

## The Highland Council

### Education, Children and Adult Services Committee - 21 May 2014

Agenda Item	20.
Report No	ECA/17/14

#### Early Literacy and Before Words Initiative

#### Report by Director of Care and Learning

##### Summary

There are large inequalities in emergent literacy skills at school entry, that have detrimental effects on the wider academic and social success of children and young people as they move through the formal education system. Studies show that children with poor literacy skills by the end of P4 will have significant difficulty “catching up” and that they often do not attain even average literacy skills by the end of Primary school.

There are a range of activities being undertaken across the Care and Learning Service in Highland, aimed at working with parents to address these early inequalities and to provide the appropriate supports and interventions to enhance language and emergent literacy skills in the early years, with links into the formal support structures once a child enters school, to ensure continuing support for this critical area of child development.

This paper outlines some of the current research that is guiding the evidence based practice within early years in Highland, with a particular focus on the Before Words programme that has significantly enhanced the support provided in the very early stages of a child’s development.

#### 1 Background

- 1.1 The key variables that make the difference to early skills development in literacy is the amount of exposure children have to language and literacy and the learning opportunities children experience through interaction with the adults around them. This knowledge provides the building blocks to the Before Words programme currently being piloted in Highland.
- 1.2 Children from areas of significant economic deprivation are far less likely to have had the necessary support and opportunities for language and literacy development. Indeed a common estimate is that children from poorer families will have heard about 30 million fewer words by school entry. The effects of this can be seen as early as 24 months.
- 1.3 However, this is not a feature of the level of deprivation per se, but due to limited language interaction, which suggests that sufficiently comprehensive and early intervention can have an impact on seemingly intractable sources of inequality. Thus, children from economically deprived families whose parents have provided high levels of social interaction, regular shared reading and who have modelled using literacy, tend to do better than more privileged children who have had less input.

## 2 The key skills in emergent literacy

- 2.1 A large body of research would suggest that three key elements are important in the development of early literacy skills. These are:
1. Oral language skills, including vocabulary and speaking and listening skills.
  2. Phonological awareness. This does not mean knowledge of the entire alphabetic code, but rather the beginnings of awareness that words are made up of sounds and that letters can stand for sounds.
  3. Concepts of print. This ranges from how to hold a book to understanding that literacy is useful and enjoyable.
- 2.2 Also important, are skills for self-regulation of emotions and of attention and many activities that promote literacy (such as shared enjoyment of a story), also promote self-regulation.
- 2.3 Although children need some phonological awareness at school entry, this is best done through play and story-telling opportunities and not direct teaching. Interventions that work are those directed towards the three emergent skills and involve a mix of environmental opportunity and adult-child interactions. They are also “whole society” approaches where parents, early learning and care provisions and facilities such as libraries all have a part to play.

## 3 Home learning environments and interactions

- 3.1 From previous presentations on early brain development and emotional literacy, members will be aware that: ‘Research consistently demonstrates that children whose early emotional experiences are met with positive responses are likely to have robust health, happier relationships and better life outcomes’ (Dr Suzanne Zeedyk).
- 3.2 Even before they are born babies are developing the skills they need to interact, communicate and learn. Developing these skills is one of the most complex accomplishments children can achieve, but they can only do this within a supportive, responsive, social environment. The responses we make to a baby’s actions have a major impact on their brain development.
- 3.3 A helpful framework for describing what parents/carers can do, and how they can be supported to do it, is the ORIM, produced by Sheffield University. It works as follows:
- *Opportunity*. This includes helping parents find ways to engage children in conversation, reading, “scribbling”, and using everyday literacy such as signs in the street, shopping lists, etc.
  - *Recognition*. Building on what the family already does or can do, and also helping parents to notice and respond positively to children’s emerging literacy.
  - *Interaction*. Using objects and even TV programmes to have chats with children. Also involving them in real literacy tasks, such as turning pages, or “signing” birthday cards for family members.
  - *Modelling*. Helping parents to be positive models for children in using reading and writing, and showing these are useful and enjoyable.
- 3.4 All studies find parental input to be key, with some suggesting that daily parent-child interactions can boost later emergent literacy skills by over 20

percentile points. Interactions can and should begin very early. For example, using rich language with preverbal children impacts on later vocabulary and social skills. Early shared enjoyment of pictures and texts builds concepts of print, as does simply enjoying turning pages.

## 4 Early Learning and Child Care Provision

4.1 Parental input is necessary but not sufficient. It needs to be complemented by high quality early learning and childcare provision. Studies show that **only** high quality provision has a long term impact and therefore close partnerships and a shared understanding of service improvement and self-evaluation between the Highland Quality Improvement Team, child care and early education providers, the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland, are important in ensuring the quality of provision within Highland.

4.2 Quality in early care and learning settings, is determined by two related elements, both of which are required:

- Environmental factors
  - A wide range of books available, including stories and information books
  - Easily accessed materials for drawing, scribbling etc
  - Fine motor activities to develop pre-writing skills
  - Print-rich rooms, with child-friendly symbols and stimuli for literacy-based pretend play (shopping, cafes, etc)
- Interactional factors. Some of these may be adult-led activities, but it also includes making the most of opportunities – for example a pretend-play setting – to involve literacy.
  - A “culture of conversation” where adults talk **with** children and support children to talk **to** each other. This is most effective if adults make sure to; use open-ended questions; model complex vocabulary within simple sentences; scaffold complex thinking – “why” questions, etc.
  - Dialogic reading. This involves engaging children in talk about what is being read, and has been shown to be highly effective even for large groups, e.g. using predictive questions, linking what is read to children’s lives, sharing the emotional experience of the content, sharing the tasks of decoding the text, developing phonological awareness through rhyming games etc.

## 5 Research into Practice

5.1 To ensure skilled staff in learning and care settings, there requires to be access to focused CPD and supportive structures. There is a coherent early years CPD programme in Highland that is reviewed annually and reflects the needs of early years’ practitioners in supporting them to meet the needs of the children and families across Highland. Training includes input around the improvement methodology associated with the early years collaborative, the importance of early brain development, promoting positive relationships, emotional literacy, effective play and development, promoting emergent literacy, the use of developmental overviews etc.

5.2 There is also a range of activity and interventions that are available in Highland to support the development of early language development and pre-literacy skills to help parents/carers promote emergent literacy. These include

interventions such as:

- Before Words to build early language and interactions
- Book Bug to provide materials for parents to use at home
- Supporting bedtime reading
- The roll out of the *Improving Literacy with Parental Involvement* programme training
  - Many centres also:
    - Issue Story Sacks and support parents to use them
    - Invite parents in for story time to model reading
    - Hold workshops to explain how to support emergent writing
    - Have regular library visits and link parents with library-based activities such as Rhyme Time

5.3 In Highland there is a staged approach to intervention as an approach to ensuring the right help is provided to the right child and family at the right time, to address issues where skills are not developing as hoped. This has been refreshed this year and now includes the use of the Nursery Developmental Overviews (see **Appendix 1**), to assess the development of age appropriate milestones, the piloting of the Highland Early Assessment of Literacy Skills and the advice to early years practitioners about appropriate interventions prior to asking for assessment and intervention from specialist services.

5.4 Using a staged approach can ensure skills development and capacity building in early years' practitioners, enhancing the quality of universal early years provision, and also the effective use of early intervention and targeted services where appropriate and required.

## **6 Before Words**

6.1 The Before Words approach supports the early development of interactions between parents and their baby in order to build a positive relationship and promote learning. It is a powerful universal, preventative, early intervention.

The resources were developed in Newcastle upon Tyne with Surestart funding and several areas in Scotland now use some of the resources.

The complete programme has been used in Moray over the past few years, and evaluation there has shown that this approach is successful.

It is now being piloted in Highland as an approach that links many of the aspects of child development that are known to be important, including an understanding of early brain development, the promotion of positive relationships between parents and their babies, the development of self-regulation and emotional literacy, and early language development as a building block to emergent literacy skills.

6.2 The resources used in the programme are in the form of cartoons with simple captions which engage the interest of parents and enhance their understanding. They allow them to imagine themselves in the everyday situations illustrated and help them to think about what their baby may be thinking and feeling. This in turn supports the development of close bonds and positive relationships and encourages the use of greater levels of language and social interaction through play and sharing time together.

- 6.3 **Pre Birth:** Parents are given an illustrated booklet by midwifery staff at the 12 week scan, and the key messages are discussed. These messages are:
- **Talk to your baby** - Your baby can hear, and will learn to recognise your voice. This will make your baby feel secure now, and when it is born.
  - **Interesting voice** - Your baby will listen to, and remember, an interesting, tuneful voice better.
  - **Quiet time** – Each day have a quiet time (when you turn off noisy things like the TV, radio and washing machine), so your baby can hear you talk.
  - **Sing and play music** - Your baby will remember favourite songs and tunes. Music and rhythm will help your baby get ready to listen to words and to learn them.
- 6.4 **Once the baby is born:** An early years' practitioner meets with parents to check the baby's development, give the hand-out of cartoons and discuss the key messages. These messages are:
- **Face to face** - Hold and talk to your baby face to face. This makes your baby feel safe. When you look at each other, your baby can 'talk' back to you.
  - **Interesting voice** - Your baby will listen to, and remember, an interesting, tuneful voice better.
  - **Quiet time** - Every day, have a quiet time when you turn off noisy things like the TV, kettle, and phone. Your baby can then listen to your voice as you play together.
  - **Pause and wait** - Your baby needs time to 'talk' back to you. Your baby can then copy your expressions and movements, and make sounds for you to copy.
- 6.5 If there are concerns about the baby's development, or if it is felt that parents need extra help in order to build a positive relationship with their baby, the early years practitioner will make extra visits to provide teaching and support, and may request specialist assessment from others as appropriate. In this way potential problems can be identified early on, and children and parents can get the help they need at this crucial time.
- 6.6 The preventative spend investment and development of family teams provides the staff resources to deliver the Before Words approach. Midwifery staff and early years' practitioners will be trained and supported to provide and model the relevant pre and post birth materials. These two contacts will be delivered universally. It is envisaged that other contacts and Before Words materials will be used to provide additional support where families would benefit.
- 6.7 Currently:
- Midwifery services are aiming for all prospective parents to be given information at the 12 week scan – each area is trialling the best way to do this.
  - Posters showing the key messages are displayed in various places (e.g. ante natal clinics, nurseries, GP surgeries, health clinics).
  - The key messages are printed on a bag given to all parents at ante natal clinics to keep information in.
  - Early years' staff in some areas are trialling different ways of meeting with parents once the baby is born to give the information. This will then be evaluated and the most effective ways rolled out to all areas.

6.8 Training is being offered to all other staff who work with babies and parents to be, so they can discuss and model this approach.

## 7 Next steps

- The learning from the Before Words pilot in Highland will allow practitioners to further refine the method of delivery to better meet the needs of parents and children.
- A revision of the 27-30 Months Health Visitor check will include a measure of language development that can be used to identify those children considered to be 'at risk', if they haven't already been identified by Health Visitors, with more targeted support provided to those families at this stage.
- At this stage too, parents can be provided with easy support materials, and/or links to sources of support.
- The improvement methodology supporting the framework around the Early Years Collaborative will allow practitioners across Highland to consider more carefully how childcare settings provide language and literacy rich environments and interactions
- The Early Years activity is being linked more closely with Primary school literacy using a model that fits children's developmental needs and is being supported through the use of the Nursery Developmental Overview.
- Language and literacy interventions are being highlighted as universal interventions, with additional targeted support provided to those families who need this most.
- Discussion to establish literacy guidelines to cover birth through to P4, integrated with the refresh of the school based Highland Literacy Programme.

## 8 Implications

8.1 **Resources:** There are no new resource implications for the work required to be undertaken in this area. The work on Before Words is being led by the Speech and Language Therapy Service and the work on early literacy is being guided by the Educational Psychologist (early years). Early years practitioners are already engaged with parents and children and this work provides further advice and recommendations that support their interventions.

8.2 **Legal and Equalities:** The focus of this area of work is to reduce inequalities and to support the development of skills in all children, but most notably, in that group who have done least well to date. In working to secure better outcomes for children and young people, reducing inequality and supporting children's rights, this area of work supports the Council in meeting its legal requirements within equalities legislation and in relation to improving wellbeing and outcomes for children and young people as required within the Children and Young People's Bill.

8.3 There are no implications for Climate Change/Carbon Clever or Gaelic and there are no identified risks.

## **9. Recommendation**

9.1 Members are asked to note and comment on the:

- focused work within universal early years services, to enhance language and pre-literacy skills in young children.
- enhancement of this work by the introduction of the Before Words programme.
- steps being taken to identify at an early stage, those families where additional support may be required to develop positive relationships between parents and their children and/or to develop key language and emergent literacy skills in children.
- importance of the focus on language and relationship development as key determinants of wellbeing and later success in education achievement and attainment.

Designation: Director of Care and Learning

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Date: 28 April 2014

Background Papers: Nursery Developmental Overview

## Appendix 1

MOVEMENT	COORDINATION	ROUTINES	SOCIAL - EMOTIONAL	PLAY - IMAGINATION	UNDERSTANDING	EXPRESSION
Able to walk on tiptoes or heels, when asked, or along a line, 1 foot in front of the other	Handles crayons and brushes with reasonable control	Changes own shoes <i>placing on correct feet</i> ; Fastens and unfastens Velcro	Developing stable friendships	Shows imagination during small world play, sequencing events and stories	Follows 3 instructions to carry out an activity without visual cues	Uses well-formed sentences; may have some grammatical immaturities; 'falled'
Goes up and down steps with alternating feet, one foot on each step	Can draw using straight and curved lines	Dresses and undresses by themselves except for difficult fastenings	Generally cooperates with playmates and beginning to be able to negotiate	Takes turns and shares toys with other children	Listens and appropriately joins in talk about current activity with adults and other children	Easily understood although may still be some immaturities in speech sounds: eg: r, th, ch
Explores playground equipment. Uses slides and swings, may need a 'starter push'	Cuts along straight lines and beginning to cut around a shape	Generally gets clothes the right way out and round for dressing	Attempts to comfort playmates who are upset or hurt	Plays board game in small group : adult supported	Understands concepts like biggest, more, just one	Can describe an event in reasonable order
Jumps high with feet together, lands with more control from step	Can copy or continue a pattern using coloured beads, cubes, shapes	Helps to set table, serve and participate in social snack	Able to talk about the feelings of characters in stories: cross, scared, happy	Draws or paints recognisable pictures without prompting	Shows understanding of story by simple question or commenting	Uses language to gain information and give own ideas
Kicks a large ball with some accuracy	Can fit together pieces to construct models, layouts; Duplo, Popids, train track...	Helps adults clearing up and tidying nursery	Responds to unfamiliar adult with speech	In group play takes on different roles: doctor, shopkeeper, parent...	Understands position and adjectives: eg: behind, long, between	Starts, takes turns and stops, in longer conversations
Throw a small ball with some accuracy, catches large ball with 2 hands	Draws person showing some details	Accepts unpredicted changes to daily routines	Aware of more complex humour, laughs at jokes that are told	Adapts objects as props in imaginative play	Can follow spoken instructions without having to stop and look at the speaker	Uses more pronouns: 'I', 'me', 'my', 'mine', 'you', 'yours', 'he', 'she'
Able to balance on one foot, minimal body sway	Pours liquids with little spilling	Goes to the toilet and washes hands independently	Follows rules and likes pleasing others	Engages in make believe fantasy role play using dressing up, actions and different voices	Understands and follows instructions: first... next... last	Can sequence 3 to 4 pictures/photos logically and talk through the story
Hops on one foot or hops forward one step without other foot touching the ground	Completes jigsaws with 12 plus pieces	Can wipe/ blow own nose	Developing a sense of fairness	Uses and adapt the ideas of other children and adults in creative & imaginative play	Understands Why/How, Who, What happened questions	Asks questions starting with: Can...? Does...? Why...
Runs and changes direction smoothly, reciprocal/ swinging arm movements	Hand dominance developing	Can focus on a game, activity until completed and then move onto next one	Becoming aware of other children's emotions	Uses imagination to create and play with models eg: Duplo	Beginning to understand more abstract words: if... maybe... might...	Beginning to use plurals but may use 'mouses' etc
Pedals a tricycle including steering	Uses a fork and spoon and beginning to use knife to spread	Asks for help when needed	Developing self confidence	Is able to choose and plan play activities?	Aware of time in relation to daily routine: tonight, tomorrow	Can tell own name and age



## Overview of Pre-school (4 year old) Skills



Secure



Emerging



Area of Concern

The developmental skills described are not designed to be used as part of a formal assessment and generally they should all be observable within the weekly routine of the setting. Write any additional comments or observations, if needed, on a separate sheet and attach to the overview.

The overviews could be completed on an on-going basis throughout the course of the year. The four year old Overview must be completed by the end of May. Use of the three year old overview is optional but it would be particularly useful to complete should there be pre-existing concerns about a child's development.

Name of Child		Date of Birth:
Name of Centre:		

When a concern or challenge is identified through the use of the overviews, information should be discussed with the support structure within the setting (Childhood Practice Manager/Head Teacher/Support for Learning Teacher/Principal Teacher Pre-school Education) and shared with parents/carers and the Link Health Visitor.

Shared with:		Date:
Shared with: (parent/carer)		Date:
Shared with: (HV)		Date:
Shared by:		Date:

### Credits:

Referral Guidelines for Education Nurseries and Schools: Speech and Language Therapy Service, *NHS Highland, 2008*

Gross Motor Development: Women & Children's Physiotherapy Services, *NHS Highland, 2007*

I still can't tie my shoelaces.....: *NHS Quality Improvement Scotland, 2008*

Play Steps: *Highland Council Psychological Services, 2011*

Elizabeth Morris, Director at Child Learning and Development Advisory Centre, (*formally School of Emotional Literacy*)

Ann Locke and Maggie Beech: *1991*