

Senedd Cymru  
Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a  
Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol  
Gofal plant a chyflogaeth rhieni: y  
pandemig a thu hwnt  
CPE(13)  
Ymateb gan Coleg Brenhinol  
Therapyddion Iaith a Lleferydd

Welsh Parliament  
Equality and Social Justice Committee  
  
Childcare and parental employment:  
the pandemic and beyond  
CPE(13)  
Evidence from Royal College of Speech  
and Language Therapists

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## Executive summary

Thank you for the opportunity to give written evidence as part of the committee's inquiry into childcare and parental employment: the pandemic and beyond. In our response, we focus primarily on one key question raised within the terms of reference namely;

- *The impact of high-quality formal childcare provision on reducing the attainment gap, and the potential benefits of extending childcare provision to tackle inequalities.*

## Key points

- There is strong evidence of the benefits of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Early years practitioners have a crucial role in supporting children's development and in closing the language gap between children from higher and lower income families, which begins in infancy, promoting social mobility and offering children the best start in life.
- Recent research conducted during the pandemic highlighted the importance of high-quality ECEC for the development of key skills and for levelling socioeconomic inequalities noting that the protective effect of ECEC was likely to be even greater during the pandemic.
- As a key element of high-quality formal childcare provision, all early years' practitioners need to have the requisite skills, knowledge, confidence and attitudes to promote language development, and identify and support children with speech, language and communication needs.
- Since the publication of the Welsh Government [Talk With Me: Speech, Language and Communication Delivery Plan 2020-2022](#), there have been a number of positive actions taken to upskill the childcare, health and social care workforce in Wales to address speech, language and communication (SLC) needs. This area requires sustained focus.

## About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

1. RCSLT is the professional body for speech and language therapists, SLT students and support workers working in the UK. The RCSLT has over

18,000 members in the UK (650 in Wales) representing approximately 95% of SLTs working in the UK (who are registered with the Health & Care Professions Council). We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, care and justice policies.

2. Speech and Language Therapy manages the risk of harm and reduces functional impact for people with speech, language and communication support needs (SLCN) and/or swallowing difficulties.
3. Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) are experts in supporting children, young people and adults with speech, language and communication needs and training the wider workforce so that they can identify the signs of SLCN, improve communication environments and provide effective support.

## The impact of high-quality formal childcare provision on reducing the attainment gap, and the potential benefits of extending childcare provision to tackle inequalities.

1. Good early language skills are central to children's early years development and school readiness. They play a crucial role in literacy, a child's ability to achieve their educational potential, their social mobility, and their life chances. Beyond academic attainment, well-developed speech, language and communication skills are fundamental to the ability to form and maintain social relationships with family, peers and friends.
2. Not all children have the speech, language, and communication skills they need to fully engage with their education. It is estimated that 10% of all children in the UK have long-term, persistent speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)<sup>1</sup>. Research shows that there is a strong correlation however between poverty and delayed language. By which we mean, those children whose language skills are developing significantly more slowly than those of other children of the same age but who do not have a specific disorder. Studies of whole populations reveal a clear social gradient for language development, with children from the most disadvantaged groups more likely to have weaker language skills than those in more advantaged groups.<sup>2</sup> Language skills are a critical factor in the intergenerational cycles that can perpetuate poverty<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> ICAN Talk Series – Issue 2. (2009) The Cost of the Nation of Children's Poor Communication. ICAN

<sup>2</sup> Law, J, Todd, L, Clark, J, Mroz, M and Carr, J (2013a) Early Language Delays in the UK. Save the Children

<sup>3</sup> Hart B & Risley T.R (2003). The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by 3. American Educator, 27 (1), 4 -9

## Key statistics

- Over 50% of children in socially deprived areas may start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills<sup>4</sup>
- On average children from the poorest 20% of the population are over 17 months behind a child in the highest income group in language development at age three.<sup>5</sup>
- Vocabulary at age 5 has been found to be the best predictor (from a range of measures at age 5 and 10) of whether children who experienced social deprivation in childhood were able to 'buck the trend' and escape poverty in later adult life<sup>6</sup>. Researchers have found that, after controlling for a range of other factors that might have played a part (mother's educational level, overcrowding, low birth weight, parent a poor reader, etc), **children who had normal non-verbal skills but a poor vocabulary at age 5 were at age 34 one and a half times more likely to be poor readers or have mental health problems and more than twice as likely to be unemployed as children who had normally developing language at age 5.**<sup>7</sup>

There is an increasing focus on children's speech, language and communication skills within early years' policy in Wales, both within the home environment and within early years provision. The strongest influence on the early language skills of young children are their parents and carers. Poverty can strongly reduce parents' ability to respond to their child's early language needs and offer a home learning environment that enhances language skills in the early years<sup>8</sup>. Supporting parents to foster a communication and language rich home environment is fundamental to improving children's early speech, language and communication skills.

Beyond the home environment, there is strong evidence of the benefits of high-quality early education and childcare from the perspective of vocabulary and literacy development<sup>9</sup>. Early years practitioners have a crucial role to play in

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<sup>4</sup> 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), pp. 3-15.

<sup>5</sup> Save the Children (2014) *How reading can help children escape poverty*. London: Save the Children

<sup>6</sup> Blanden, J. (2006) *Bucking the Trend - What enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed later in life?* London: Department for Work and Pensions.

<sup>7</sup> Law, J. et al (2010) Modelling developmental language difficulties from school entry into adulthood. *Journal of speech, language and hearing research*, 52, 1401-1416

<sup>8</sup> Law, J et al (2015). *Early language delays in the UK*, Save the Children: London. <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/news/documents/Lawetal2013EarlyLanguageDelaysintheUK.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Havnes, Tarjei & Mogstad, Magne, 2009. "Money for nothing? Universal childcare and maternal employment," IZA Discussion Papers 4504, Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA)

supporting children’s development. They share the early learning and skills that provide the foundation for school readiness and support good future progress through education and later life. The early years workforce is also vital in closing the language gap between children from higher and lower income families, which begins in infancy, promoting social mobility and offering children the best start in life.

Recent research conducted during the pandemic highlighted the importance of high-quality ECEC for the development of key skills and for levelling socioeconomic inequalities. It is well known that lower-income families have been disproportionately impacted by higher rates of infections, deaths, unemployment, and mental ill-health<sup>10 1112</sup>; all factors which have the potential to negatively affect home interactions with children. The research concludes that the protective effect of ECEC was likely to be even greater during the pandemic<sup>13</sup>

Given the wide-ranging evidence, a number of academics have argued that ‘investment in early ECEC is a effective way of reducing socioeconomic inequalities’<sup>1415</sup>. The Education Endowment Foundation’s early years toolkit also concludes that the use of ‘communication and language approaches in early years education result in a high impact for a very low cost’<sup>16</sup>.

## Progress on the ability of high-quality formal childcare provision to reduce the attainment gap,

We warmly welcomed the publication of the [Welsh Government: Talk With Me Speech, Language and Communication delivery plan](#) in 2020 and the secondment of two speech and language therapists as national speech, language

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<sup>10</sup> Kousoulis, A., McDaid, S., Crepez-Keay, D., Solomon, S., Lombardo, C., Yap, J., ... Davidson, G. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, financial inequality and mental health. London: Mental Health Foundation

<sup>11</sup> Office for National Statistics [ONS]. Coronavirus and depression in adults, Great Britain: January to March 2021

<sup>12</sup> Shum, A., Skripkauskaitė, S., Pearcey, S., Raw, J., Waite, P., & Creswell, C. (2021). Report 07: Changes in parents' mental health symptoms and stressors from April to December 2020. University of Oxford Co-Space Study.

<sup>13</sup> Davies C, Hendry A, Gibson SP, Gliga T, McGillion M, Gonzalez-Gomez N, 'Early childhood education and care (ECEC) during COVID-19 boosts growth in language and executive function' *Infant and Child Development* 30 (4) (2021) ISSN: 1522-7227 eISSN: 1522-7219

<sup>14</sup> Center on the Developing Child. (2010). Foundations of lifelong health are built in early childhood. Retrieved from [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

<sup>15</sup> Heckman, J. J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312(5782), 1900–1902.

<sup>16</sup> [EEF, 2018](#)

and communication co-ordinators. It is extremely positive that a key objective within the plan is upskill the childcare, health and social care workforce in Wales to address speech, language and communication needs. A number of key steps have been taken under this banner including;

- the launch of the all-Wales SLC training pathway for childcare practitioners that enables practitioners to identify their personal training needs and empowers staff to access training to promote SLC skills and identify those needing early access to intervention.
- The development of a level 4 professional practice qualification in speech, language and communication as part of the suite of new Children's Care Play Learning and Development (CCPLD) qualifications.
- Childcare and Play inspectors offered annual/ online training in children's early language development.

There is a pressing need to ensure that the training pathway are widely available and that childcare practitioners are afforded time to be able to access these key resources. It is also vital that SLC continues to be considered in national conversations about the impact of the CCPLD qualifications and viewed as part of inspection processes.

## The potential benefits of extending childcare provision to tackle inequalities.

As we have highlighted above, ECEC has a key role to play in supporting child development and reducing the language gap for children from lower social economic groups. There is a great deal of learning in this regard from the Flying Start programme. Given the strong correlation between disadvantage and early language delay, the Flying Start programme has prioritised speech, language and communication since its inception. To support this key strand of work, a speech and language therapist (SLT) was seconded into Welsh Government for six months to write the programme guidance document on speech, language and communication. In addition, a SLT has been employed at every Flying Start team in Wales. Part of the role of the therapist is both to upskill the early years workforce in these areas and to improve parents' knowledge and skills to support children's early language development. This strategic approach ensures that;

- all Flying Start childcare staff have an understanding of SLC development
- all Flying Start childcare practitioners provide a rich learning environment that fosters language and communication opportunities for all children

There is a wealth of evidence available showcasing the positive outcomes of this model. In 2015, the Bridgend Flying Start SLTs won an NHS Wales award for their work in reducing language delay in two and three year olds. The SLTs worked with Flying Start nurseries in Bridgend to achieve a significant reduction in the number of children with delayed language skills. Out of over 600 children

screened on starting nursery, 73% were assessed as having significant language delay, which would impact on future learning development. After the interventions delivered by nursery staff which were planned and supported by the Flying Start SLTs, 68% of the children with the worst language delay had improved.<sup>17</sup>

We remain concerned that many young children living in poverty in Wales are unable to access the SLC support offered by Flying Start given the relationship between social disadvantage and early language delay. Recent research has suggested that 44% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds live outside of Flying Start areas<sup>18</sup> (Save the Children, 2018). In exploring the potential benefits of extending childcare provision to tackle inequalities, we believe it would be extremely helpful for the committee to consider how children at risk and living outside of Flying Start areas may be able to access targeted support.

## Further information

We hope this paper will be helpful in supporting the committee's discussions around childcare and parental employment. We would be happy to provide further information if this would be of benefit. Please see below our contact details.

**Pippa Cotterill, Head of Wales Office, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists**



**Dr. Caroline Walters, External Affairs Manager (Wales), Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists**



## Confirmation

This response is submitted on behalf of The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Wales. We confirm that we are happy for this response to be made public.

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<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Jones (2015). Reducing the impact of language delay on two to three year olds in Bridgend. Abertawe BRO Morgannwg University Health Board: Swansea.  
<http://www.nhswalesawards.wales.nhs.uk/previous-nhs-wales-awards-winners>

<sup>18</sup>Save the Children (2018). Little Pieces, Big Picture. Cardiff: Save the Children.