

Boys Talking - rationale

The correlation between strong language and communication skills and academic achievement is highly significant. As is the opposite, those with weak language and communication skills usually go on to academic under and low achievement.

High verbal children (in early years), fall into reading, writing, phonics, emotional expression and verbal friendships.

Verbal children gravitate towards each other and high physical children do the same. Language increases for the first, and too often stands still for the second.

Language is the currency in the School environment. Those that are strong in language are more likely to settle quicker, feel at home and get on, while the opposite is true of those children with low or no language.

While it is still a low number, more children with little or no language are coming into school, and risk starting and remaining at risk of underachievement.

Some EAL children are highly verbal in their mother tongue, and usually become high verbal in English because they have committed to language.

If EAL children are low verbal in their mother tongue, they are likely to be low verbal in English.

Too many adults assume that a child in a language-rich environment will develop their language, but too many low verbal reception children are low verbal in year 6.

If a child develops other ways of communicating (nods, noises, grunts, hand gestures), and these work for their basic needs, they don't necessarily see the point in learning and using language.

This includes children thought to be "Shy" and those that will talk to other children, but are reluctant talkers to adults.

Eighteen to twenty-four months is a "critical and sensitive" time for language development. If a child has some language before this period, their vocabulary is likely to grow 10-fold in this short period. If this is missed, the language will not accelerate at the same speed.

If this critical period is missed an intervention, non-specialist, but still an intervention will be required, if a child is to catch up. The further away from this critical period, the more a child will have developed a communication habit that will also need to be replaced.

If a child's alternative communication method is effective, they have little motivation to increase or use their vocabulary.

Any intervention will have to be regular and consistent, as direct as possible (meaning rote and repetition are more important than interesting and varied), and also may require some insistence, until the child realizes the importance of the language currency.

More boys than girls are low verbal; are high physical and low verbal; low verbal and get into more conflict, and have a speech delay. Some classes can have as many as 5 or 6, but usually there are 2 or 3. When girls are low verbal, high emotions and low compliance are also often at play.

Boys Development Project

Project Name: **Boys Talking**

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Background

The 'Stand Out Boys' project (SOBP) aims to prevent underachievement, by targeting those boys (as they come into reception) who show characteristics that will prevent them settling into their learning. Boys Talking is a spin-off project of the SOBP.

One of the characteristics common in targeted boys, has been poor communication skills, and this often reflects small vocabulary and/or little confidence in using the vocabulary they have. There are

significantly more boys than girls who are low verbal (ref), and the correlation between low communication skills and underachievement is strong (ref).

While the Stand Out Boys Project provides parents with a range of techniques and strategies to develop low verbal boys use of language, we also aim to accelerate this within a school.

All Boys Development Project initiatives are underpinned by an understanding of brain plasticity. Our rationale for targeting parents is that for those aged under seven, behaviours at home, rapidly comes into school, while those at school are much less likely to go home. However, we wanted to see if we could increase targeted children's (but boys in particular) communication through a school-only initiative.

Project objective

To target children with low communication skills and increase this by providing daily individual support.

Outcomes

To significantly increase targeted children's use and confidence in language and communication.

Project scope and exclusions

While this initiative is in the Speech and Language domain, it does not intend to replace specialist S & L services. We think there are three particular groups of children who would benefit from this initiative, they are:

1. Those children who have low **vocabulary**. Who might speak, but when they do they are severely limited by the number of words they have at their disposal. They might be reluctant talkers and/or children with English as an Additional Language (EAL), but are limited by vocabulary.
2. Those children, who have a reasonable vocabulary, **but are reluctant** to use it. They might be reluctant to initiate a conversation (with children and/or adults) and may appear 'shy' or just don't see the point of talking. They might gravitate towards play that does not require, or lend itself to conversations, such as small world, computer and lego.
3. Those, who **talk a lot** with other children, **but seem more reluctant to talk to adults**. They might talk during play, but do not ask questions of adults, and do not respond easily on the carpet or

when they are the focus of attention. There are also those children who talk a lot, but do not have a growing vocabulary; they often use what they have repetitively.

Exclusions

Those children, whose language is likely to develop naturally, as a result of being in school, such as EAL children, who are already good communicators in their mother tongue.

Also excluded are those children who are already receiving Speech & Language, or require specialist input (such as issues related to pronunciation).

Project tolerances

This initiative requires an everyday slot of a Teaching Assistant for at least a term.

What we did?

Children were identified, 3 weeks into the autumn term, who fall into one of the three groups above. A Teaching Assistant spent 15 minutes each, with nine children every day for the rest of term. Very basic materials were used, flashcards to increase vocabulary and books with drawings of everyday scenes such as supermarkets and kitchens. We were encouraging children to build their vocabulary and use everyday words. Children's progress was reviewed with teachers every two weeks. The criteria for progress was whether teachers were seeing changes in the classroom, and not how well children were responding to the TA. If the TA reported children were doing well, but teachers were not seeing it in the classroom, we concluded we were not getting it right.

Methods used

Because of the distance from the 18-24 month critical period; the reluctance those targeted children may have for language development, and the need to bring into play brain plasticity, our approach led us to simplicity. One-to-one, using old school picture flashcards of day-to-day objects (table, chair, plate, floor, toy, pen, toilet etc.), and repetition were used every day, until the words were accessible to the child in day-to-day use. Once children had increased their vocabulary they were introduced to again old-school large picture books that had numerous everyday objects and required identification and linking activities, so

that individual object-identification because 3 or 4 words and then sentences. This accelerated vocabulary learning and using, until the targeted child had some language use momentum.

Who we targeted

With the targeted school having three reception classes, we asked teachers to identify up to three children who fell into the groups above. Of the nine targeted, there were 7 boys and 2 girls. Decisions were made three weeks into term, with a one-line brief for each child (for example, **A [boy]** (has language, but doesn't use it enough)).

Of the nine, seven were targeted because of their low confidence, while one had a lack of vocabulary and the ninth had language, but others could not understand him.

While we reviewed progress every two weeks with both the TA and the class teachers, we carried out a more detailed review after eight weeks of the daily intervention.

Findings

We saw significant progress for 4 of the 9 children in the first eight weeks; while a further 3 were making good progress. The other two there was little progress in the first 8 weeks.

Examples of those who made significant progress can be represented by **H [boy]** (has some language, but doesn't use it enough, lacks confidence)

"He has been using a broad vocabulary, and his confidence has gone up. However, he is still quiet, and needs encouragement". (Teaching Assistant 4W) and later

"H has made huge steps with his language and confidence". (Teacher 4W)

Those that made progress, but not fully after 8 weeks, can be represented by **A [boy]** (has language, but doesn't use it enough)

"He has used a lot of vocabulary; answers in sentences and has grown in confidence". (TA 4W)

"I agree - he does answer in sentences, and has grown in confidence - but throughout the day in certain situations can appear seemingly 'lazy' with vocabulary". (T4W)

We relied on teacher's perceptions of how much children were using language and whether this was more than the initial baseline. With something so dynamic as language development it is hard to quantify a child's growing language use, but it is worth pointing out that teachers did not hold back when they did not think they were progressing.

All of the children had developed ways of making sure their needs were communicated, some just looked until adults and children guessed what they wanted; some showed emotion; some pointed; some grunted and others used single word replies. This meant that not only had children developed a communication habit that worked well enough, but as a result, they lacked a motivation to communicate using language. When the TA carried out the 1to1's some of the children were reluctant to talk, which meant that the TA had to be willing at times to be firm and insistent until children started to reap the benefits. We think that those that had not progressed so far, were those where the resistance was part of the low verbal habit, and this slowed the process significantly. So for example:

S [girl] (has language, but doesn't use it enough)

"She didn't engage at first, has engaged more since, still saying very little, most of her answers are one word, and three at most. Only responding to questions from me, not initiating conversation. Some progress, but not a great deal yet". (TA 4W)

"Still not participating willingly during class time. Just about responding to the register. Will nod or shake her head in response to questions, but extremely reluctant to answer open-ended questions". (T4W)

Interestingly, both of the children where there was very limited progress were girls. We cannot tell whether this was about gender (girls who talk very little have a stronger habit and are more reluctant, or that boys are more likely to respond to the initiative in this format). It could also of course be that with such a small sample (nine), that gender is just a coincidence.

We didn't use a control group, so we cannot be sure that all of the changes were as a result of the intervention. We also cannot be sure which components made a difference to those children who have progressed. We think it was the basic materials; the repetition and regularity and the 1to1, but without an evaluation that enables us to measure the individual components we cannot say this with confidence.

Conclusions

This reflective evaluation suggests that an intervention such as Boys Talking can make a significant difference to enough children who have low vocabulary and low confidence in language use, in a relatively short period (8 weeks), and with a relatively low investment and cost.

If language use and confidence is such an important component in school achievement, and if the neuroscientists are right in their views that early intervention and brain plasticity in young children means that rapid progress is possible, then interventions such as Boys Talking are important to trial further.

With the pressures on specialist Speech & Language Services, and the long waiting time between request and service, where possible it is worth looking at what can be done within mainstream schools, with non-specialist support.

Investment in language development and confidence is a critical foundation stage marker for all children. If a child comes into school and is high verbal they are more likely to fall into reading and writing, get into less conflict and make best use of the school environment.

We think that the Boys Talking model is worthy of further development, and an evaluation that will enable us to identify which components have the most impact on targeted children.

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