

Early Words Together at Three in Leicester

Chiara Cappellini and Sian Hackett

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Introduction

The vocabulary of children from low-income families can lag behind their high-income counterparts by up to 17 months at the age of three (Gascoigne & Gross, 2017). However, the home learning environment (HLE) can have a positive impact on a child's communication and language development, and it has been shown to have a greater impact on a child's intellectual, social and emotional development than parental education, occupation or wealth (Sylva et al., 2004).

Early Words Together at Three helps to improve the home learning environments of families and the school readiness of three-year-olds. It is a practitioner-led programme designed for school nurseries that serve low-income families, or any family that may be looking for ways to support their child's language development.

Following training, practitioners are supported to recruit families and deliver cycles of 50-minute family learning sessions over a five-week period that support improvements in the HLE and school readiness. This is achieved by building parents' confidence and skills as their child's first educator, and helping them understand why they, and the HLE, are so important for their child's development.

Early Words Together at Three in Leicester

After a successful Early Words Together at Two project in the city, Leicester City Council wanted to continue supporting the home learning environment of families. As a result, Early Words Together at Three was created and piloted in Leicester. Funding from Leicester's maintained primary schools through the Closing the Gap initiative has allowed National Literacy Trust's Early Years Team to train and support settings in Leicester to take part in Early Words Together at Three. We engaged 31 practitioners from 15 settings over the course of the project, beginning in September 2018 and ending in December 2019 (see Table 1 for more key outputs).

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Table 1: Key outputs of the Early Words Together at Three project in Leicester

Early Words Together activities	Target numbers	Actual numbers
Number of settings trained at initial training days in Sep 2018	15	15
Number of practitioners equipped with the skills and tools to engage and work directly with parents to create a positive HLE and to strengthen and improve their own nursery practice	30	31
Settings successfully engaging parents in family sessions	15	13
Number of families reached	225	205
Books gifted to families	225	260

Some of the key findings of this programme include:

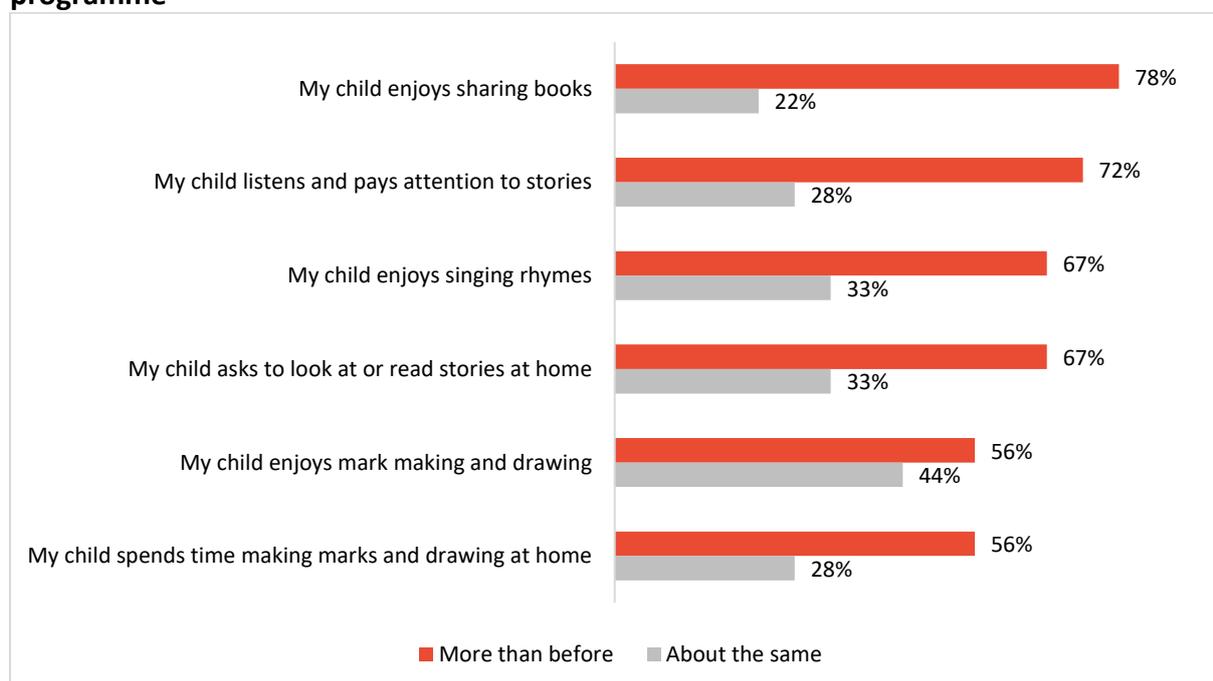
Key findings	Key statistic
Children show improved attitudes to literacy-based activities	78% of parents report that their child enjoys sharing books more than before 67% of parents say their child enjoys singing rhymes more than before
Parents have increased knowledge, understanding and confidence of how to support their child's language and communication development	78% of parents told us they are more aware of why it is important for them to talk to their child 78% of parents say that they are more confident singing rhymes and sharing stories with their child now
There has been an increase in positive home learning behaviours	Two in three parents (67%) said that they read and share stories with their child 'more than before'
Practitioners are more confident in supporting parents	Practitioners have improved their confidence in supporting parents (74% to 82%)
Practitioners are more likely to engage parents and give them guidance on how they can promote their child's language and communication development	91% of practitioners encourage their parents to listen to their child (32% to 91%)
Practitioners felt that the training contributed to their professional development	91% of practitioners rated the training as very good or excellent overall, and 78% of people said that they would recommend this training to other schools

Child Outcomes and Behaviours

The data show how the programme had an impact on participating children, with almost all parents (95%) believing that it supported their child to be more school ready.

We surveyed parents to ask them whether their children were more likely to engage in positive behaviours as a result of the programme. Figure 1 shows that almost four in five (78%) parents report that their child now enjoys sharing books 'more than before' as a result of Early Words Together. Almost three in four parents (72%) also say that their child listens and pays attention to stories more than before, while 67% say that their child now asks to look at and read stories at home more than before.

Figure 1: Parent-reported changes in child behaviours as a result of taking part in the programme¹



In addition, parents report that their children are more likely to engage in mark-making and singing songs as a result of the programme. The survey asked parents to reflect on how frequently their child engages in this activity now, and reflect back on how frequently their child engaged at the beginning of the programme.

Figure 2 (overleaf) shows how before the programme only 59% of parents told us that their child engaged in mark-making most days, while after the programme this increased to 67%. Similarly, before the programme only 66% of parents told us their child sang songs and rhymes most days, while as many as 78% now do so.

¹ The survey also contained a "less than before" option. No parent chose this option in the survey.

Figure 2: Parent-reported changes in child behaviours before and after the programme (most days)



These findings are echoed by several parent comments on how the children are more likely to sing songs. For example:

“Kleo loves singing songs a lot more than he did.”

While another parent mentioned:

“Sharing stories and singing. The biggest change for my child is listening.”

Other qualitative data show that parents see the effect of this programme on child behaviour and outcomes. We asked parents about the biggest change they’d noticed and some parents mentioned how they had seen increased enthusiasm in their child as result of the programme. For example:

“Being more enthusiastic when reading stories to help my child to engage better.”

Another theme that parents can see is increased confidence:

“Small group made him more confident to speak out his ideas without hesitation.”

Another of the quotes said that the biggest change was confidence around activities that are known to support early literacy and language development:

“I think she is more confident now. She interacts more and takes part in more activities at home.”

Practitioners also reported an increase in confidence for the children taking part in Early Words Together at Three:

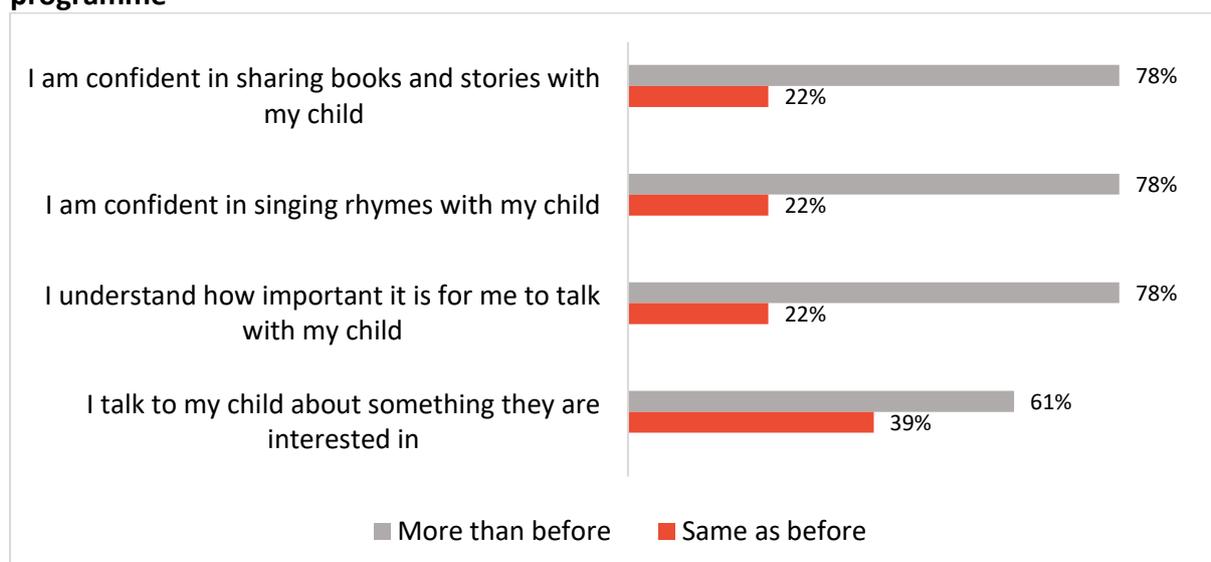
“Children’s confidence grew almost immediately and despite being reluctant to speak in class prior to the sessions they were much more vocal once sessions began.”

“I have noticed an improvement in communication within the classroom and improvement in confidence at approaching and interacting with others.”

Parental Outcomes: Focus on Confidence, Understanding and Behaviours

The findings that we saw in the previous section are mirrored by shifts in parental attitudes. Parents told us that they now have a better understanding of the importance of the home learning environment (see Figure 3). For example, as a result of taking part in Early Words Together, 78% of parents said that they now understand that it is important for them to talk to their child more than they did before. There are also improvements in confidence: 78% of parents now say that they are confident singing rhymes and sharing stories with their child more than they had been before.

Figure 3: Self-reported improvements in parental behaviours as a result of taking part in the programme²



The qualitative feedback provided by parents offers further insight into how the Early Words Together programme was beneficial to increasing their understanding of how best to support their children’s language and communication development. For example, one of the parents commented that the greatest benefit of the programme for them was:

“Realising in what area we should spend more time playing together.”

Another parent discussed how they got a better understanding of how to engage their child through a variety of different ways:

“I’ve realised you don’t need to use a physical book to be developing language skills.”

“It really helps us bond and helps to understand how the child's brain works.”

Interestingly, practitioners tell us that these increases in confidence mean that parents are more likely to engage with the settings. Settings found that as a result of the parents’ increased confidence, they are now more willing to take part in other aspects of school life.

“Some parents have formed friendships and have even gone on to join the PTA and take part in the family learning courses organised by family learning.”

² The survey also contained a “less than before” option. None of the parents ticked this.

Another practitioner commented:

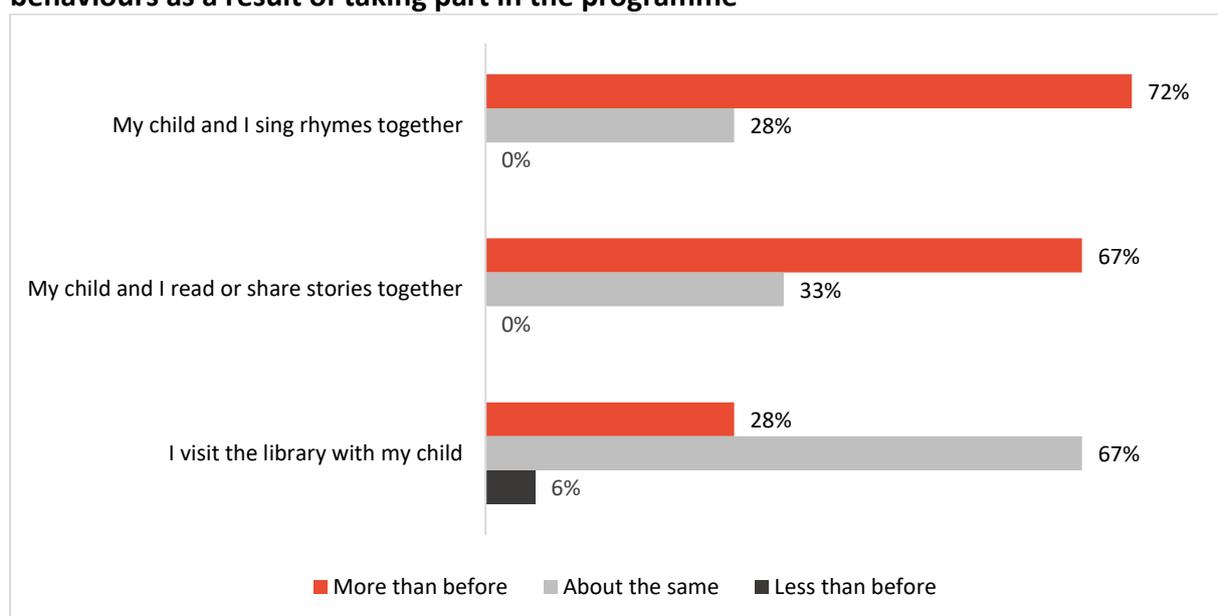
“One parent is going to volunteer in my classroom next year as well so it has been lovely to see how the Early Words programme has helped to build confidence amongst the families that I have worked with.”

Joint Parent and Child Behaviours

It is encouraging to find that the increased confidence in, and understanding of, how to support their child’s learning goes hand in hand with an increase in positive behaviours. The survey asked parents whether they were more likely to engage in behaviours that are known to promote children’s language and communication development.

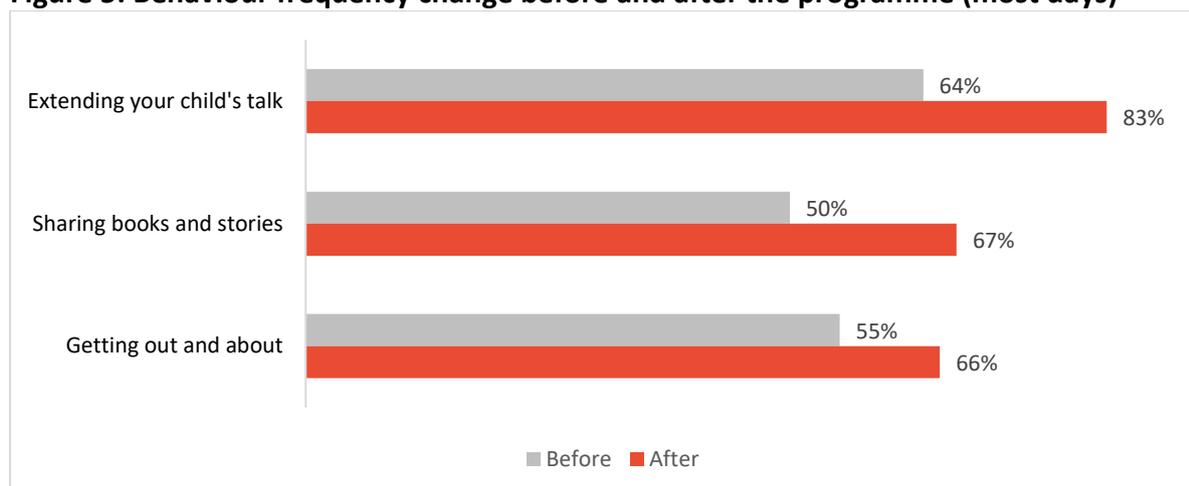
As seen in Figure 4, over 70% of parents said that they sing rhymes with their children ‘more than before’. Two in three parents (67%) also said that they read and share stories with their child ‘more than before’.

Figure 4: Self-reported changes in frequencies of positive home learning environment behaviours as a result of taking part in the programme



We also asked parents about changes to their home learning environment. More specifically, we asked how much they engaged in certain joint behaviours before and after the programme. For example, we asked parents if they are more likely to use techniques that were modelled during the Early Words Together sessions. Figure 5 (overleaf) shows how 83% of parents were extending their child’s talk at the end of the programme compared with 64% before the programme. Similarly, 67% of parents and children were sharing books and stories at the end of the programme compared with 50% before.

Figure 5: Behaviour frequency change before and after the programme (most days)



Quotes from the parents provide some indication that the changes in the behaviours have occurred as a result of an increased understanding of the importance of engaging in that activity. For example, one parent told us how their increased understanding has motivated them to read more to their child:

“I didn't read a lot to my children before taking part but it has shown me how important reading and story-telling is.”

Practitioners also noticed increased confidence in parents who took part in the sessions:

“We have seen a marked improvement in the confidence of parents and children who took part in the sessions. Parents have responded positively to the programme carrying out the activities at home. We have noticed that one parent is now allowing her child to be independent and is being much more positive with her.”

“Parents feel more confident in how to support their children at home, especially reading stories.”

Outcomes for multilingual families

Settings have been able to engage a number of families who needed additional support, as well as a number of multilingual families (Somali, Punjabi, French, Portuguese, Gujarati, Telugu, Hindi, Polish, Tamil, Urdu, Bangla, Pashto, Asante Twi, and Amharic). Practitioners have been provided with bilingual quick tips about supporting babies' and young children's language development from the National Literacy Trust and have utilised other parents' skills to support and translate for these parents.

Multilingual families have benefited from being made aware that keeping their home language alive is important in supporting their child's language development and fluency. Following Early Words Together sessions, parents said:

“I am more confident with doing activities with my girls (home language).”

“She has become more confident and is talking a lot more than before (home language).”

“The activities helped a lot my child on speaking, playing, drawing ... my child is more confident than before.” Portuguese-speaking parent

“That she’s more confident and talk around with others and she can tell me how her days at school are.” Somali parent

One practitioner noted the value of the sessions in giving multilingual parents an understanding of the importance of supporting their child’s speech, language and communication at home:

“Some of the parents have felt confident to read at home with their children as they had said that it wasn't what parents were expected to do in their home countries (which they didn't really do beforehand).”

What was interesting is that these findings were complemented by multilingual parents telling us that their child was speaking more English as a result of the programme. For instance, one parent wrote:

“Reading a book twice a week or sometimes four times a week, talking in English some little words & she understands some English sentences.”

While another parent wrote:

“My son is excited to talk about nursery experience at home. He is speaking a lot more in English.”

A quote that really emphasised how this programme is beneficial for both parent and child:

“My child is more confident holding a pencil and she loves colouring more than before. Even I spend more time talking to her instead of stuck on my phone.”

Session feedback from the parents

The successes of the programme may be attributed to the fact that it was enjoyed and well-received by the target parents. All (100%) parents said that they would recommend Early Words Together to other families. Specifically, one parent spoke about how they benefit from seeing these children learn:

“I love seeing how excited the child gets when they achieve something.”

As many as four in five parents (83%) said they would consider becoming a volunteer for the programme. One parent said they would love to be involved because:

“I always love teaching and as a parent this will help me to know more about methods to play and teach kids.”

The parents found the sessions so useful that many have already spread the word in their community. In fact, 62% of parents said that they have already recommended it:

“I've told a few parents about this and some have said they wish they had got involved now.”

Another parent who gave feedback commented on what it is like to speak to other parents and watching their child progress:

“Really enjoyed being a part of the group and interacting with other parents and seeing my child learn.”

There was a bit of constructive criticism that we received:

“It's good if lessons are a bit more lengthy with some more practical sessions. Give some task for kids and parents to prepare and come.”

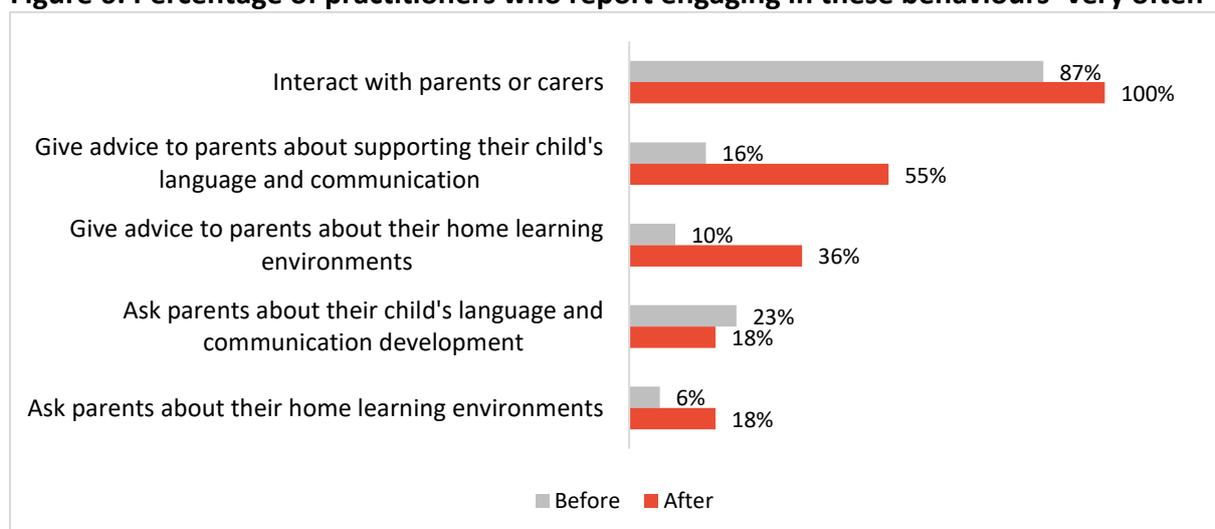
Practitioner outcomes

The children and parent outcomes are aligned with positive changes in practitioners' skills, attitudes and behaviours, with practitioners reporting that they have gained knowledge of, and confidence in, how to engage parents so that they can best support their child.

We asked practitioners how often they engaged in specific behaviours before the programme, and compared their answers with how often they reported engaging in these behaviours following the programme. As seen in Figure 6, one of the biggest changes has been in practitioners giving advice to parents on how to support their child's language and communication, with 16% giving advice to parents before the programme and 55% doing so afterwards. Furthermore, practitioners are three times as likely to talk to parents about their home learning environment as a result of the programme, increasing to 36% from 10% at the beginning of the programme.

This was reflected in an increase in confidence: 82% of practitioners reported being confident engaging with parents at the end of the programme compared with 74% at the beginning.

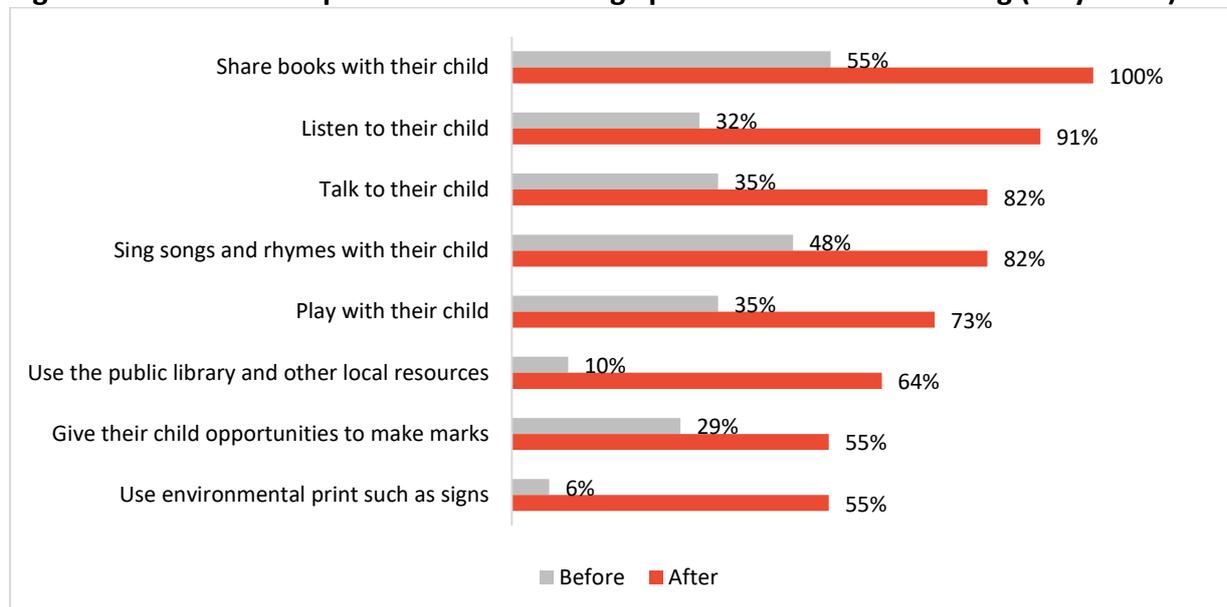
Figure 6: Percentage of practitioners who report engaging in these behaviours 'very often'



We also asked practitioners how frequently they encourage parents to engage in specific behaviours. As seen in Figure 7, the percentage of practitioners who encourage parents to

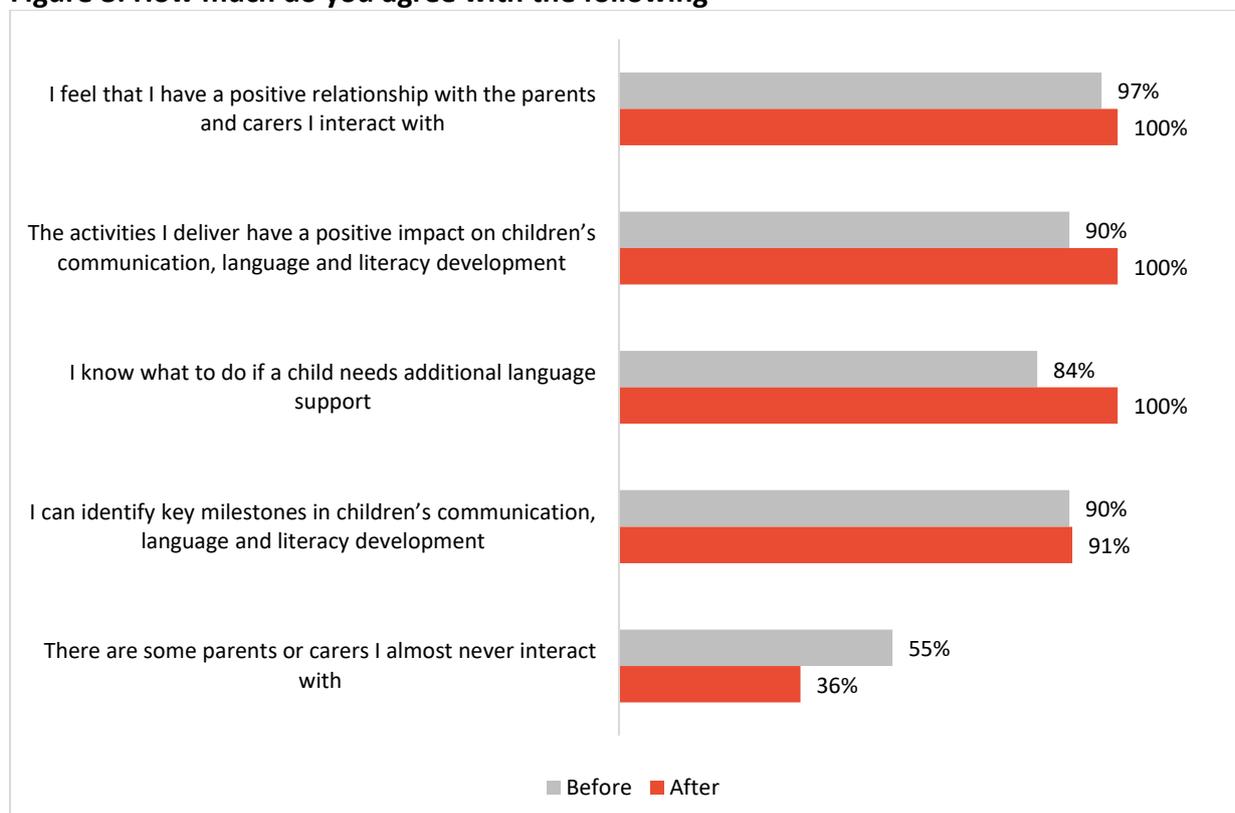
listen to their child increased almost threefold, from 32% at the beginning to 91% at the end of the programme. More practitioners also encourage parents to talk to their child (35% to 82%) very often and to use the public library (10% to 64%).

Figure 7: How often do practitioners encourage parents to do the following (very often)



There were also positive changes in their attitudes to parents and language development (see Figure 8). For example, more practitioners know what to do if a child needs additional language support after the programme than before (84% to 100%).

Figure 8: How much do you agree with the following



Many practitioners have reported that running Early Words Together sessions has helped build positive relationships between practitioners and parents. Practitioners were able to spend time finding out more about the children's family lives and helping parents support their child's development.

“Home-school relationships improved which meant that [the parents] were more willing to approach school regarding how to support their child at home.”

“I realise how important it is to have strong positive relationships with parents and I would feel more confident to run parent groups in the future because of the training and experience gained by EWTa3.”

“I love the time that I get to spend talking to parents and seeing how they can support one another.”



As a result of taking part in the sessions, some parents have begun to engage more with the settings by sharing positive experiences at home through online journals:

“Parents now add more observations themselves on to their child's electronic learning journey. Cooking at home together, trips, activities completed at home.”

“I have noticed some of the parents are engaging more with home learning such as completing family challenges or uploading things that they have done at home onto tapestry.”

One practitioner highlighted how the Early Words Together programme can challenge assumptions that settings might have about families:

“The programme is very simple but actually is very supportive of parents. Quite often we assume parents know what to do and how to support their child and this is something we will not do in the future. We think Early Words Together can be invaluable by helping to build relationships with parents but also in supporting parents to know what to do and how to support their child.”

One setting has done so well in engaging parents through Early Words Together that we chose to feature them in short videos, highlighting how to support families to become aware of the importance of talking with their three-year-old children, and different activities they can do to support language development:

<https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/early-words-together/early-words-together-three/early-words-together-practitioner-videos/>. These training videos are now used around the country for early years practitioners about to embark on an Early Words Together project.



Challenges

The final number of families reached (205) fell slightly short of the original target of 225. Two settings that were initially trained did not participate in the programme, taking the number of active settings down to 13. However, as each setting was asked to reach 15 families (a total of 195 families for 13 settings), the active settings actually surpassed the number of families expected of them. Practitioners reported that parent retention, staff availability and available space were the main challenges facing practitioners. Additionally, one practitioner noted that supporting multilingual families to engage with the sessions was challenging:

“Parents’ access to English is limited. We have had the benefit of an interpreter. Even so, we found that one parent didn’t have the vocabulary for positional language in her home language. We found that simplifying some of the sessions made it more accessible for our parents.”

A lot of practitioners cited that a main problem for them was getting the parents to attend in the first place, although one said:

“Once parents had attended one session, they were keen and enthusiastic to complete the cycle.”

Training Feedback

There has been positive feedback about the training, with 52% of practitioners saying that the training has improved their understanding of the programme ‘very significantly’. Similarly, 52% of practitioners said that they think the programme resources will be ‘very useful’. 66% of practitioners said that they feel quite confident or very confident in putting what they have learnt into practice.

83% of practitioners said that they thought the time allowed for each session was ‘about right’, and 52% said that the trainer met the needs of the group ‘very well’. One practitioner said the trainer was:

“very engaging and empathetic”

91% of practitioners rated the training as very good or excellent overall, and 78% of people said that they would recommend this training to other schools.

We asked practitioners what the most helpful part of the day was, and something that was brought up multiple times was helping them interact with parents:

“Learning how to talk to parents”

Conclusion

In summary, Early Words Together at Three in Leicester has achieved intended outcomes for children, parents and practitioners. The programme seems to have been effective in furthering children’s interest and engagement in activities and behaviours that promote language and communication (i.e. shared reading, sustained listening and attention, singing, mark-making).

These changes in children’s attitudes and behaviours may be explained by improvements in their home learning environments. Parents reported having a better understanding of how to support their child at home, and being more confident doing so as a result of the programme. These attitudinal shifts seem to go hand in hand with positive changes in parental behaviours, with parents reportedly engaging more frequently in activities that promote the language development of their children, such as extending talk, singing songs, sharing books and getting out and about.

The programme seemed to have a particularly positive impact on the many multilingual parents and children taking part, with multilingual parents reportedly having more confidence speaking with their children in their home language, and children reportedly more confident speaking in their home language and in English. These changes may be connected with practitioners being more confident engaging with parents, and engaging more regularly with them to discuss ways to support a strong home learning environment.

Methodology

Survey	Survey responses
Parent survey	76
Practitioner pre	31
Practitioner post	11
Progress report	38
Training feedback	23