



Little Voices overview:



The project which is the oral language strand of ABC Start right Limerick provides services for children 0–6 years. The strands of Little Voices are many and include speech, language and communication programmes for babies 0–12 months, wobblers 12–24 months, toddlers 2–3 years, pre-schoolers 3–5 years and junior infants 5–6 years.

Parent and child programmes include; ‘babbling babies’, ‘wobbler words’, ‘talking toddlers’, ‘Bringing stories to life’ (toddlers and preschool), ‘Loving language’ and ‘Family Reading’ (Junior Infants) ‘Rhyme time fun’ and universal information sessions in baby and toddler groups.

In preschools and schools, teachers and Early Years Practitioners, with support from Little Voices, run Talk boost (ICAN, 2012) and Early Talkboost (ICAN, 2015) evidence based language development programmes children with delayed language development.

Practitioner training is run regularly for early years staff, preschool staff and teachers in all aspects of speech, language and communication development.

Little Voices is accessible on social media where it provides information regarding best practice and promotion of children’s speech and language and communication [Facebook: LittleVoices16].

Parent and Child Programs

All Little Voices parent and child programs incorporate a theory, demonstration and coaching approach. Parents first attend a theory and demonstration session on their own with the “language teacher” where communication strategies relevant to the age group are presented, demonstrated and discussed in creative ways. Parents then join their own child in their rooms where communication strategies previously discussed are demonstrated by the “language teacher” first and parents are then given time and an opportunity to practice these new strategies with their child and receive coaching and guidance. The content of these programs incorporated universal interaction and communication strategies depending on the target age group.

‘**Babbling Babies**’ is run with the early years (EY) practitioners and babies in EY services. The SLT visits baby rooms and provided practitioners with ideas and activities to promote language and communication skills for babies. Recently these sessions are being supplemented with content form the Baby Room project which is run in conjunction with the early years coordinator and Infant mental health specialist.

Wobbler Words

Wobbler Words is delivered over 4 to 6 sessions. The interaction and communication strategies introduced during Wobbler Words include being face to face with your child, providing opportunities for your child to communicate, look, wait and listen to what your child is telling you and respond and expand on what your child says. Recently these sessions are being supplemented with content from the Baby Room project which is run in conjunction with the early years coordinator and Infant mental health specialist.

Talking Toddlers

Talking Toddlers was designed by the SLT originally in conjunction with an adult education tutor from LCETB to be delivered by LCETB tutors independently in the future. It now runs co facilitated by the SLT and EYP in the toddler rooms of the four services in the area. The content covered over 4 – 6 weeks is based on interaction strategies which support speech, language and communication development and includes look, listen and wait to allow your child time to communicate. Comment and expand on what your child says. As well as topics such as your child and screen time, reading with your child and play.

Bringing Stories to Life Toddler and Preschool

'Bringing Stories to Life' groups are run in the preschool rooms with parents and EY practitioners. Parents are invited to attend weekly sessions for 4 weeks. We demonstrate good listening skills, rhymes and a story with their child. The SLT demonstrates how to grab children's attention, keep them engaged and give them an opportunity to participate in the story while simultaneously developing language skills through explaining, highlighting new vocabulary, questioning for meaning, predicting to activate prior knowledge.

Little Voices Loving Language

The interaction strategies introduced with the junior infant parents include descriptive commenting, balancing comments and questions, expanding your child's language and being a good speech and language model.

This consists of 3 sessions and are co facilitated with the HSCL teacher. First we speak to parents alone and then we go to the classroom to demonstrate and model activities with the parents and their children. They get an opportunity to practice the strategy.

Little Voices Family Reading

Reading Comprehension strategies covered in these sessions include vocabulary development, Predicting, Making Connections and Questioning. This programme also consists of 3 sessions and are co facilitated with the HSCL teacher. First we speak to parents alone and then we go to the classroom to demonstrate by reading a story and model activities with the parents and their children. They get an opportunity to practice the strategy.

Little Voices "Stay and Play" / Drop in sessions

Little Voices tag on clinic. Meeting with parents after their babies 7–9 month check-up (with PHN/ AMO) to talk about speech and language development and give them ideas on how to track their baby's development and give them tips on how to develop speech language and communication skills.

Little Voices deliver once off sessions for parents and practitioners at drop off and pick up times in the early years settings to raise awareness of the importance of speech and language skills and demonstrate practical ways of developing early language and communication skills through song, rhyme, stories and play. Little voices will do drop in sessions in settings so parents can come and discuss their child's speech and language needs.

'Rhyme Time Fun' sessions are delivered with parents and practitioners in EY services in wobbler and toddler rooms, baby and toddler groups and the Teen Parent support group. Booklets of rhymes were devised by the Little Voices SLT and provided to EY practitioners and parents to use with children from babies to preschoolers. These booklets contained traditional rhymes with tips and ideas on how to develop children's language skills.

Other Practitioner Training

Hanen training, It Takes Two To Talk and Encouraging Language Development in Early Childhood Settings.

This Hanen training delivered in 2015 for early years practitioners in Sunshine Creche and Little seeds Creche targets the use of everyday conversations, play and daily routines to promote the communication and social development of all children, including those with language delays and those who are second language learners. Topics covered during the training included children's conversational styles and the role practitioners play in interactions. Significant focus was placed on following the child's lead by Observing, Waiting and Listening and the strategies, Be Face to Face, Imitate, Interpret, Comment, and Join in and Play. Practitioners were shown how to help children become better conversation partners. The training was followed up with onsite visits and mentoring from the SLT. This training was offered by the Limerick Childcare Committee in 2016 and was open to all Community Childcare providers in Limerick. A review session for those having previously attended was done in 2017. Further follow up information sessions and coaching sessions are regularly done.

Other sessions have been:

Language and Sensory Play for Babies

Using gestures with babies

The Baby Room project 3 sessions for EYPs

Language and Sensory Play for Wobblers and Toddlers

Identify and Supporting Language Development for Preschoolers

Bilingualism discussions/ talks with parents

Speech sound development for teachers

Guest Lectures/ Talks Mary Immaculate College Limerick, County Childcare committee

Workshop for LCETB Literacy Tutors and Family Learning Tutors.

Targeted Language Support Programs

Early Talk Boost Training

Little Voices co-delivered Early Talk Boost (ICAN, 2015) programs in all preschools in 2016 in conjunction with preschool leaders. This evidence based program was delivered to children with delayed language development helping to boost their language skills and narrow the gap between them and their peers. The program was delivered to target children who may have difficulty listening/paying attention, poor vocabulary, difficulty understanding language, difficulty organising and using language, immature sentences, difficulty explaining or describing, difficulty taking turns. Followed by training delivered by the speech and language therapist these programs can be delivered independently by early years practitioners and teachers in the preschool and school settings. Recently Primary Care SLTs throughout the MW region have been trained as licensees.

Talk Boost Training

A one off Talk Boost training session and resources are offered to all schools individually in the target area. Follow up support is also offered to teachers delivering the program. This is an evidence based program for children aged 4–7 years with delayed language development helping to boost their language skills and narrow the gap between them and their peers. The program targets children who may have difficulty listening/paying attention, poor vocabulary, difficulty understanding language, difficulty organising and using language, immature sentences, difficulty explaining or describing, difficulty taking turns. Recently Primary Care SLTs throughout the MW region have been trained as licensees, in order to mainstream this programme.

Oral Language Development Module with M.I.C.

An oral language development module was developed and Delivered in the Autumn of 2014 by the Centre for Early-Childhood Research and the Little Voices Speech and Language Therapist at Mary Immaculate College (CERAMIC) for adult education and family learning tutors from Limerick Clare Adult Education Training Board (LCETB). The six week evening program included topics such as 'The Psychology of Language Acquisition in the Early Years'; 'Developing Children's Oral Language through Creativity' and Developing Children's Oral Language through Play. The module targeted tutors who could act as communication champions by providing the parents with whom they work with information, knowledge and understanding of language stimulation strategies and their importance. These parents could then use this information to create language rich environments and develop their children's oral-language skills.

Introduction to "Encouraging Language Development in Early Childhood Settings"
Introduction to *Encouraging Language Development in Early Childhood Settings* and the Hanen approach was delivered to LCETB Literacy Tutors and Family

Learning Tutors by Little Voices in June 2015. Content included the use of everyday conversations, play and daily routines to promote the communication and social development of all children. This programme along with It takes two to talk Hanen programme continues to be delivered with early years practitioners and other targeted programmes such as Parent Child Home Programme.

Printed Materials

Little Voices Tips and Tracker

The Little Voices tips and tracker is a developmental tool for parents which allow them to track their child's speech, language and communication development from birth to 3 years. The tips and tracker was designed by the Little Voices speech and language therapist. Uniquely, each developmental milestone is paired with a tip. These tips give parents ideas on how to help their child reach each speech, language and communication milestone. Areas covered include attention and listening, play and chat, understanding, talking and speech sounds. The tracker is given to parents at their 0-3 month developmental check up with their PHN and reviewed with parents at their 7-9 month developmental clinic when they meet the speech and language therapist.

Stages of Language Development Poster for Early Years Settings

The Stages of Language Development Poster for Early Years Settings is a developmental tool for early years practitioners containing information from the Little voices Tips and Tracker which allow them to track children's speech, language and communication development from birth to 5 years. Each age range gives developmental milestones and ideas for supporting speech, language and communication development. This is coming soon along with a reference for PHNs for their child health clinics.

Rhyme Time Fun Leaflet and Poster

The rhyme time fun leaflet contains information regarding the important and benefits of saying rhymes with young children. The leaflet gives suggestions for introducing rhymes to different age ranges including 0-1 years, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 4-5 years on the inside pages and then opens into an attractive A4 poster containing the words of common nursery rhymes to share with children. Story time coming soon.

Little Voices Toolkit

The toolkit was the culmination of the Little Voices pilot project which ran from 2013 to 2015 and was completed within the lifetime of the ABC Start Right project. The toolkit is intended to offer a practical guide for a wide audience including individuals and services seeking to support children's language development as well as groups working with children, parents and communities in areas experiencing social disadvantage.

Population Approach

News paper articles

News paper articles submitted and printed in the Limerick Chronicle/ Leader include; "Talkers make great readers" and "Introducing toddlers to books", "Just one more bite" (about fussy eating) Dos and don'ts of dummy use, and articles to coincide with World book day and World nursery rhyme week.

Little Voice Facebook Page

The Little Voices facebook page shares information regarding the importance of attachment, language and communication and ways in which parents can support their child's language, communication and social and emotional development. The page currently has 1200+ followers.

No Pens Day

No Pens Day encourages schools to put down their pens and pick up language by spending one day focusing on learning through speaking and listening. The aim of 'No Pens Day' is to highlight and promote oral language skills to school communities, families, and children. Oral language activity packs were sent to schools in advance which contained ideas for running a 'No Pens Day' in classes from junior infants to sixth class. On the day, the Little Voices speech and language therapists were available to visit schools and classrooms to talk about the importance of communication and language.

World Nursery Rhyme week:

This was supported by Little Voices in 2017. Activities and resource packs were given to settings which ranged from baby rooms in crèches to whole schools getting involved. Articles appeared in the paper and SLTs went on the radio to promote the simple message of promoting nursery rhymes to help develop language and literacy skills.

Measurements and results:

The 'Bringing Stories to Life' programmes were delivered in toddler and pre-school rooms with parents and early-years practitioners. Parents were invited to attend four weekly sessions. The speech and language therapist (SLT) demonstrated reading a story with tips and guidelines for parents on holding the children's attention, using actions to aid comprehension, extending the child's language and adding vocabulary.

A focus group discussion was conducted post-programme to ascertain parental views and opinions on the effectiveness of this programme.

What did this group of parents think?

All of the parents were in agreement that their children had enjoyed the program: *"they do love it"* and *"brilliant"* being some of the comments. Some of the parents described how their children *'looked forward to it'*, with one parent describing how her daughter knew the story time was on Tuesdays *"Mammy, today is story-day!"*

This is consistent with much research which emphasises that children will learn more words if they are interested in the subject matter, so making the stories fun and exciting is an effective way to do this.

Doing the activities in a group was seen to be beneficial for the children with one parent describing how their child found it easier to concentrate in a group:

"Its always easier to do things in a group as well, I find it easier, especially with S. like its very hard to get her attention sometimes, but if they are in a group it is easier"

Much of childrens' learning is observational and watching how the other children in the group listen to the story possibly helped this child to focus her attention on the story (Gaskins and Paradise 2010).

Helping to develop home-school links

This group of parents were also aware of the importance of following on with activities at home:

"Yes, its one thing to be doing it in the crèche but when they go home, they need to be doing it again"

"...because they are given the stories to take home, every night, I hear him saying can we do our homework and he'd be taking out his envelope, you know and he would be going through them at night"

Some of the parents also spoke of how doing the work at home was helpful in preparing the children for the transition to primary school: *"Its getting them used to big school"*.

Research has shown that encouraging these home-school links leads to better outcomes for children not only in terms of their academic achievement but also in their social development, as they are receiving similar messages from the both the home and the school (Hill and Taylor 2004). Studies have also indicated that although school readiness is a complex concept; spending time at home encouraging childrens' language skills plays a significant role in preparing children for the transition to primary school (Parker et al 1999).

Had the parents themselves learned new ideas?

The parents felt they themselves had learned how to make story time not only more enjoyable but had also learned new tips for encouraging their children's language development.

"It's giving you good ideas as well for when you are reading a story to them at home"

"I suppose you learn how to tell a story properly from watching them do it"

"You are learning ways of doing the story with them"

One of the parents spoke of how previously she had tended to just read the story but since taking part in the program she now realised that:

"When you do all the actions and stuff, it make a huge difference, you know it's not just to read the story but to do all the actions as well"

Many of the parents felt they were now interacting with their children as opposed to just reading a story aloud:

"They are interacting with it, you know they are interacting with the reader"

"you are actually interacting with the kids like"

When reading stories is fun and not seen as a chore, the children's language development is fostered in a natural way and additionally helps to develop strong attachment bonds between parents and children (Dickenson *et al*/2011).

The **Early Talk Boost** (ETB) Programme was introduced by Little Voices in 2016 and an analysis of pre and post programme results was conducted in early 2017 with a group of 55 children from seven pre-schools in the area. The age range was from three years to five years with the majority (n = 36) aged between three and a half years, and four and a half years.

Data were gathered using the ETB tracker which was administered by the SLT.

The results on the ETB tracker for this group of children suggest that the ETB programme had a statistically significant effect on oral language skills. This is consistent with results from the UK.

Additionally, a focus group was conducted with early years practitioners from the early years services accessing the Early Talk Boost programme. Almost all of the practitioners noted positive changes in the children's language skills. For example, *"the language skills of some of the children has really improved, they are using their words more"* and that it *"helped the children to communicate in a fun and creative way."* In particular, many of the practitioners felt that the smaller groups were beneficial to the children's language development: *"the small group*

learning and focused attention really helped children" Crucially, all felt the programme supported both themselves as practitioners and the children's oral language development and that they would "definitely would like it to continue."

A focus group with parents who had participated in the 'Loving Language' Junior Infant parent programme was undertaken after the programme had been completed. The following details identify information received from parents.

All of the parents in the discussion group felt they had benefited from the program in some way. *"You would learn things from it"* and that it helps them to *"bring out the words a bit more"*. One of the parents described how now she takes the time to explain things to her child, instead of saying *"I don't know"*.

"when the child asks you something and you says you don't know, you would kind of be worse than the child when you are rushing around, they kind of learn from their...like how are they going to learn if you don't explain it to them...I have learnt now not to do that like, its better for the child, to take a minute to tell them what it is.."

Some of the parents also spoke about how they feel *"a lot more confident,"* and also that the programme provided reassurance that all children develop language skills at different rates and *"that it is normal, as she says, to get the words wrong"*.

This capacity building in parents of both their own ability to support their children's language development in in everyday situations and also the confidence of knowing that all children develop language at different rates is one of the primary aims of the 'Loving Language' programme (Hill and Taylor 2004).

Summary:

Currently results from speech and language assessments of the new cohort of Junior Infants and focus groups in the area is being evaluated by CES. We have data from 2013/2014 and 2017. This year we will have data from 2018. The results so far are indicating that the interventions in settings, and preschools are having positive effect on children's language abilities when starting school.

Further structured interviews and focus groups of parents and practitioners are planned for 2018. University of Limerick are hoping to evaluate some of the interventions in 2018 also.

Unique features of the Little Voices programme.

A focus on parental engagement: A significant amount of time, effort and emphasis was put on and into parental engagement as the guiding principle throughout the project.

Building a sense of community ownership:

Consultations were held with children, parents and staff about the name and logo of the project aimed to encourage participation, promote the project, and foster ownership. Input from parents was sought from the outset and during the planning phase. Feedback from parents was also gathered throughout the project using evaluation forms, informal conversation and formal focus groups.

Accessible and practical staff training:

In addition to formal professional development training for early years staff, training was integrated with on-site advice and mentoring provided by the SLT during the normal working day of the crèche. This enabled a much stronger practical content. For example as well as training and development sessions being held with staff, the SLT supported mentoring sessions each week with the practitioners.

User-friendly resources:

The Speech and Language Tips and Tracker was the first local product of its kind giving not only the developmental milestones but also practical suggestions to parents about how to interact with their young child (0-3 years). It is user and reader friendly. Each age section can be removed as the child progresses and develops language and communication skills. Positive reactions from parents, children, public health nurses and other staff working in the early years sector to this product has meant that it has become a symbol and key resource for the project.

Summary:

Children from socially disadvantaged areas are at increased risk of speech language and communication delays. Children with persistent speech language and communication difficulties usually require extra help in school at a significant cost. These children are at increased risk of behavioural difficulties which can result in exclusions and criminal activity both of which have huge cost implications. Add to this the prevalence of mental health issues in this population and this raises the cost again. And the lack of employment opportunities due to lower academic achievements increases the likelihood of unemployment which also increases the cost to the state.

A Social Model is used by Little Voices with the goal of addressing the broader influences on language development by engaging with and supporting everyone involved in a child's life. It uses a community-based approach focusing on prevention and early intervention.

A key aim of Little Voices is to raise awareness of the importance, scope and problems associated with language difficulties amongst the general population.

Little Voices strives to strengthen the capacity of parents to create language rich learning and nurturing environments at home.

- Universal services were offered to all children in an attempt to prevent early speech and language difficulties.
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- Targeted Services were delivered for the children identified as being at risk for speech and language difficulties. Targeted services can be delivered by adults with awareness, experience and skills in the areas of speech, language and communication. Therefore, the project facilitated the transfer of skills from specialist speech and language therapists to early year's educators and schools.

Traditional speech and language therapy services are commonly offered to parents, in a health centre. Little Voices engages parents in local community settings which were non-threatening, more familiar and accessible to them.

