

## **“TALKING TOGETHER” IN BIRMINGHAM**

“Talking Together” is the generic title of a set of four, colourful, easy to follow leaflets, with wonderful photographs, providing information on ways of supporting children’s listening and communication skills. The leaflets are available to parents and agencies from a wide range of early years settings, working with young children. Each leaflet focuses on a slightly different set of messages broadly associated with babies and young children starting to listen, babble and take turns; babies and young children starting to use sounds and gestures; children starting to use words; young children starting to put words together. The series is developmental in nature and each leaflet can be selected to suit the individual child.

**“This is the first time there has been something constructive about talking to provide to parents .... A much needed, high quality resource”**

“Talking Together” was launched in June 2003 and grew from Birmingham’s commitment to ensure that all children have the best possible opportunity to develop language and communication. It was intended that the series of leaflets would be an additional tool to help enhance existing activities to support children’s listening and communication skills and will play a role in the prevention of speech and language difficulties.

The leaflets were developed collaboratively by a number of different services including Sure Start, Speech & Language Therapy, Educational Psychology, Pre-School Workers, Health Visitors, Specialist Support Services, the Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership and Birmingham City Council Learning and Culture. Since its launch, feedback on the Talking Together series has been received from over 80 different early years settings and services, including health, education, social services, private settings, voluntary and community groups.

The leaflets are considered to be clear, eye-catching, well written, logically organised and presented, with excellent photographs, making them more accessible for people with limited literacy skills. They are easy to follow with helpful information and ideas, which compliment other resources and activities going on in Birmingham. By using the “Talking Together” leaflets parents have reported feeling more confident about encouraging their children to talk.

The feedback to date has suggested that these relatively simple materials have often formed the basis of a discussion between the parent and the early years practitioner particularly where the issue of language development/delay has been a difficult topic to raise ‘cold’. The leaflets have led to discussions, for example, on a one-to one basis or during parent workshops, where the focus of the discussion may be on establishing how the child’s speech and language development is progressing, or how parents might encourage their child’s speaking and listening. Such discussions happen at different times including when a child starts nursery or to complement sessions such as book

sharing and parent workshops, or to support curriculum topics within the setting.

In addition to being used to support discussion, the leaflets have often displayed on information boards, included in resource packs for parents or used to support video material. Leaflets have been made available to parents whose children may be part of listening and communication groups. Often ideas from the leaflets are demonstrated to parents so that they feel comfortable to have a go themselves at home.

The feedback so far suggests that the leaflets have been made available to parents for many reasons, including to:

- Stress the importance of the development of listening and communication.
- Encourage parents to talk with their children.
- Provide information and ideas on how to encourage listening and communication skills in everyday activities.
- Help early years practitioners to talk about language and communication with parents, in order to reinforce language activities being carried out within the early years setting.
- Provide support or reassurance for parents who may be concerned about their child's language development. Indeed, services involved in supporting children with speech and language difficulties have found the leaflets useful as an additional tool to support their work in facilitating the development of a child's communication skills. "Talking Together" has been introduced following referral to services such as Speech & Language Therapy

There have also been some exciting spin-offs from using the "Talking Together" materials, for both parents and early years practitioners. For example the leaflets have been used as learning material in family literacy programmes to help parents develop their own language and literacy skills, including parents whose first language is not English. The leaflets have been used in professional development sessions, to provide information and ideas on encouraging language and communication for students and staff working within a range of early years settings and services. Its developmental approach means that "Talking Together" is also being used to support the observation and assessment of a child's listening and communication skills in early years settings.

Given the initial success of "Talking Together", further ideas have emerged to expand the resources available, including developing posters and a video of the key messages about listening and communication contained within the leaflets. Other ideas include developing a resource bag of toys and objects to accompany the leaflets.

The uniqueness of the leaflets lies in their multi-agency production and use, and in the scale of their distribution and use. Other similar materials had been produced before but these were overspecific to one agency, produced in relatively small numbers, and restricted in their use. Parents and

professionals have valued the promotion of a set of commonly-agreed messages, in large numbers, across all agencies, in a multiplicity of ways to suit the local pattern of activity.

There is an ongoing need, within Birmingham, to make sure that the “Talking Together” material is available to even more parents, early years services and settings across the city, as well as at the same time ensuring that the information and ideas about listening, language and communication development within “Talking Together” remain relevant and appropriate, as research continues to grow in the area of child language development.