifted to new Family Hubs and displayed and discussed at Stay and Play sessions. Online these key messages are at the heart of posts on the Cornwall Hub Facebook page¹, which has had 530 engagements over the project period. Participating practitioners also shared our parent-facing Words for Life website² with project families for support and ideas to develop the home learning environment.



¹ <https://www.facebook.com/ChatPlayReadCornwall>

² <https://wordsforlife.org.uk/>

Evaluation of the programme

In order to explore the impact of participating in First Words Together on families and practitioners, we asked parents and practitioners to complete various evaluation tools as part of the programme. These include:

Parent pre- and post-programme forms

All parents were asked to complete a form assessing their knowledge and confidence to support their child's speech, language and communication development at the beginning and at the end of the programme. The forms used were adapted from ones originally developed by Centre for Research in Early Childhood³ as part of an earlier delivery of First Words Together in Birmingham. Learnings from a previous Goldsmiths-funded project where there were low numbers of parent surveys returned has led us to ensure the project team is on-hand to help parents complete surveys. This has meant that overall, 70 parents completed the form both before and after the programme delivery.

Practitioner post-programme survey

Practitioners were asked to complete a survey after the programme delivery that explored changes in their own practice in supporting families as well as their perception of changes for the families they work with. These also gave practitioners space to provide feedback on the programme. Overall, 7 practitioners completed the post-programme survey.

Training feedback and progress reports

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 39 practitioners and progress reports were returned by 28 practitioners over the course of the programme.

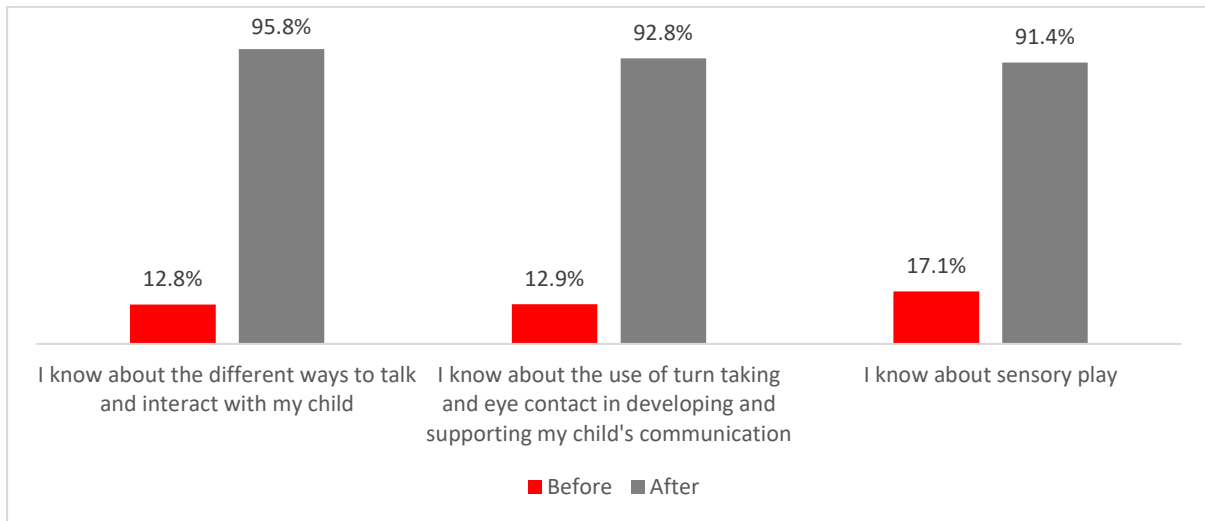
Findings

Changes in parents' knowledge and confidence

Parental knowledge of how to support their child's speech, language and communication increased significantly over the course of the programme. While only 1 in 8 parents reported knowing about the different ways to talk and interact with their child (12.8%) and about taking turns and eye contact as ways to support their child's communication (12.9%) before the programme, nearly all did so after taking part (95.8% and 92.8% respectively, see Figure 1). Similarly, while only 1 in 6 (17.1%) knew about sensory play before the programme, nearly all (91.4%) did so at the end.

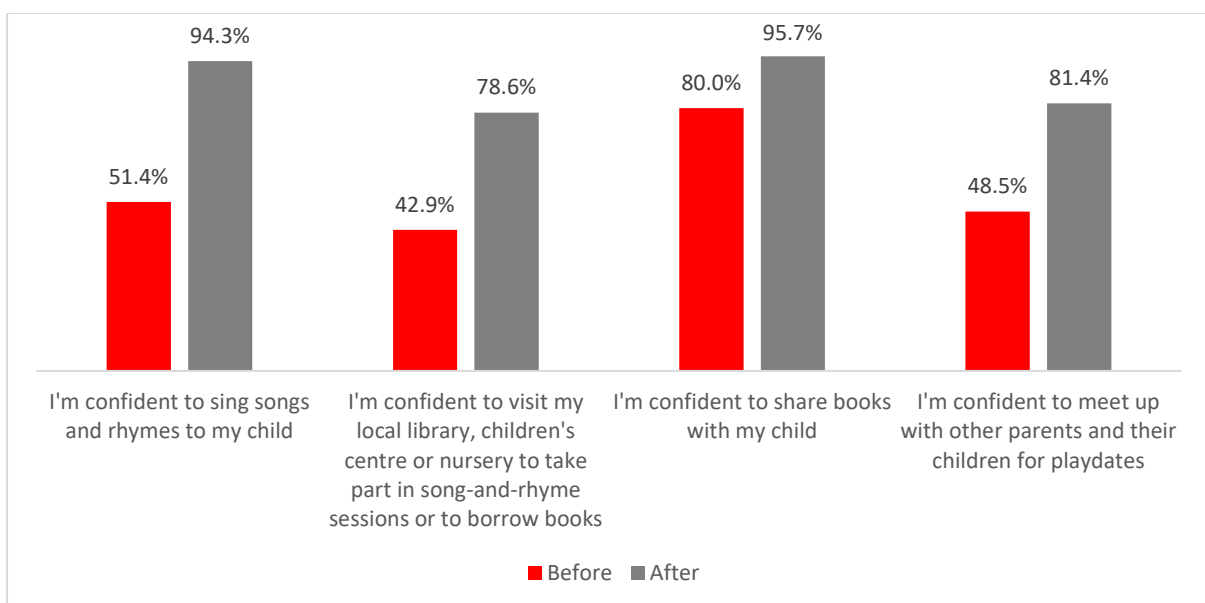
³ <https://www.crec.co.uk/>

Figure 1: Percentage of parents knowing about how to support their child’s early language development a lot or a great deal before and after First Words Together



Parents’ confidence to support their child similarly saw a significant positive increase, albeit less drastic than increase in their knowledge (see Figure 2). This was largely due to more parents already reporting feeling confident before starting the programme. Yet, the percentage of parents who feel confident to sing songs and rhymes with their child has nearly doubled over the course of the programme (increasing from 51.4% to 94.3%). Similarly, the number of parents who feel confident to visit the library, children’s centre or nursery to participate in activity or borrow books has increased by 83% (from 42.9% to 78.6%) and the number of those who feel confident to meet other families and organise playdates by 67% (from 48.5% to 81.4%).

Figure 2: Percentage of parents who are quite confident or extremely confident to support their child’s early language development before and after First Words Together



Some of the parents also provided specific comments on their increased confidence as part of the feedback:

“A great course which has massively increased my confidence about communication. The books were great quality + all the sessions were relevant + beneficial for developing language + communication. It helped build good friendships between children + the carers too.”

“It’s been really helpful for me as a Mum. It has given me ideas in understanding how my son learns to speak.”

“I lacked confidence + felt anxious around other parents as my child can be very overwhelming, this has eased with each session.

“[My child] has absolutely loved coming here to play. I'm not very confident to socialise and to take [my child] in case he misbehaves etc and I get embarrassed easily but I have felt very relaxed here with this group.”

These positive changes for parents were further supported by data collected from practitioners. For example, all seven practitioners indicated in the post-survey that they had noticed that parents seem to know more about the activities that support their children’s early literacy development and that they seem more confident to engage in behaviours that support their child's early literacy development.

Throughout the post-survey and progress reports submitted as part of the programme, many practitioners also commented on parents’ increased knowledge and confidence, and provided examples of how parents have continued to engage in behaviours that support their child’s learning:

“Some parents have grown in confidence in their interactions with others and have joined us in some of our other groups too.” (Post-survey)

“I was so pleased to watch the confidence grow and become more and more comfortable in a group situation with one family who generally come with a big group of friends. They settled into the way of the programme beautifully and the way that I engaged them interacting and following the activities with the child was a pleasure to observe from afar. I still hear them talking about their First Words Together experiences and how they enjoyed and benefitted from the workshops.” (Post-survey)

“I think it most importantly highlighted to each family that children develop at their own pace, and each and every one is different. But with support, enthusiasm and input little developments take place and lead to bigger ones. Enhancing the confidence in the parents was key to the entire programme.” (Post-survey)

“One family who attended each week have become regulars at our ‘Stay and play’ type session after.” (Progress report)

“One mum said yesterday that she didn’t realise the importance of looking at their child on the same level and is thinking about this and doing this so much more. It’s very encouraging to hear the positive impact that the sessions are having on our little ones and their families. Everyone absolutely loves the books too, thank you.” (Progress report)

“The family I have started with is a young parents family, both mum and dad take part, it’s been great to relax and have fun through the activities. Also lovely to leave the books with them as they didn’t have any. They have already purchased another book in a charity shop after seeing how much their little boy enjoys looking at the pictures” (Progress report)

While our evaluation did not directly measure changes in children’s early language development, all seven practitioners felt that the programme was beneficial for children’s speech, language and communication. They also provided examples of how they had noticed positive changes for the participating children alongside their parents:

“Penny and Mike are young parents to James [all names changed], who is 2. They do everything they can for James and provide him with many stimulating resources and opportunities. However, James until the First Words Together programme was to be found with a dummy in his mouth most of the time. They also believed that as he couldn’t read, he was too young for books. Since the programme and using the knowledge gained, Penny has reported she seeks out new books from charity shops and understands the benefit to James of having ready access to books, and her and Mike also managed to wean him off the dummy and have reported that his speech has come on in leaps and bounds. The team at WILD have also seen noticeable progress in James’ language and communication skills.” (Post-survey)

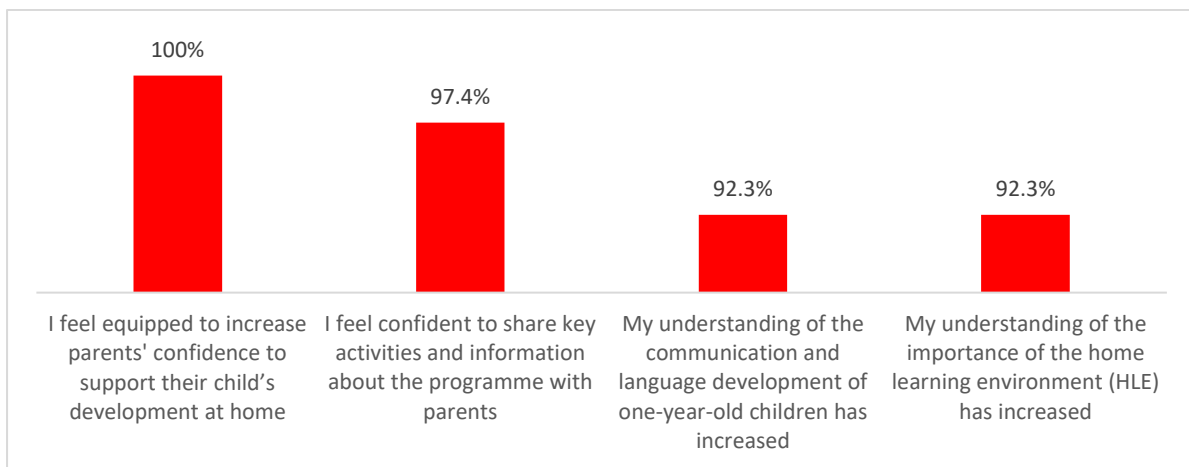
“Back in setting, we have noticed a huge positive impact on one little boy in particular. He is more confident and using far more language both in setting and at home.” (Progress report)

“Mum felt that her child showed no interest in books, however observed the child turning the pages, feeling the textures and saying words from the busy day book.” (Progress report)

Changes in practitioners' practice

The positive changes for parents are underpinned by positive changes for practitioners. Following the training, all practitioners (n= 39) felt equipped to increase parents' confidence to support their child's development at home and nearly all (97.4%) felt confident to share key activities and information about the programme with parents (see Figure 3). 9 in 10 (92.3%) reported that following the training their understanding of the communication and language development of one-year-old children and the importance of the home learning environment (HLE) had increased.

Figure 3: Percentage of practitioners who felt the training improved their confidence and understanding of the key areas of the programme



After completing the programme, all seven practitioners also reported that they felt they had a better understanding of how they can help their parents to support their child's early literacy development, better understanding of one-year-old's communication and language development and better understanding of the importance of positive home learning environment. They also told us they felt confident to support parents in their confidence to support their child's early literacy development and had already made changes in their practice in helping parents to support their child's early literacy development.

One practitioner commented on their own increased confidence as part of the programme:

"It was a pleasure to be involved and not only have families who participated in First Words Together grown in their confidence, so have I and I have enjoyed every minute of it. Thank you for giving our service the chance to be involved." (Practitioner post-programme survey)

Conclusion

This report shows that First Words Together programme has been successful in equipping families and practitioners to better support children's early speech, language and communication development. The changes in parents' knowledge and confidence to support their child are particularly impressive and the feedback on the programme overall indicates that it has been positively perceived by all.

We believe we have identified a gap in provision with this programme and our work has been recognised and valued by both the Health Visitor Team and the Local Authority. A positive local reputation promoted great interest in First Words Together and we were invited to deliver workshops about the project at the Cornwall 0-3 Conference in Wadebridge in March 2023. This led to greater engagement with the Local Authority who have recently commissioned our Early Words Together programme for three to four-year-olds to support their Family Hub development across the County. We were also delighted to be interviewed by the Goldsmith's Company Charity for an article on the stories section of the Goldsmith's Company website and we would like to thank the Education Committee for their support and valuable feedback here.

This successful project has also been a pleasure to deliver, with such positive feedback from all involved, a strong project team and practitioners keen to continue next year and build on this impact. We are delighted that with continuing funding we will now be able to widen the geographical area for next year with additional settings, more WILD practitioners and the whole Foundations for Life team joining the project and we plan to film some of the unique delivery and great practice taking place in Cornwall. We would like to thank the Education Committee from The Goldsmith's Company Charity. Your support enables this work to take place and will continue to make a positive difference to early years' communication and language development and improve children's life-chances across Cornwall.