



### ***Talk it up – oral language skills in the early years***

***Karyn Johns***

Karyn Johns is a Speech Language Pathologist who has worked with children and families for over 20 years. She graduated in WA and has worked for a number of health and education agencies in SA, ACT and QLD, including Education Queensland for ten years. Karyn is a partner in a thriving private practice (S.P.E.E.C.H Pty Ltd) on the coast. This business currently provides services to children in 4 private schools, as well as clinical services in their rooms in Coomera. Karyn is passionate about sharing information and strategies with families, teachers and early childhood professionals that will support language, literacy and social skills development. Karyn has two children - aged 14 and ten years. They have taught her an incredible amount and probably have had the most important and significant impact on the work she does and the advice she provides to others.

#### **Talking about policy**

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) elevates 'effective communication' as an essential learning outcome for early years services to work towards. This statement embraces one of the most obvious and best understood expectations for caring for a young child. Currently the early childhood sector is immersed in a range of terms, concepts and 'jargonistic' messages that at times marginalise and even confuse the range of professionals (including parents) who are all concerned with positive developmental outcomes. This paper describes examples of tools and resources that support the pedagogy and assessment for learning principles that underpin this outcome.

Communication is central to social-emotional wellbeing, thus speech and language development is a cornerstone for successful outcomes later in life. ([http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/pages/PDF/Beitchman-BrownlieANGxp\\_rev.pdf](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/pages/PDF/Beitchman-BrownlieANGxp_rev.pdf)). This area of development also underpins some of the other

learning outcomes in the EYLF as well as other early childhood curricula (e.g. Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline) However, speech and language competency does not progress normally for a growing number of children and research shows that these children are at greater risk for later problems than children who do not have communication impairments.

#### **Talking about research**

Current brain studies (see reference list for some weblinks) are highlighting the importance of the early years, particularly 0-3 years, as the critical window period for brain connections for communication skills to develop. Yet our current level of understanding about the pathways for language development and long term outcomes are still emerging. Longitudinal studies, in both Melbourne and Perth, have identified that almost half of the late talkers at age two years old have "caught up" at age four years old. However, later literacy measures reveal residual problems for learning that may be connected to those

This article supports Outcome 5 of the *Early Years Learning Framework*  
**Children are effective communicators**

difficulties in the early years (i.e. detecting sounds or developing vocabulary). Thus, support for children and adolescents who have language impairment (or a history of language delays) is particularly important not just in the early years but also in the “school” context.

### *A range of longitudinal studies have been highlighting increasing concerns about the incidence rate for language and subsequent literacy delays.*

The Australian Early Developmental Index (AEDI) is a population measure of Australian children’s development. The data, now emerging for communities across Australia, consistently shows that the domains of development connected to communication development are the most vulnerable for children in their first year of schooling. This points the arrow for attention and intervention directly on the early years. However, these settings are typically struggling with the capacity to access speech language pathologists for support. Therefore, ready access to tools and resources that can support early childhood professionals in this area is important.

### **Talking about resources**

In response to the information arising from research and population studies, a number of Government funded services and programs are emerging, particularly in communities identified as vulnerable or in need of services. The Northern Gold Coast Communities for Children (C4C) Initiative, auspiced by Lifeline Community Care, <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/progserv/communitieschildren> commenced in 2004 and is now in the second round of funding (extended to 2012). One of the major strategies or program areas has been in the area of communication skills for children, by providing resources and support for parents and staff in early childhood settings. Two major programs under the *Successful Learners Strategy* have been developed:

- Ready Set Learn
- Read and Grow

These programs and their resources have emerged from the interactions, requests and “niggles” expressed by parents and early childhood professionals. Speech Language Pathologists (SLP’s) and Early Childhood Professionals (ECP’s) have worked alongside parents and early childhood professionals, in child care centres, playgroup hubs, and have also participated in forums and training events. The partnership and collaborative approach has been critical in the process of verifying that the tools are useful, as well as offering hands-on mentoring, modeling and demonstration of the ideas and materials.

### **Ready Set Learn - a Resource CD**

- Quick Speech and Language Screener (*assessment for learning*)
- Talk and Play cards (*play based, open-ended questions, intentional teaching; scaffolding*)
- Listening Lucy (*active listening, visual scaffold*)
- Ideas for celebrating emergence of early words (*connecting with parents*)

### **Read and Grow - an interactive story telling program**

Originally designed to support community facilitators in a playgroup setting, this program is now delivered in all Gold Coast City Council library branches as their Storytelling program. Four critical language development strategies are embedded in the program framework. This program is also being trialed in a child care centre context to support staff in their delivery of engaging and effective group times.

These resources have drawn heavily from the Hanen Centre ([www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org)), which is a well respected and utilized not-for-profit research centre in Canada whose mission is to support language, social and literacy skills through enhancing adult-child interaction. They promote a number of easy to remember strategies e.g.

- OWL - observe wait and listen
- Be face-to-face
- Add language to play

- Strive for Five - this strategy challenges us to engage in a conversation with a young child for five consecutive 'turns' (without creating a question-answer situation)

See Makin (2009) for reflections on how *conversations do matter* and the connection to Learning Outcome 5 from the EYLF.

### Talking about connections

How do these resources support early childhood professionals to implement the EYLF and other curricula or frameworks e.g. Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline?

*A curriculum or framework refers to all the things that children may experience that have been planned or unplanned but with a structure or point of reference that supports staff to reflect on their practice and respond to the needs of children and families in their 'care' (Goodfellow, 2009).*

The tools listed above will support:

- an understanding of communication development
- delivering activities with language development in mind
- discussion with parents about their child's progress.

The application of these tools and resources will be driven by the early childhood professionals perspective on the teaching and learning process. They support a number of the teaching practices from the EYLF but don't prescribe a philosophy or specific theoretical framework e.g.

- scaffolding
- responsiveness
- intentional teaching
- visual learning environments (props and visual tools)
- play-based learning environments
- monitoring development.

*Speech Language Pathologists are excited at the recognition in documents like the ELYF that communication skills are a critical early years learning outcome.*

However, with workforce limitations, such as the limitations in the availability of SLP's, we need to find ways to provide sustainable and meaningful ways of collaborating that will support children and families achieve positive outcomes. Our experience in the Northern Gold Coast Communities for Children C4C project has been that these tools support staff and facilitate ongoing dialogue between agencies.

### References

- Early Language in Victoria Study (ELVS) - A study of language development from infancy to 7 years of age. [www.mcrc.edu.au/projects/elvs/default.asp](http://www.mcrc.edu.au/projects/elvs/default.asp)
- Looking at Language - Centre for developmental Health. Curtin University, W.A. <http://cdh.curtin.edu.au/research/ll.cfm>
- Australian Early Developmental Index - [www.rch.org.au/australianedi](http://www.rch.org.au/australianedi)
- Growing up in Australia - Longitudinal Study of 10,000 Australian children (commenced in 2004) [www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/](http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/)
- Australian based information about brain research can be found at [www.brain.org.au](http://www.brain.org.au). Established 2007 in Melbourne [www.bmri.org.au](http://www.bmri.org.au) Based at the University of Sydney.
- University of Oregon Brain Development Lab - useful links to video footage and appropriate for parents to view [www.changingbrains.org](http://www.changingbrains.org)
- A comprehensive web resource providing accessible information and resources about brain development, brain fitness and links to current research [www.brainconnection.positscience.com](http://www.brainconnection.positscience.com)
- Pam Schiller is an avid writer of articles about brain research, implications and practical ideas for early childhood professionals. <http://www.childcareexchange.com/library/5015406.pdf>
- Goodfellow, J. (2009) *The Early Years Learning Framework: Getting Started*. Research in Practice Series. Early Childhood Australia.
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