

**Early**

**Talk  
Boost**

**THE EARLY TALKBOOST  
SCALING UP PROJECT**

INDEPENDENT EVALUATION  
SUMMARY REPORT



# Acknowledgments

This evaluation would not have been possible without the support and commitment of many people. The evaluation team at Mary Immaculate college would especially like to thank:

- **Bernie Laverty**, National ABC Manager, Prevention, Partnership and Family Support, Tusla
- **Suzanne Reilly**, Senior Speech and Language Therapist, Oral Language Coordinator: Little Voices, ABC Start Right, Limerick
- **Amy Landers**, National Support Officer, Prevention, Partnership and Family Support, Tusla

Their dedication to ensuring positive experiences and outcomes for young children, and their invaluable support, cooperation and collegiality throughout the evaluation process are much appreciated.

We extend our thanks to the members of the working group, for their ongoing guidance and support throughout the evaluation:

- **Maya Dafinova**, ABC Start Right
- **Riona Garvey**, HSE
- **Anita Boyle**, SPECS ABC
- **Caitriona O Mahony**, Family Matters ABC
- **Catherine Healy**, Better Start

We would also like to thank:

- **Participating early childhood educators** for their commitment to delivering the programme, gathering pre-and-post intervention data, working tirelessly to improve outcomes for children, and participating in the evaluation
- **Parents/guardians** of participating children. Thank you for sharing your insights
- **Participating Speech and Language Therapists** in Dublin North and Dublin South, Galway, Laois Offaly, Limerick, Mayo, North Tipperary, Westmeath and Wicklow, for their unwavering

support for children and educators, and for championing language and communication in natural environments for young children in the home and early childhood setting


- **Speech and Language UK** for their cooperation and support
- **Gabriela Portillo**, PhD student at MIC Psychology department, for her assistance with SPSS and quantitative data.

A special word of thanks to the **young child participants**. We are truly delighted to see how the programme helped your language and communication skills. Thank you for sharing your stories about *'Tizzy Time'* and your drawings with us. Thank you for expressing your enthusiasm for Early Talk Boost through dancing, cheers and laughter when we met you.

We are grateful for the time given by everyone to delivering the Early Talk Boost programme, and the time they gave to contribute to the evaluation through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, drawing and chatting. The information gathered provides a strong evidence base to justify a national roll out of Early Talk Boost, through the proposed Equal Participation Model and the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme.

This project is supported through What Works. What Works is an initiative led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, with funding from Dormant Accounts, to support a move towards evidence informed prevention and early intervention services for children, young people and their families.



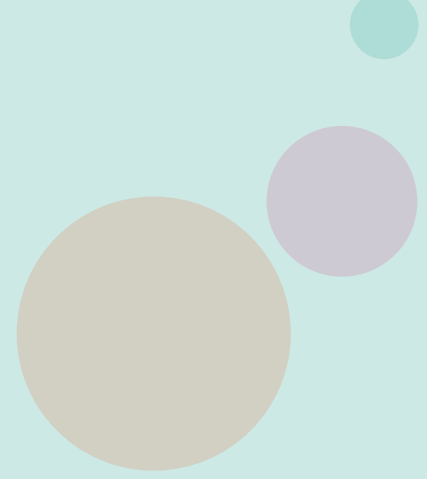


The evaluation of the Early Talk Boost Programme was commissioned by Prevention Partnership and Family Support, Tusla.

This report should be cited as follows:

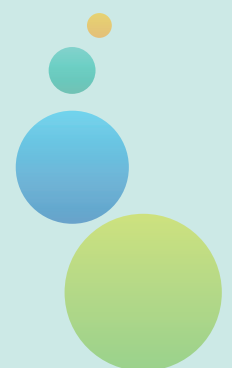
Moloney, M., Egan, S., Pope, P., Breatnach., D. Burke-Hayes, M and Hoyne, C. The Early Talk Boost Scaling Up Project Independent Evaluation: Summary Report. Available at: [www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

# Contents



## Contents

Introduction	1
Overview of Context and Rationale	1
The Evaluation	2
Children's Rights	5
Summary of Key Findings	6
Child Outcomes	6
Influence of Child Age	8
Influence of Child Gender	9
Influence of English as an Additional Language (EAL)	12
Summary: Children's Perspectives	13
Summary: Parent and Educator Perspectives	14
Summary: ETB and the Home Environment	16
Summary: Impact of ETB on Participating Educators	16
Summary: Educator Perspectives on the Most Beneficial Aspects of the Programme	16
Summary: SLT Perspectives	18
Summary of Key SLT Findings	18
Conclusion and Recommendations	19
References	22





# Introduction

**This summary report presents key findings and recommendations from the independent evaluation of Early Talk Boost (ETB), a nine-week prevention and early intervention programme for children aged between three and four years old that experience language delay.**

Developed by Speech and Language UK (a UK-based registered Charity), ETB supports children's skills in attention and listening, developing vocabulary, building sentences and having conversations. The programme is rolled out in the child's early childhood setting (e.g., pre-school or creche<sup>1</sup>). To date, ETB has been implemented in England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Australia.

ETB has been running for a number of years in the ABC sites in Limerick and Ballyfermot and more recently the wider areas covered by the ABC programme. In 2023, the Tusla National Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme scaled up evidence-based community-based language support across several new areas, engaging clusters of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings and Primary Care Speech and Language therapists (SLTs) in the delivery of the Early Talkboost (ETB) programme.

To investigate the impact of ETB, Prevention Partnership and Family Support, Tusla commissioned a research team from Mary Immaculate College to undertake an independent outcomes-based evaluation of the ETB Scaling Up Project in ECCE clusters, nationally. This summary report provides insight into the evaluation process in terms of the methodological approach, research participants and data collection strategies. It provides a synopsis of the core findings from the evaluation, of key recommendations, focused upon policy practice and future evaluations of ETB.

## Overview of Context and Rationale

Language development supports and sets the pace for both formal and informal learning (Reilly and McKean, 2023). Early language

skills, such as listening, understanding words, speaking, and building vocabulary, are vital foundations that enable children to learn to read (Feldman, 2019).

Accordingly, when young children face challenges in language acquisition, they are more likely to struggle with learning to read when they start school, with the poorest children being most at risk of falling behind from an early age (Ibid.).

Although "most children acquire the fundamentals of language effortlessly in the toddler - preschool years, without formal instruction or explicit feedback," (Feldman, 2019, p.2), learning language can be challenging for others (McKean and Reilly, 2023; Reilly and McKean, 2023). In the main, children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have more limited language skills (Locke, Ginsborg and Peers, 2002), a difference which may emerge as early as 18 months (Fernald, Marchman, and Weisleder, 2013), and persist across the lifespan (Reilly and McKean, 2023).

Other factors, such as gender and bilingualism may also affect language development in early childhood. It is thought for example, that girls out-perform boys in language development from an early age (e.g., Adani and Capanec, 2019; Bando, Lopez-Boo, Fernald et al., 2024), with more boys than girls having poor early language and attention skills at age five (Moss and Washbrook, 2016). Overall, boys have weaker or slower capacities for language acquisition (Adani and Capanec, 2019). Moreover, gender affects language development regardless of social class (Moss and Washbrook, 2016; Bando et al., 2024).

1. The term early childhood setting is used within this report to denote a pre-school and/or creche.

In relation to bilingualism, studies suggest that minority ethnic children from low socio-economic backgrounds and with low exposure to the English language may be particularly vulnerable to early language delay (Hoff, 2013; Cheung, Willan, Dickerson et al., 2023). In general, however, while bilingual children are *not* more likely than monolingual children to have difficulties with language, show delays in learning, or be diagnosed with a language disorder (Lugo-Neris, Bedore, and Peña, 2015; Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013; Paradis, Genesee and Crago, 2010), some *will* experience a language delay or disorder (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2013).

Early childhood provides a short window when “the critical foundations are built to support child language development and provide a platform for children’s future life chances” (McKean and Reilly, 2023, p. 2259). As such, early intervention is critical to boosting young children’s language skills (Finnegan et al., 2015; McKean and Reilly, 2023). One such evidence-based intervention that supports language and communication in young children, is the Early Talk Boost programme.

### The Evaluation

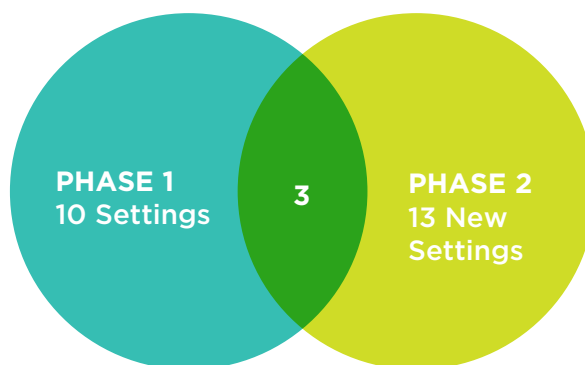
Underpinned by an ecological framework, this mixed-methods outcomes-based evaluation sought to:

1. Review pre- and post-intervention data, to measure the impact of the intervention on Child Outcomes and Language Outcomes
2. Measure any changes in the identification of Speech, Language and Communication needs
3. Review the barriers and enablers that supported the implementation of ETB across the new sites
4. Assess the applicability of this model of language supports within the emerging Equal Participation Model<sup>2</sup> proposed within First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies Young Children and their Families (Ireland, 2018).

Data collection occurred between April 2023 and March 2024, involving two phases: the first, April to June 2023, and the second, September 2023 to March 2024.

It is important to note that TUSLA selected all participating early childhood settings prior to commencement of the evaluation, and there

### ECCE Settings Participating in the ETB Scaling Up Project



**Figure 1:** ECCE Settings Participating in the ETB Scaling Up Project

2. Similar to the DEIS model in the primary school sector



was no waiting list control group. In total, 23 settings, offering the Early Childhood Care and Education programme participated in the ETB scaling up project. Ten settings participated in Phase 1 with 16 settings participating in Phase 2 (i.e., 13 new settings, plus 3 settings<sup>3</sup> from Phase 1). As shown in Figure 1, 3 settings participated in Phase 1 and phase 2 of the programme, involving different child cohorts each time. Of the 23 participating settings, 2 were privately run, with some of the children attending Speech and Language therapy. In both cases, the settings participated in ETB at the request of the SLT.

Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) and early childhood educators co-delivered the ETB programme in the 23 participating early childhood settings. Under the supervision of an SLT, the educators who were working directly with the children undertook pre- and post-intervention assessments. They used an online tracker, developed by Speech and Language UK, specifically for ETB. The tracker is based on developmental norms and was benchmarked using the Pre-School Language Scales - 4th Edition (PLS-4) (Zimmerman et al, 2009). As it was developed for use by educators in busy settings, the tracker is simple to use, easy to score and quick to administer (see also Early Talk Boost, 2015, for additional information on the development of the tracker). The SLTs

uploaded the children's assessment scores to [icantracker.org.uk](http://icantracker.org.uk). These data were then made available in anonymous format to the MIC evaluation team for analysis.

The mixed-methods, outcomes-based evaluation utilised both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. It involved all the key stakeholders involved with ETB: children, SLTs, educators and parents/guardians. All data collection tools and procedures were approved by the Mary Immaculate College and the TUSLA Research Ethics Committees (MIREC A23-022; A23-023). Table 1 provides details of the participants, as well as an overview of the methods and data sources used in the evaluation. It also outlines the purpose of each data collection tool.

Note: A more detailed account of the evaluation is available in the main evaluation report.

---

3. Four other settings intending to participate in phase 1 and phase 2 were unable to do so, primarily due to staff illness and staff attrition within the setting during the period September to December, 2023

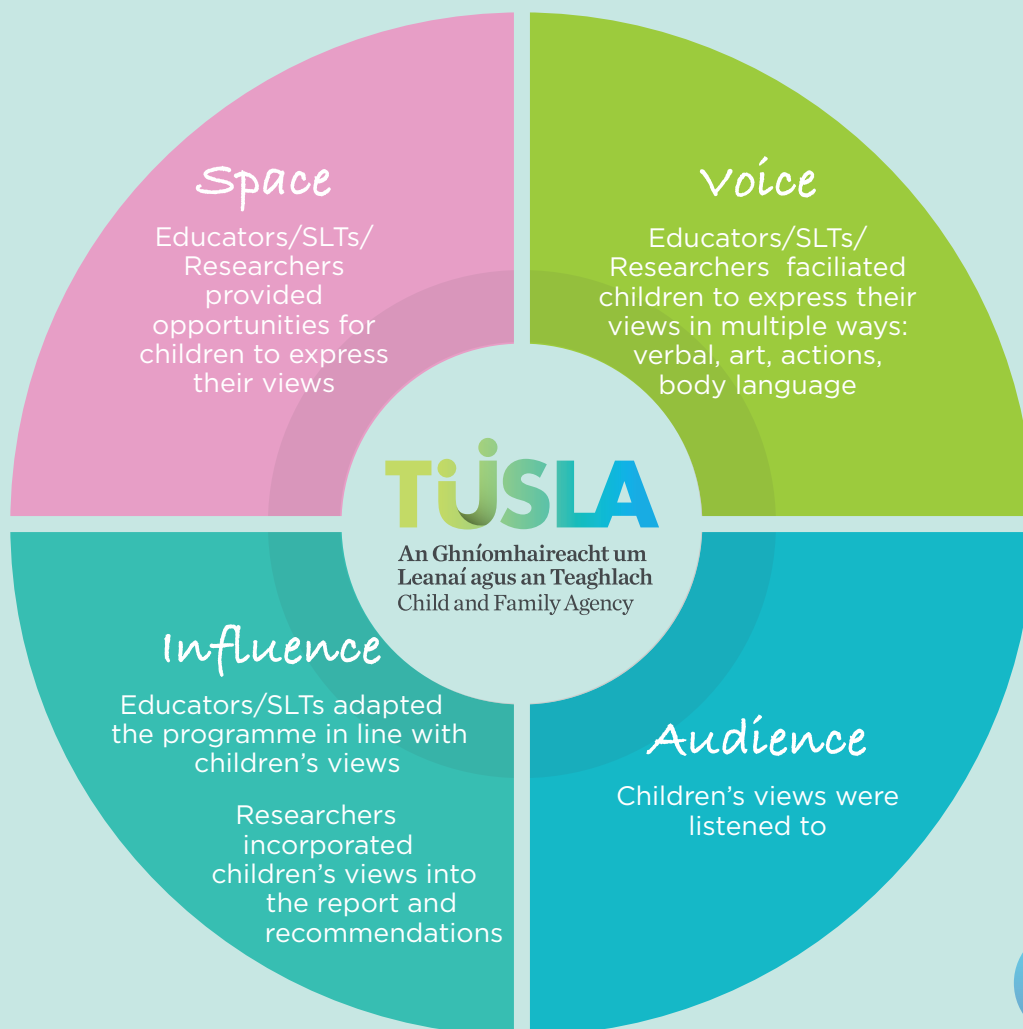
SUMMARY OF METHODS AND DATA SOURCES		
PARTICIPANT	METHOD	PURPOSE: GAIN INSIGHT INTO
<b>Early Childhood Educator</b>	Bespoke anonymous online questionnaire, administered in week 9 (final week of the programme)  20 completed questionnaires returned = 87% setting response rate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators' perspective of the intervention</li> <li>• Confidence in identifying children for inclusion in the programme</li> <li>• Confidence in supporting children's language and communication pre and post intervention</li> <li>• Perception of the programme</li> <li>• Recommending the programme</li> </ul>
	Interviews with 8 educators, undertaken within 4 weeks of programme completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators' experience of the programme</li> <li>• Attitude towards their training and preparation</li> <li>• Perspective on the usefulness of the ETB tracker in determining changes in different aspects of a child's language and communication</li> <li>• Impact of the programme on children's language and communication</li> <li>• Thoughts on the programme overall (what worked well; challenges, if any, recommendations for future implementation)</li> </ul>
<b>Parents/Guardians</b>	Bespoke anonymous online questionnaire, administered in week 9 (final week of the programme)  33 completed questionnaires returned	<p><b>Parent/guardian opinions on:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child's language and communication pre and post intervention</li> <li>• Parent/guardian confidence in supporting child's language and communication</li> <li>• Perception of the programme</li> <li>• Recommending the programme</li> </ul>
	Interviews with 7 parents (undertaken within 6 weeks of programme completion)	<p><b>Parent/guardian perspectives about:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Their child's involvement in the programme</li> <li>• Impact of the programme on their child</li> <li>• Changes if any, noticed in their child's communication and language skills post intervention</li> <li>• Whether participation had increased their child's interest in books or reading</li> <li>• What worked well with the programme in terms of how it was run</li> <li>• Challenges, if any experienced during the programme in terms of how it was run</li> </ul>
<b>Speech and Language Therapists</b>	Focus Group  10 SLTs in Phase 1 (undertaken in June 2023)  4 SLTs in Phase 2 (involved in the second roll out) (undertaken in February 2024)	<p><b>SLT views about:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The programme</li> <li>• The training and how it was delivered</li> <li>• How the early childhood setting, educators and children responded to the programme</li> <li>• Suggestions for running the programme in the future</li> </ul>
<b>Children</b>	Online Early Talk Boost tracker  Pre and post programme data available for 179 children	<p><b>This assessment of language provided pre and post intervention data relating to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's auditory (receptive) and expressive abilities</li> <li>• Changes in the identification of speech, language and communication needs</li> </ul>
	Informal conversation/drawing with 9 children in one participating early childhood setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience of participating in the programme</li> <li>• What they liked/disliked</li> <li>• What they liked best/least</li> <li>• Anything they might like to change about the programme</li> </ul>

Table 1: Summary of Methods and Data Sources

# Children's Rights

Early childhood is a critical period for the realization of children's rights, including their right to express an opinion, and to have their views considered in all matters affecting them (UNCRC, 1989, Article 12). Building upon these participatory rights, we draw upon Lundy's

(2007) model of participation, to illustrate how, throughout the roll out of the ETB programme, and the evaluation, children's views were sought out, listened to, and acted upon in the present evaluation (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Children's Participatory Rights Within the Evaluation

# Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the findings were overwhelmingly positive for the stakeholder participants involved, across both the quantitative and qualitative data sets. Table 2 provides a summary overview of key findings.

The evaluation found that there was:

- A statistically significant increase in each of the language areas measured (**Attention and Listening, Understanding, Speaking and Communication**) between the children's scores before and after the programme. These significant increases were present in each of the age groups
- Both boys and girls benefitted from the programme, with boys making greater gains than girls
- A significant improvement in each of the four areas of language skills for children with English as an additional language before and after the programme

The programme contributed positively to:

- Children's confidence and social and emotional development
- Educators' knowledge and understanding of language and communication in young children, and how to support this
- Educators' ability to select children who would benefit from the programme
- The Home Learning Environment

SLT involvement was an important factor in the success of the programme. Accordingly, co-delivery, involving speech and language therapists and educators was especially beneficial. The findings indicate that this approach is transformative, with the potential to reduce the workload for Speech and Language Therapists, and speech and language therapy waiting lists.

**Table 2:** Summary of Key Findings

The report now summarises the tracker data, providing insight into the child outcomes. It therefore provides a summary of how the programme impacted children's language

development across four areas: **Attention and Listening, Understanding, Speaking and Communication.**

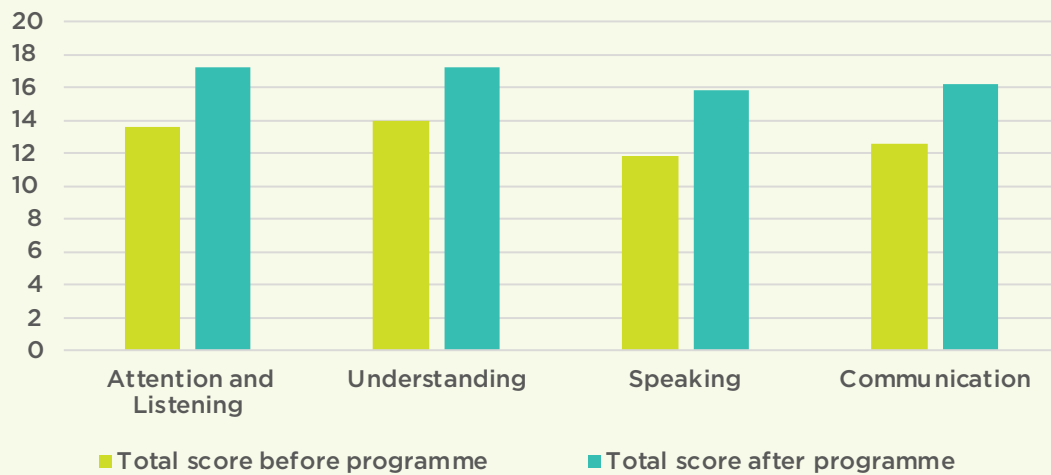
## Child Outcomes

Participating children were assessed before and after the programme using the ETB tracker. A first assessment was completed for 191 children, of which 179 children also completed a second assessment. The children ranged in age from 34 months to 70 months, with an average of 48.9 months. There were 112 males and 79 females. The primary language of most children in the programme was English with 16.8% of partici-

pating children using another primary language, including Polish, Lithuanian, Arabic, Bengali, Urdu, French, Italian and Romanian.

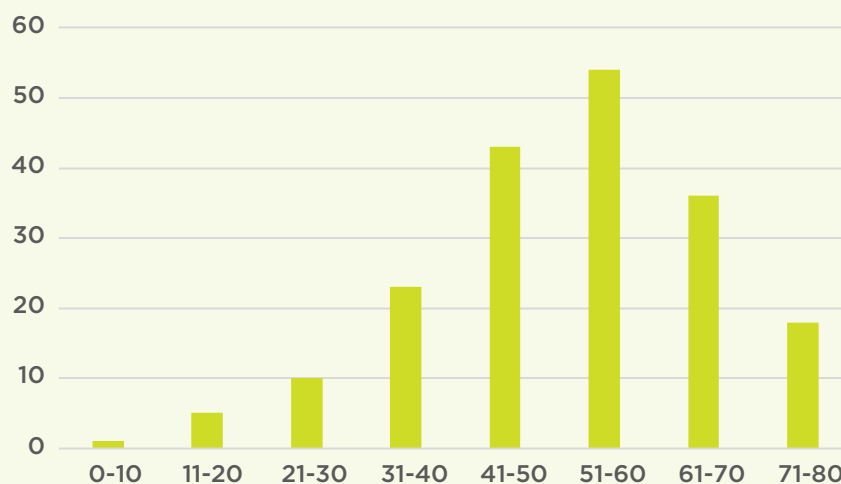
The evaluation shows a statistically significant increase in each of the language areas measured (see Figure 3), between the children's score before the programme and after the programme, all  $p$ 's < .001.

### Average Scores in Different Areas of Language Development

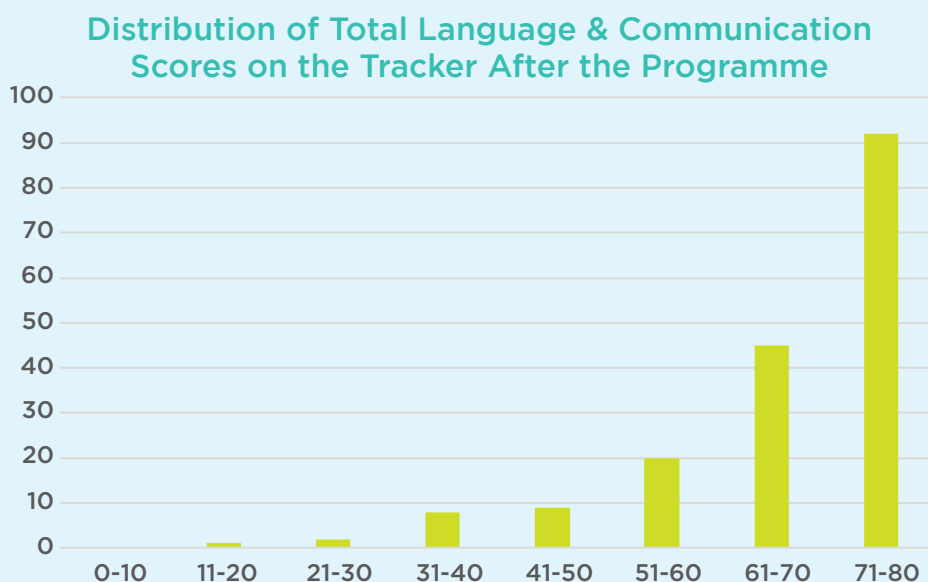


**Figure 3:** Average Scores in Different Areas of Language Development

### Distribution of Total Language & Communication Scores on the Tracker Before the Programme



**Figure 4:** Distribution of Language & Communication Scores on the Tracker Before the Programme



**Figure 5:** Distribution of Language & Communication Scores on the Tracker After the Programme

There was also a significant increase in overall language and communication scores (see Figures 4 and 5),  $p < .001$ . The greatest gains were made by the children who attended the most sessions, with a positive correlation between the number of sessions attended and score increases,  $p < .001$ .

### Influence of Child Age

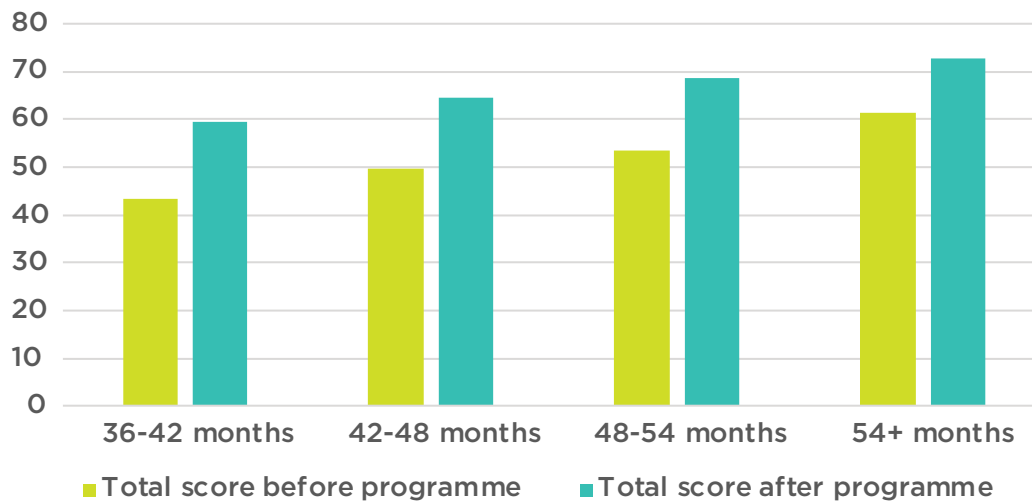
These significant increases were present in each of the age groups, all  $p$ 's  $< .001$  (see Figure 6). The largest overall gains were found in the 36-42-month-old age group, and the smallest overall gains in the 54+ month age group. Children participating in the first year of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme then, had the largest gains. However, the effect sizes were large for each of the age groups.

Depending on the child's age, their tracker scores may be categorised as:

- working below age expectations (also labelled as a 'red' score for ETB)
- working towards age expectations (also labelled as an 'amber' score for ETB and the target population that might benefit from ETB)
- working at age expectations (also labelled as a 'green' score for ETB). Table 3 below shows before target scores for various ages, before and after the programme.

Prior to commencing ETB there were 168 children with a total overall score indicating they were working below age expectations or towards age expectations. Many of these children may have been referred to an SLT for an assessment. After completing the ETB programme this number was reduced to 63 children (see Figure 7). This represents a 62.5% reduction in the number of children that may have been referred for an SLT assessment.

### Total Language & Communication Scores for Different Age Groups



**Figure 6:** Total Language & Communication Scores for Different Age Groups

Age	Before			After		
	Red	Amber	Green	Red	Amber	Green
3-3.5 years	20	60	20	6	31	63
3.5-4years	29	64	7	5	50	45
4-4.5 years	58	37	5	16	32	52
4.5 + years*	39	51	10	7	31	62

\*Same red, amber and green scoring used for 4.5+ years as for 4-4.5 years.

**Table 3:** Percentage of Children in Red, Amber and Green Scoring Categories on the Tracker Tool, Before & After the Programme

### Influence of Child Gender

Before beginning the programme, boys had significantly lower scores than girls in three of the four areas measured (Attention and Listening, Speaking, Communication), all  $p$ 's < .034. After completing the programme, there was only a significant difference in scores in one of the four areas (Attention and Listening),  $p$  = .016. However, Figure 8 shows that both boys and girls benefitted from the programme, with boys making greater gains than girls.

After the programme, there was no significant difference in overall language and communication scores between boys and girls,  $p$  > .05. Critically, the findings showed that each of the four areas of language and communication skills improved significantly from before the programme to after the programme, for both boys and for girls, all  $p$ 's < .001, and all effect sizes were large, all Cohen's  $d$ 's > 2.66.

### Percentage of children before and after ETB working below, towards or at age expectations

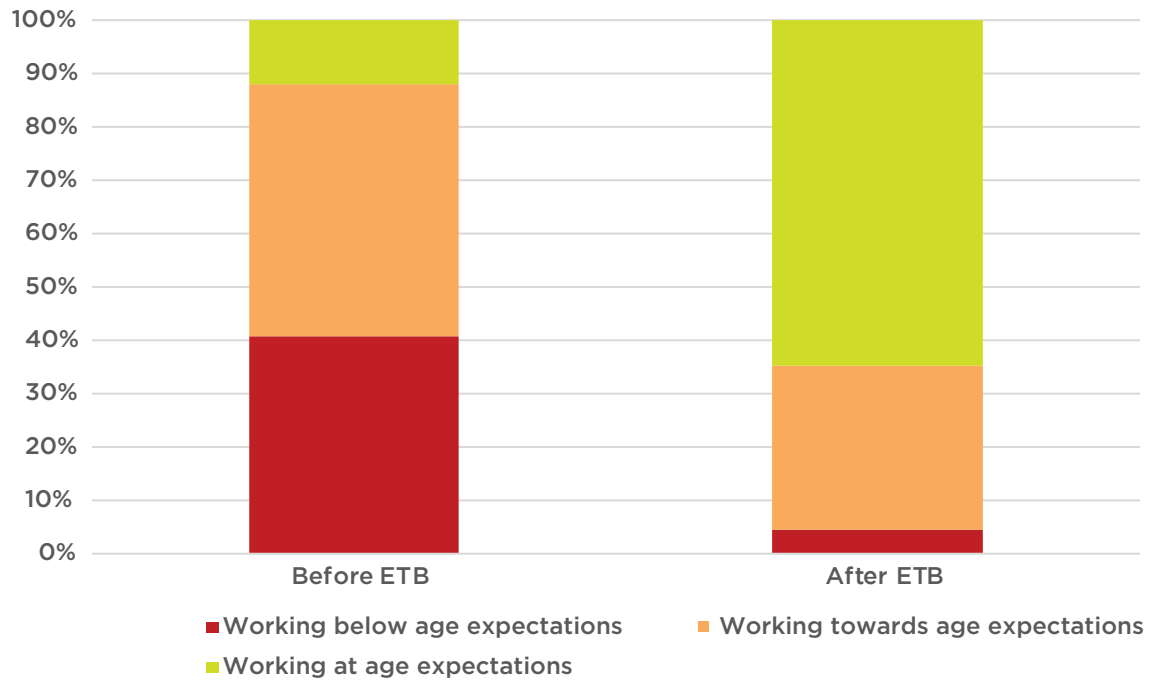


Figure 7: Percentage of Children Before and After ETB Working Below, Towards or at Age Expectations.

### Gender Differences in Total Language & Communication Scores

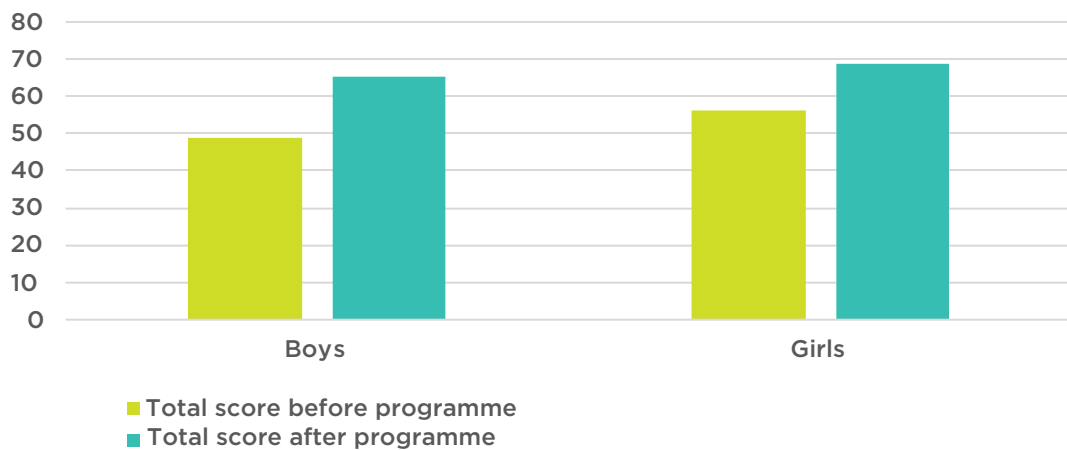
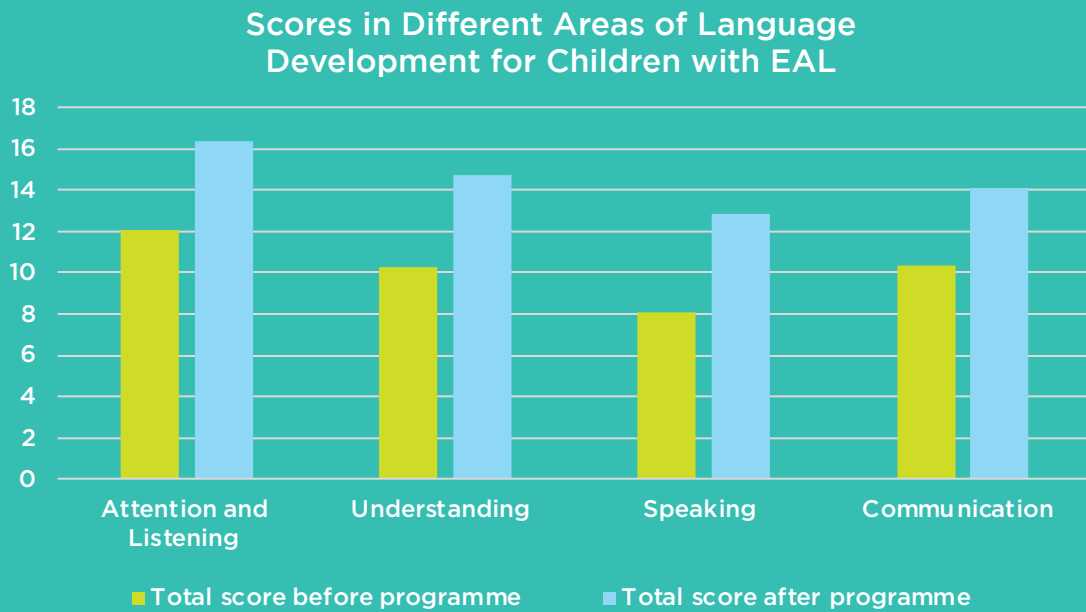
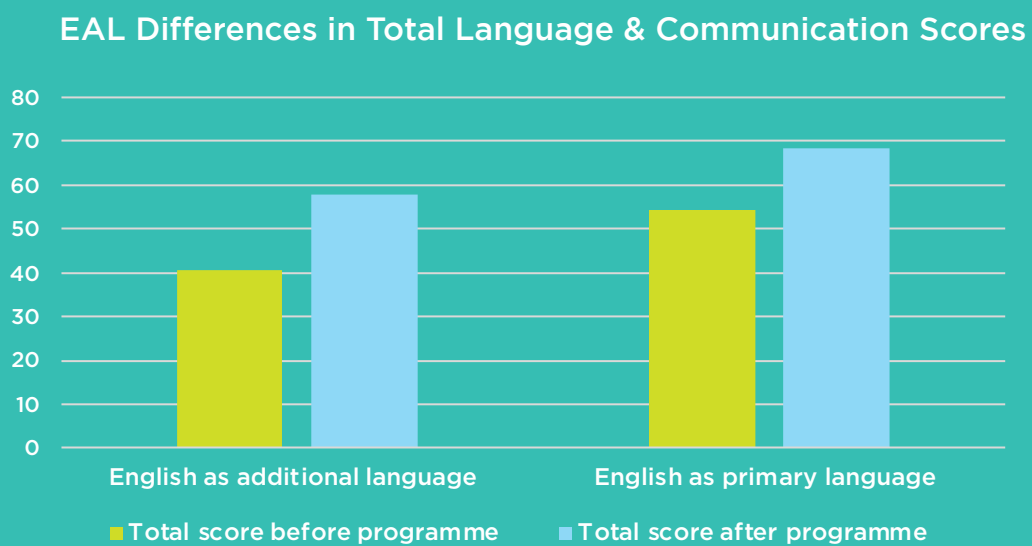


Figure 8: Gender Differences in Total Language & Communication Scores





**Figure 9:** Scores in Different Areas of Language Development for Children with EAL



**Figure 10:** EAL Differences in Total Language & Communication Scores

### Influence of English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Regarding children with English as an additional language, findings show significant improvements in each of the four language skills measured (see Figure 9), all  $p$ 's < .001, similar to children who did not have English as an additional language, all  $p$ 's < .001. All effect sizes were large, Cohen's  $d$ 's > 2.82.

Gains made by children with and without EAL over the course of the programme were similar (see Figure 10), except for understanding skills, where the children with EAL made a larger gain (4.60 points versus 3.01 points),  $p = .006$ .

Overall, the findings from the analysis of the tracker data indicate that the programme had a beneficial effect on average language and communication scores. This positive effect was present for children of varying ages, for both boys and girls, and for those with English as a first language or an additional language. The findings reported in the next section, from conversations with children themselves about the programme, highlight their enthusiasm for the programme, and provide insight into their growing competency in language and communication.

# Summary: Children's Perspectives

## Summary: Children's Perspectives

As illustrated in Table 1, a sample of children's perspectives were gained through informal conversations and draw and tell with children in their early childhood setting<sup>4</sup>. Children provided insights into their perspectives and experiences of the programme by sharing and explaining their drawings and engaging in informal discussion with members of the research team. With the children's permission, their educator shared drawings from their memory books, which contained drawings children had completed while engaging in the ETB programme.

Children expressed their enthusiasm for the programme and the Jake and Tizzy puppets by jumping up and down, and gathering around excitedly when the educator produced the Tizzy puppet. In the drawings completed during the informal conversation with researchers as well as those featured in their memory books, children depicted parachutes, feathers, football

games, marshmallows, chocolate spread and sandwiches. These drawings reflected the stories in the books (e.g., football), as well as toys and items contained in the Early Talk Boost pack (e.g., feathers). Children also drew pictures of Jake and Tizzy.

Relationships featured in some of their drawings. In one drawing, a child included their educator with Tizzy. Meeting and chatting with these young children revealed they have acquired the fundamentals of language and communication. They demonstrated their ability to listen, to understand and use words appropriately, to combine words to form comprehensive phrases and sentences, recall information, use descriptive and positional language etc. The researchers observed first-hand the children's growing competency across all these areas, which are considered the fundamentals of language and communication, and central to learning how to read (Feldman, 2019).

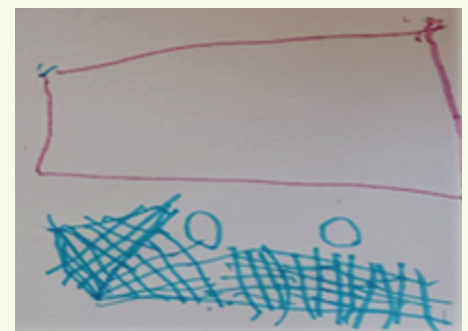
4. From an ethical stance, parental consent and child assent were obtained prior to data collection. Children were given a child-friendly information sheet, and the purpose of the research was also verbally explained to them in a developmentally appropriate manner before they agreed to participate in the research.



Jake and Tizzy at the Swimming Pool



Jake is Big and Tizzy is Small



Jake and Tizzy playing football

# Summary: Parent and Educator Perspectives

## Summary: Parent and Educator Perspectives

**The evaluation found that both parents and educators were overwhelmingly positive about the programme. Across data sets (questionnaires and interviews), parents and educators identified a range of positive outcomes for children in terms of language and communication, but also in relation to social and emotional development.**


In addition, they identified wider benefits relating to family book sharing experiences within the home, including children with English as an additional language or growing up in bilingual home environments. They felt the Jake and Tizzy books were suitable and would recommend ETB to other parents/educators.

Both parents and educators observed improvements in children's language and communication skills, and indicated that overall, children were better across a range of language and communication indicators. Figure

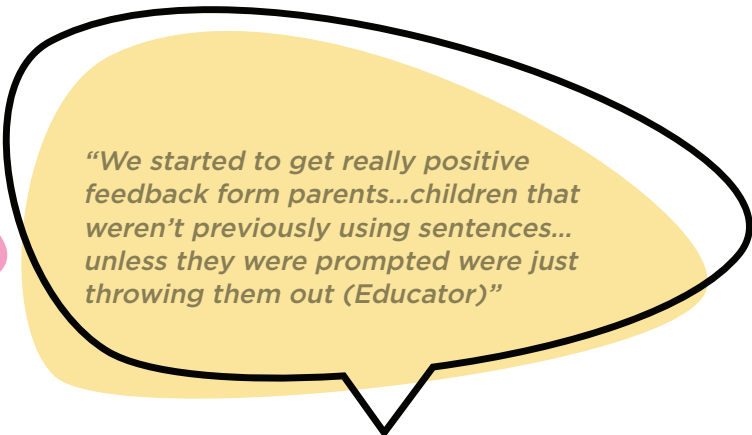
11 presents educator perspectives of children's use of language and communication after the programme.

Parents noticed similar improvements in their child's language and communication following participation in the programme (see Figure 12).


Both parents and educators pointed to the many positive benefits of ETB for their children. These included enhanced confidence in using language, as illustrated through these examples from questionnaire and interview data:



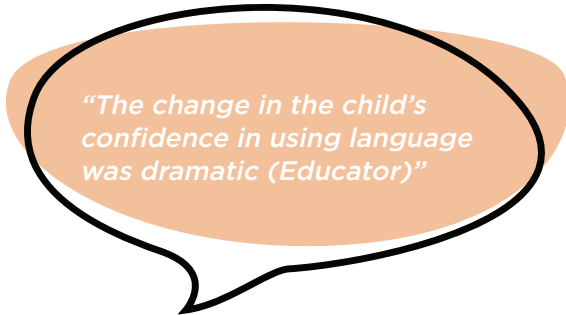
*"The programme helped my son so much with his confidence (Parent)"*



*"We started to get really positive feedback form parents...children that weren't previously using sentences... unless they were prompted were just throwing them out (Educator)"*



*"My child encountered a period of not speaking at the beginning of this programme, which has now largely resolved. The programme has no doubt been of great help to him (Parent)"*



*"The change in the child's confidence in using language was dramatic (Educator)"*

### Percentage of educators indicating change in various language and communication abilities

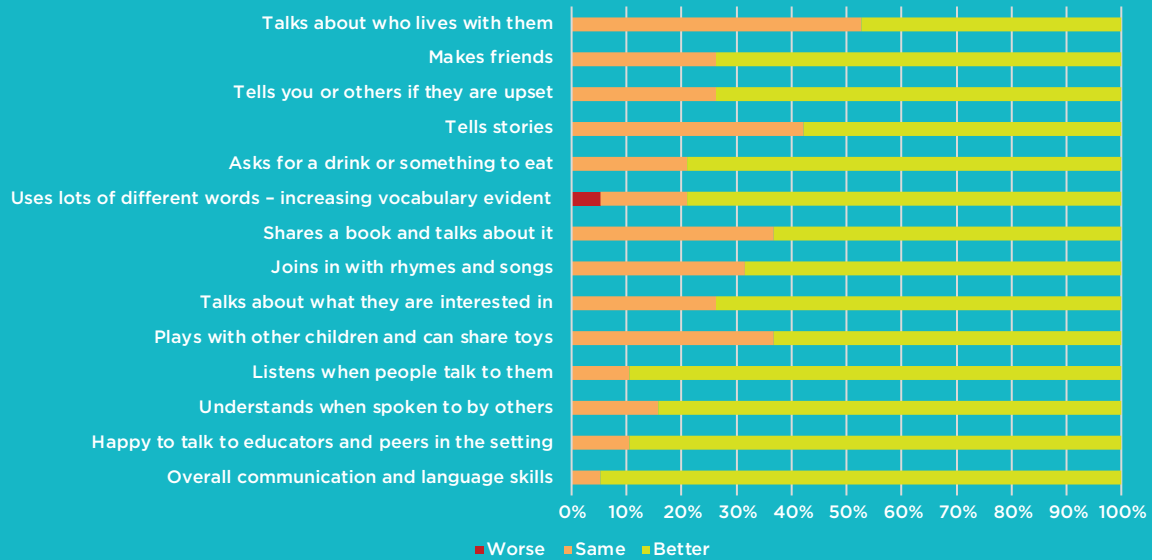


Figure 11: Educator Perspectives of Children’s Use of Language & Communication After ETB

### Percentage of parents indicating change in various language and communication abilities

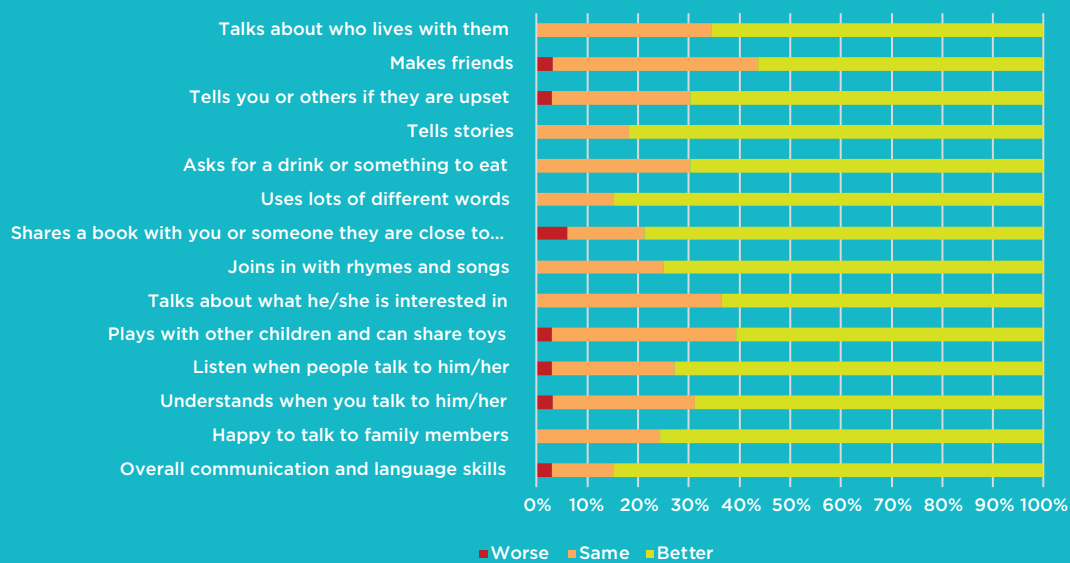


Figure 12: Parental Perspectives of Children’s Use of Language & Communication After ETB

### Summary: ETB and the Home Environment

**As well as considerable improvements in children's language and communication, confidence, and social-emotional development, the evaluation found wider benefits in the home environment. Parents reported an increased interest in books, and the subsequent effect on reading, book sharing and relationships with parents and siblings.**

*He never had an interest in books as much before... [he now] ...has a stack of books beside his bed every night. He's looking at other books now and finding that there's a story. And it's not just pictures. Like there's a storyline in there as opposed to just sitting in front to look at [sic]...(Parent)*

The programme further impacted how parents approached story time with their child. The evaluation found that following their child's involvement in the programme, parents utilised a range of strategies to support their child's language and communication during story time. Parents reported spending more time reading with children, discussing the pictures before reading the story, asking questions and talking about the book with their child, rather than just reading.

### Summary: Impact of ETB on Participating Educators

**The findings indicate that the programme enhanced educators' professional knowledge and practice in several areas. Educators reported increased knowledge of children's language and communication and how to support this, as well as greater ability to identify children who would benefit from the programme.**

The programme had an equally positive effect on educators' confidence in supporting children's language development. Following involvement, 18 educators (n=20) felt 'quite confident' or 'very confident' about supporting children's language development. Only two educators indicated they only felt 'a bit confident' in supporting children's language and communication, following the programme (See figure 13).

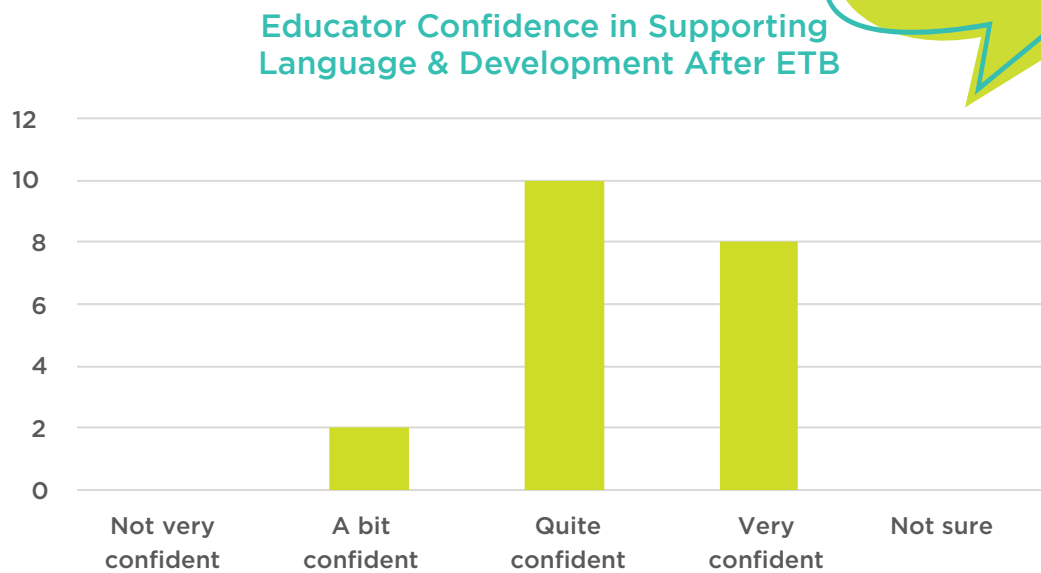
Again, in terms of educator ability to identify children who would benefit from ETB, 19 educators reported feeling 'very confident' or 'quite confident.' The remaining educator felt 'a bit confident,' following their involvement in the programme (see Figure 14).

### Summary: Educator Perspectives on the Most Beneficial Aspects of the Programme

**The evaluation sought to determine what educators found most beneficial about the programme. While the positive impact on children's language and communication is without question, educators indicated that SLT involvement was an important factor in the success of the programme.**

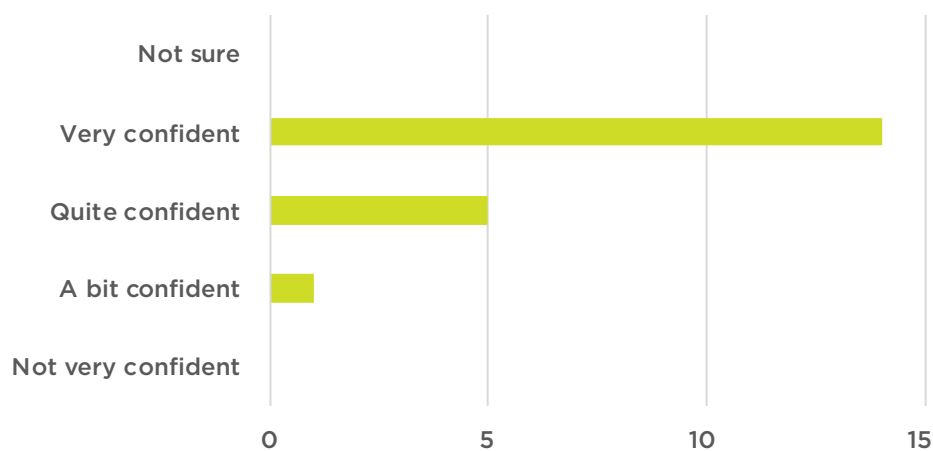
Accordingly, they identified co-delivery of the programme and relationships with SLTs as especially beneficial. These benefits included the opportunity for parents to make contact with, and build relationships with SLTs in the context of the early childhood setting, the ongoing support and advice SLTs provided to the educators throughout the programme, and the potential to reduce SLT waiting lists.

*I am more aware of my use of language during informal conversations with children (Educator)*



**Figure 13:** Educator Confidence in Supporting Language & Development After ETB

### Educator Confidence in Ability to Identify Children who would Benefit from the Intervention, Following ETB Training



**Figure 14:** Educator Confidence in Ability to Identify Children who would Benefit from the Intervention, Following ETB Training

## Summary: SLT Perspectives

Consistent with parents and educators, SLTs were very positive about the programme. The key findings, outlined below, point to significant

benefits that accrue from delivering ETB within the naturally occurring environment of the child's early childhood setting.

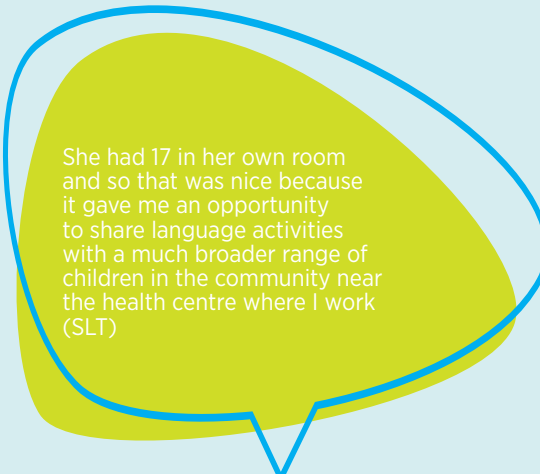
## Summary of Key SLT Findings

- Significant improvements in children's language and communication skills
- Positive influence on the home reading environment
- Benefits for early childhood educators, including increased knowledge, and confidence in identifying a child for inclusion in the programme, resulting in
- More targeted referrals to SLTs
- An enhanced working relationship between SLTs and educators

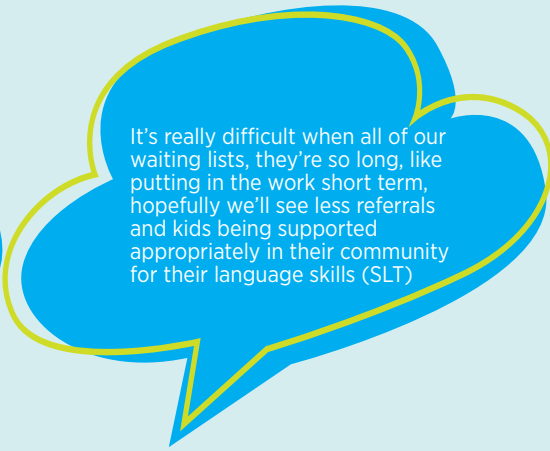
In both focus groups, the SLTs spoke positively about the training they received, stressing the educators' enthusiasm, and the closer working relationships. They also highlighted a significant boost in children's language, and confidence. SLTs identified factors that would hinder or

support the continued facilitation and future roll out of the ETB, including the time required by educators to engage in the training and deliver the programme. A potential barrier to any future roll-out of ETB, as identified by SLTs in the second focus group, related to staffing issues within the early childhood settings, such as absences due to illness and staff attrition.

In general, SLTs were very positive about the benefits of the programme, particularly in relation to the children directly, and to their own professional work. An added advantage concerned the opportunity to support and promote language development for all children in the ECCE setting, beyond those selected to take part in ETB.



She had 17 in her own room and so that was nice because it gave me an opportunity to share language activities with a much broader range of children in the community near the health centre where I work (SLT)



It's really difficult when all of our waiting lists, they're so long, like putting in the work short term, hopefully we'll see less referrals and kids being supported appropriately in their community for their language skills (SLT)



## Conclusion and Recommendations

**There is no doubt that ETB works for young children. As illustrated in Table 4, the benefits extend beyond the children, to educators, SLTs and the home environment.**

THE EVALUATION FOUND	
1.	A statistically significant increase in each of the language areas measured: <b>Attention and Listening; Understanding, Speaking and Communication</b> , between the children's scores before and after the programme
2.	A statistically significant increase in children's overall language and communication scores
3.	These significant increases were present in each of the age groups, with the largest overall gains in the 36-42-month-old age group (i.e., children availing of year one of the ECCE programme)
4.	Both boys and girls benefitted from the programme, with boys making greater gains than girls
5.	A significant improvement in each of the four areas of language skills for children with English as an additional language before and after the programme
6.	The programme contributed positively to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's confidence and social and emotional development</li> <li>• The Home Learning Environment</li> </ul>
7.	Educator's knowledge and understanding of language and communication in young children increased, as well as their ability to support this, and select children who would benefit from the ETB programme.
8.	The programme provided SLTs the opportunity to support and promote language development for all children in the ECCE setting, beyond those selected to take part in ETB
9.	SLT involvement was an important factor in the success of the programme. Accordingly, co-delivery, involving speech and language therapists and educators was especially beneficial. This approach is transformative, with the potential to redress Speech and Language waiting lists, expedite therapy, and in turn, reduce SLT workloads

**Table 4:** Summary of Overall Findings

Congruent with others (e.g., Finnegan et al., 2015; McKean and Reilly, 2023), the evaluation highlights the importance of early intervention in boosting young children's language and communication skills. However, many consider that provision of speech and language therapy in Ireland is insufficient to meet the needs of children (McConkey et al., 2021; Rafferty, 2014; Wright and O'Donoghue, 2018). In fact, the Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists (IASLT, 2017) suggest that SLTs have limited capacity to provide guidance to primary caregivers and teachers as to how they can assist children's speech and language development. The evaluation attests to the potential for ETB to redress Speech and Language waiting lists, expedite therapy, and reduce SLT workloads.

To improve access to SLT services, and outcomes for children, this evaluation provides an evidence base that supports integration of such services into the micro level, i.e., pre-schools and schools, ensuring that interventions reach all children who need them (Wright and O'Donoghue, 2018). In this respect, Feldman (2019) notes that even though some children do not experience socio-economic disadvantage, they can struggle to develop good language skills. The present evaluation supports this claim. Across the 23 participating settings, children presented with delayed speech and language and EAL. It is incumbent upon policy makers to ensure that children who need support do not slip through the cracks.

The evaluation indicates that children's experiences within the micro level environment of the early childhood setting and home are enhanced by knowledgeable, confident and supportive adults (parents and educators). It found that ETB served as a valuable form of CPD for educators, increasing their knowledge of language and communication in young children,

as well as their ability to identify children who would benefit from the programme, and/or refer to a SLT. Equally, in the home environment, parents reported greater understanding of how to support their child's language and communication during story time. Additionally, findings attest to enhanced relationships between parents and SLTs, between parents and educators, and between SLTs and educators. These enhanced relationships were a direct result of offering the programme within the early childhood settings, rather than in a clinic.

All evaluation participants would recommend ETB to others. Children, enjoyed the programme so much, they repeatedly asked their educator to "do more Tizzy time." These findings have considerable implications for policy, notably the proposed Equal Participation Model, and the ECCE programme more generally. They also have implications for practice, in terms of programme delivery and capacity building (see Table 5).

Language and communication permeate every aspect of a child's development. Speech and language difficulties may extend into adulthood (Finnegan et al., 2015), and can have lasting consequences for children's social and emotional development (Hancock, et al., 2023; Lanbecker, Snoswell, Smith et al., 2020), educational achievement (e.g., Chow, Ekholm & Coleman, 2018), and occupational status (Durkin et al., 2011). The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (UNCRC, Article 3). The findings from this evaluation, therefore, cannot be ignored. The child cannot wait. The recommendations are a political imperative and central to realising positive outcomes for all children in the context of the proposed Equal Participation Model specifically, and the ECCE programme and school contexts more broadly.

SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS		
	It is recommended that:	Benefit
<b>Programme Delivery</b>	SLTs and Educators continue to co-deliver the programme with early childhood educators in the short to medium term.	Ensure high quality delivery and closer connections between professionals.
	Speech and Language UK adapt the ETB tracker to ensure its suitability for use in the Irish context.	Given the age range accessing the ECCE programme in Ireland (i.e., 2 years 8 months and 5 years six months), the tracker must cover the full age range within early childhood settings in Ireland.
	Align the roll out of Early Talkboost with Talkboost programmes in the junior phase of primary school..	Capitalise on progress made through Early Talk Boost, and ensure continuity of provision in young children's experiences of language and communication supports.
<b>Future Evaluations</b>	Undertake an evaluation of a wider roll-out of ETB in a greater number of early childhood settings, involving more children, educators, SLTs and parents.	Add to the evidence base in an Irish context.
	Utilise the revised tracker tool (see earlier recommendation re programme delivery) in any future evaluation	Improve reliability and validity of findings with children aged over 54 months.
	Consideration of a wait-list control group.	Improve reliability and validity of findings in the Irish context.
<b>Capacity Building</b>	Incorporate ETB training into undergraduate SLT and ECCE degree programmes, with the purpose of including the programme in their practicum experiences, in the short term.	Upon graduating, these professionals will have the knowledge, skills and competencies to implement ETB into their practice.
	Offer ETB training to other professionals within the ECCE support infrastructure nationally, such as Better Start, Childcare Committees, and Non-Governmental ECCE Organisations.	Both recommendations would over time, help to reduce waiting lists, and free up SLT time. In the longer term, SLTs could reduce support for early childhood settings who may be able to run ETB independently, thus ensuring the sustainability of the programme.
<b>Policy</b>	<p>ETB is integrated into young children's naturally occurring environments at Micro-level.</p> <p>In keeping with the thrust of Government policy, vis a vis targeted and universal supports, it is essential that the Government ensures that ETB is a central pillar of wrap around therapeutic supports (e.g., play therapy, occupational therapy) within the proposed <b>Equal Participation Model</b>. Additionally, it should be integral to the ECCE programme, notably in year one, when children appear to make the most significant gains in language and communication.</p>	<p>This is essential to supporting children in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, not just in the area of language and communication, but more holistically.</p> <p>Rolling the programme out through the ECCE programme reduces the risk of children in need of support falling through the cracks, ultimately reducing SLT waiting lists and workloads. In keeping with <i>First 5</i> these measures will ensure a good start in life for all young children, ensuring equal participation for all.</p>

**Table 5:** Summary of Key Recommendations

## References

- Adani S., & Cepanec M. (2019). Sex differences in early communication development: behavioural and neurological indicators of more vulnerable communication system development in boys. *Croatian Medical Journal*, 60, 141-149. <https://doi.org/10.3325/cmj.2019.60.141>
- Bando, R., Lopez-Boo, F., Fernald, L., Gertler, P., & Reynolds, S. (2024). Gender Differences in Early Child Development: Evidence from Large-Scale Studies of Very Young Children in Nine Countries. *Journal of Economics, Race and Policy*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41996-023-00131-1>
- Byers-Heinlein K., & Lew-Williams, C. (2013). Bilingualism in the Early Years: What the Science Says. *Learn Landsc*,7(1), p. 95-112
- Cheung, RW., Willan K., Dickerson, J., & Bowyer-Crane, C. (2023). Risk factors for early language delay in children within a minority ethnic, bilingual, deprived environment (Born in Bradford's Better Start): a UK community birth cohort study. *British Medical Journal Paediatric Open*. 7(1)e001764. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjpo-2022-001764>
- Chow J.C., Ekholm E., & Coleman H. (2018). Does oral language underpin the development of later behavior problems? A longitudinal meta-analysis. *Sch. Psychology Quarterly*, 33, p.337. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000255>
- Durkin, K., Conti-Ramsden, G., & Simkin, Z. (2011). Functional Outcomes of Adolescents with a History of Specific Language Impairment (SLI) with and without Autistic Symptomatology. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 42, 123-138.
- Early Talk Boost (2015). *Early Talk Boost: Evaluation Report 2015*. Speech and Language UK. Available online: <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/early-talk-boost-evaluation2015-1.pdf>
- Feldman, H.M. (2019). How young children learn language and speech: Implications of theory and evidence for clinical paediatric practice. *Paediatric Review*, 40(8), 398-411. <https://doi.org/10.1542/pir.2017-0325>
- Fernald, A., Marchman, V. A., & Weisleder, A. (2013). SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Developmental Science*, 16(2), 234-248
- Finnegan, J., Telfer, C., & Warren, H. (2015). *Ready to Read: closing the gap in early language skills so that every child in Scotland can read well*. Save the Children UK. Available online: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/ready-read-closing-gap-early-language-skills-so-every-child-scotland-can-read-well/>
- Hancock A., Northcott S., Hobson H., & Clarke M. (2023). Speech, language and communication needs and mental health: the experiences of speech and language therapists and mental health professionals. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorder*, 58(1), p.52-66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12767>
- Hoff, E. (2013). *Language Development*. Cengage.
- Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists Supporting Children with Developmental Disorders in Ireland. (2017). *IASLT Position Paper and Guidance Document*, AASLT, Dublin. Available online: <https://www.iaslt.ie/documents/public-information/Childhood%20Speech%20and%20Language/DLD%20Position%20Paper%20FINAL%2023MAY2017.pdf>

- Lanbecker, D., Snoswell, C.L., Smith, A.C., Verboom, J., & Caffery, L.J. (2020). Long-term effects of childhood speech and language disorders: A scoping review. *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 10(1), a801. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.801>
- Locke, A., Ginsborg, J., & Peers, I. (2002). Development and disadvantage: Implications for the early years and beyond. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 37(1), p.3-15
- Lugo-Neris M. J., Peña E. D., Bedore L. M., & Gillam R. B. (2015). Utility of a language screening measure for predicting risk for language impairment in bilinguals. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 24(3), p.426-437
- Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), p.927-942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>
- McConkey R., Swift A., & Titterington J. (2021). Changes in Children's Speech and Language Difficulties from Age Five to Nine: An Irish National, Longitudinal Study. *International Journal Environment Research and Public Health*, 18(16), p.8483. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18168483>
- McKean, C., & Reilly, S. (2023). Creating the conditions for robust early language development for all: Part two: Evidence informed public health framework for child language in the early years. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*. 58(6), p.2222-2241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12927>
- Moss, G., & Washbrook, L. (2016). *Understanding the Gender Gap in Literacy and Language Development*. Working Paper #01/2016. Bristol Working Papers in Education. Available online: [https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/education/documents/bristol-working-papers-in-education/Understanding the Gender Gap working paper.pdf](https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/education/documents/bristol-working-papers-in-education/Understanding%20the%20Gender%20Gap%20working%20paper.pdf)
- Paradis, J., Genesee, F., & Crago, F. (2011). Bilingual Children's Acquisition of the Past Tense. A usage-based approach. *Journal of Child Language*, 38(3), 554-78.
- Rafferty, M. (2014). *Brief review of approaches to oral language development to inform the Area Based Childhood Programme*. Dublin: Centre for Effective Services. Available online: [https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/611389/Oral\\_language\\_\\_development\\_\\_final\\_\\_12052015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/611389/Oral_language__development__final__12052015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Reeves, L., Hartshorne, M., Black, R., Atkinson, J., Baxter, A., & Pring, T. (2018). Early talk boost: A targeted intervention for three year old children with delayed language development. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 34(1), 53-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659018755526>
- Reilly, S. & McKean, C. (2023). Creating the conditions for robust early language development for all—Part 1: Evidence-informed child language surveillance in the early years. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 58, 2222-2241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12929>
- Wright, A., & O'Donoghue, M. (2018). *Prevalence of speech and language difficulties at ages 3 and 5 in the ROI, and attendance at Speech and Language Therapy services*. Available online at: <https://www.growingup.gov.ie/pubs/F3-Presentation-Aileen-Wright.pdf>
- Zimmerman, I., Steiner, V & Pond, R. (2009). *Pre-school language scale: Fourth Edition (PLS-4)*. San Antonio, TX: Pearson





