

**National
Literacy
Trust**

Change your story

In partnership with



Embedding the home learning environment: evidence, practice and partnerships



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Foreword



Every child deserves the opportunity to thrive. That is why this government has made it a national mission to give every child the best start in life. The early years – from pregnancy to age five – are a critical window for development, shaping children’s health, learning, and life chances. We know that what happens in these formative years lays the foundation for future success, wellbeing, and opportunity.

Our ambition is clear by 2028, we want 75% of five-year-olds in England to achieve a Good Level of Development. This is a bold but necessary goal, and one that demands action across systems, services, and communities. It means improving the quality of early education and care, making it easier and more affordable for families to access support, and ensuring that every parent and carer feels confident and equipped to support their child’s development.

We know that the home learning environment (HLE) plays a pivotal role in shaping children’s early development. The everyday moments, chatting at mealtimes, sharing stories, playing together, are powerful building blocks for language, confidence, and connection. Parents and carers are their children’s first and most important educators, and their role in supporting early learning is irreplaceable.

Through our Best Start in Life Strategy and the national rollout of Best Start Family Hubs, we are working to ensure that every family has access to the support they need. Best Start Family Hubs bring together services, practitioners, and community partners to offer joined-up, inclusive support that meets families where they are. By working in partnership across the early years sector, including early years settings, childminders, and voluntary and community organisations, we aim to empower more parents and carers to chat, play, and read with their children every day.

Screens and screen time are a reality of modern family life but it can sometimes be hard to find the right balance and know how they fit into children’s lives alongside other activities. That is why we announced a new advisory group with the Children’s Commissioner to develop the first-ever government guidance on screen use for under-fives, which will be published in time for the national rollout.

This guide – *Embedding the Home Learning Environment* – is a practical and evidence-based resource to help local authorities, practitioners, and partners embed HLE support across systems. It draws on the latest research, real-world practice, and the voices of families to show what works and how we can work together to make a difference.

I want to thank the National Literacy Trust for their leadership and expertise in developing this guide, and all the contributors who have shared their insights and experience. Your work is helping to build a future where every child can thrive.

Together, we can make the home learning environment a cornerstone of early years support and give every child the best start in life.

Olivia Bailey

Minister for Children and Families

Executive summary

The home learning environment (HLE) plays a central role in shaping children's early communication, social development and long-term learning. The simple, everyday interactions that families share with their children such as chatting, playing, reading and exploring build the foundations for language, confidence and curiosity. Strengthening these experiences is a national priority, reflected in the Best Start in Life programme, the Family Hubs vision and current early years reforms.

Recent evidence suggests that some forms of early interaction and communication are declining, making it more important than ever that families receive accessible, strengths-based support. The HLE is influenced by many factors, including relationships, daily routines, cultural practices, family circumstances and wider structural conditions such as housing, work patterns, income and access to services. Because families' realities differ, support is most effective when it is flexible, inclusive, strengths-based and grounded in what matters to each family, including those with SEND or diverse communication styles.

This guide draws on behaviour change approaches such as COM-B and EAST to help practitioners understand what enables or limits everyday learning behaviours, and how to make positive change feel easy, motivating and well timed. It highlights the importance of workforce confidence, trusted relationships and co-designed, culturally relevant materials. It also outlines how universal and targeted approaches can work together across Family Hubs and community settings. Universal activities build trust and set social norms, while targeted offers provide tailored help for families who face greater barriers.

Evidence highlights several activities that make a meaningful difference: responsive interaction, shared reading, playful learning, everyday outings and thoughtful use of digital media. These approaches are most powerful when they are enjoyable, interactive and embedded in everyday life, whether supported in person or complemented by digital tools.

Strengthening the HLE also depends on creating enabling environments, including welcoming community spaces, consistent messages across services, strong cross sector partnerships and the removal of practical barriers such as cost, access and confidence. The guide also emphasises the value of monitoring and evaluation to understand what is working and to inform future delivery. Bringing these elements together supports practitioners and local areas to provide consistent, confident and connected early years offers that help every child thrive.



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1. Introduction

Key takeaways

- Everyday interactions, such as chatting, playing and reading form the foundation of early communication, confidence and wellbeing.
- The HLE is shaped by families, supported by services and influenced by wider social and structural conditions.
- Strengthening the HLE is both an early years priority and a matter of social justice, requiring inclusive, culturally responsive support so that every child can thrive.



An effective home learning environment (HLE) gives children the best start in life. Everyday interactions such as chatting, sharing books, playing and exploring the world together lay the foundations for early communication, social development and wellbeing. These early experiences shape children's confidence, relationships, wellbeing and learning throughout childhood.

Families play a central role in creating a nurturing HLE, and services across the community have an important part to play in supporting them. Yet not all families have equal access to time, resources or supportive environments. Strengthening the HLE is therefore not only about improving early outcomes; it is also a matter of social justice. When families receive timely, high-quality support that recognises their strengths, respects their circumstances and reflects their culture and communication styles, children are better able to thrive, regardless of background or circumstance.

The Home Learning Environment refers to the everyday interactions, routines and experiences that support a child's early communication, play, learning and relationships. It includes:

- chatting
- reading
- playing
- songs and rhymes
- creative activities
- digital experiences
- the resources and support available to families.

These elements work together to create the conditions for children to thrive from birth.



Purpose of this guide

This guide brings together the best available evidence and practical insight to support those working with families to strengthen the HLE. It aims to:

- Provide clear, accessible messages about what matters most for early communication, language, play and learning
- Offer practical, strengths-based approaches that can be used in everyday interactions and settings
- Support the design and delivery of effective universal and targeted support
- Promote consistent messages across services and community spaces
- Embed inclusive, culturally responsive and SEND-informed practice throughout HLE activities.

The guide focuses on what works, why it matters and how local partners can create the conditions for families to feel confident, supported and able to embed early learning in everyday life.

Who this guide is for

This guide is designed for anyone involved in supporting families with young children, including those who plan, commission, deliver or coordinate services. It can be used across a wide range of roles, settings and organisations involved in early communication and early years support.

2. Policy, purpose and national context

Key takeaways

- Strengthening the HLE is a national priority, central to improving early communication, language and school readiness across England.
- All local areas should embed support for the HLE within universal and targeted services, using Best Start Family Hubs, the EYFS and place-based approaches to reach families consistently.
- A strong HLE reduces inequalities and supports long-term social and economic outcomes, making it both an early years priority and a strategic investment.



Empowering families to build a strong home learning environment is at the heart of mission-led government. Too many children still begin school without the communication, language and literacy skills needed to thrive. To address this, the government has set an ambitious goal: by 2028, 75% of five-year-olds in England should reach a Good Level of Development (GLD). Achieving this requires raising the current rate of 68.3% by 6.7 percentage points; a significant step change given last year's progress of only 0.6 percentage points¹.

Through the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework, the rollout of Best Start Family Hubs and the Best Start in Life mission, the government has made early communication, language and development a clear priority. Strengthening the home learning environment is a key lever in this work, and must be embedded across early years provision, local authority planning and family-facing services. Partnership between government, civil society, practitioners, families and carers is essential to ensure support is consistent, inclusive, accessible and joined up. This will help children transition confidently into school and reduce barriers to opportunity.

National guidance and funding priorities

Strengthening the home learning environment is now being delivered at national scale through the £500 million rollout of Best Start for Life Family Hubs, ensuring that high quality HLE support and services are available in every local area. The HLE is recognised as a core strand in reducing inequalities and improving outcomes for children aged 0–5, particularly those aged 2–4. Local authorities are expected to embed HLE support within the universal Best Start in Life offer, ensuring all families can access guidance and practical resources.

National guidance emphasises outreach, partnership working and place-based approaches to reach families who may not access traditional services. Combining evidence-based interventions with locally responsive delivery enables areas to tailor support to diverse needs while maintaining consistent messages. Placing the HLE at the heart of Best Start Family Hubs supports long-term aims around child development, social mobility and economic growth.

Social justice and economic growth

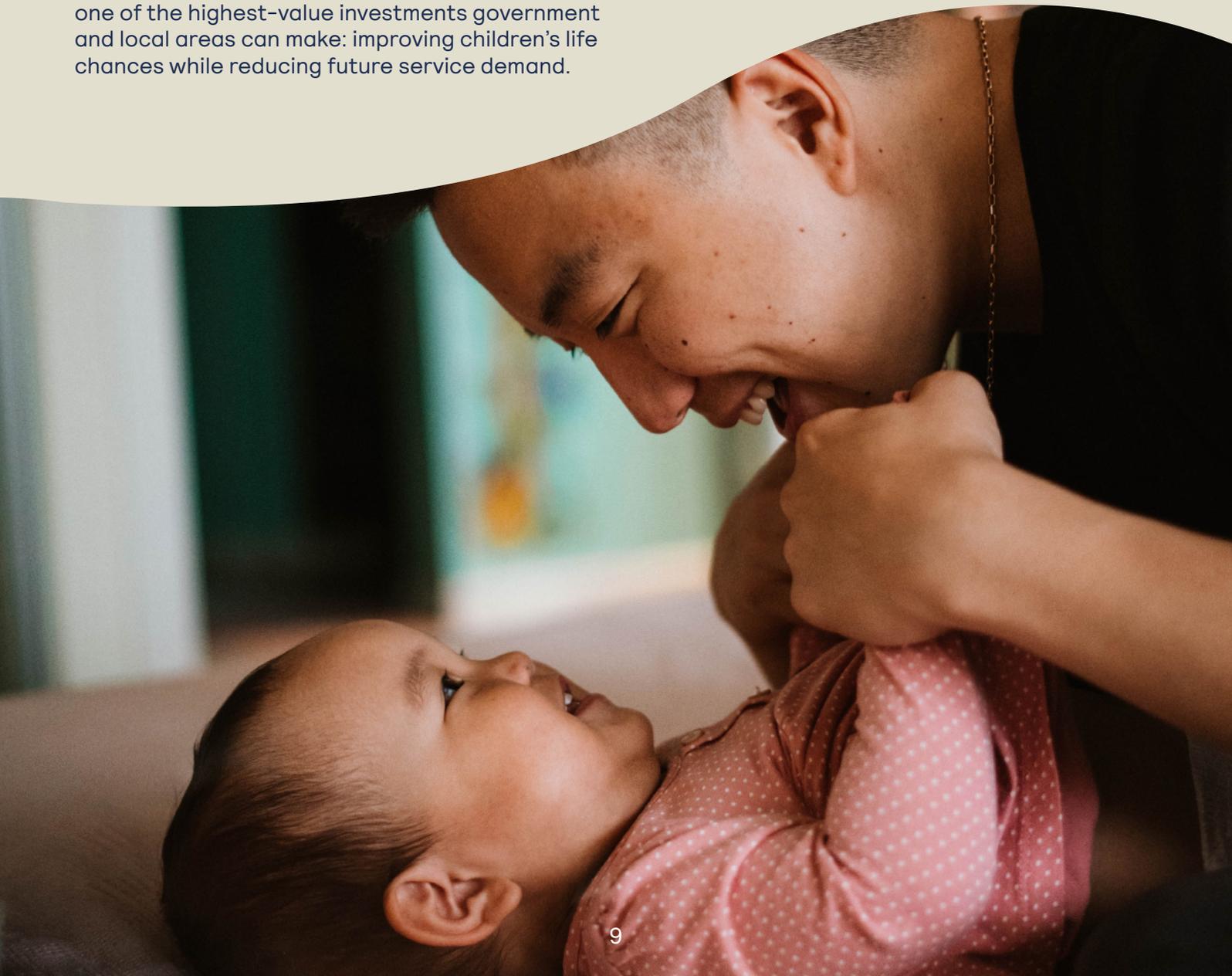
Strengthening the HLE is not only central to children's early learning; it is also a matter of social justice and long-term economic benefit. Children who begin school with strong communication, language and interaction skills, across all modes of communication, are more likely to build positive relationships, engage confidently with learning and access future opportunities²⁻⁵. Narrowing early gaps helps reduce inequalities, disrupt cycles of disadvantage and lay the foundations for a skilled and resilient future workforce.

Recent social return on investment (SROI) analysis for the National Literacy Trust indicates that each cohort of five-year-olds who do not meet expected literacy standards incurs a lifetime economic cost of approximately £830 million, around £7,800 per child with £2,500 falling directly to the public purse through higher education and welfare costs, and reduced tax revenue. Strengthening the HLE therefore offers one of the highest-value investments government and local areas can make: improving children's life chances while reducing future service demand.

Recognising diverse experiences

For this support to reach every child, it is vital to acknowledge the wider conditions that shape early learning experiences. Poverty, disability, special educational needs, racism and other structural inequalities create unequal conditions in which families care for young children. These factors can affect housing, health, work patterns, access to services and opportunities for early learning. Recognising these intersecting inequalities helps ensure support is inclusive, equitable and grounded in the diverse realities of family life.

This guide therefore adopts a whole-system, mission-aligned approach that recognises structural barriers while focusing on how local partners can create fairer conditions and more consistent support for families.



3. Why the home learning environment matters

Key takeaways

- Early communication and interaction lay the foundations for language, literacy, confidence and lifelong learning.
- Differences in early experiences emerge early and are shaped by both family circumstances and wider structural inequalities.
- A strong HLE can mitigate disadvantage, narrow early gaps and contribute to long-term social and economic inclusion.



A rich home learning environment supports children's early communication, language, social development and wellbeing. Everyday interactions, such as chatting, playing, story sharing and responsive back-and-forth communication, shape the foundations for learning during the crucial early years. Strong early communication skills are consistently linked to later literacy, social confidence and long-term outcomes e.g.²⁻⁶.

These early experiences matter for all children, including those who communicate in diverse ways, such as through gesture, sign, augmentative and alternative communication, facial expression or spoken language. A supportive HLE helps children build secure relationships, express themselves and engage with the world in ways that reflect their individual strengths.

However, differences in early communication and interaction opportunities can emerge from infancy, shaped by a mix of structural factors, family circumstances and access to supportive environments, e.g.^{7,8}. Without timely support, these gaps can widen over time.

Strengthening the HLE can help reduce these inequalities. Children with strong early interaction, language and communication skills are more likely to build positive relationships, engage confidently with learning and access future opportunities. High-quality HLE support therefore contributes to fairness, increased opportunity and long-term social and economic inclusion.

Recent trends in parent-child interactions

Everyday interactions like chatting, reading and playing are some of the most powerful predictors of children's development, yet these vital behaviours are in decline. Data from the National Literacy Trust 2025 survey of carers with children aged 0-5 shows worrying declines in everyday learning interactions⁹. In 2025, fewer than half of parents reported reading with their young child on a daily basis, compared with around two thirds in 2019. Daily chatting and shared play also appear to have decreased over the same period⁹. Similar patterns are reflected in national reading data, where 41% of parents reported reading frequently with their child aged 0 to 4 in 2025, compared with 64% in 2019¹⁰.

These trends are likely shaped by a wide range of factors. The survey period spans the pre-pandemic years, COVID-19 lockdowns and the ongoing cost-of-living pressures, all of which have affected families' time, capacity and access to support. Evidence also shows that while parents value early learning and wish to support their child, many face constraints related to work demands, financial pressures and access to services¹¹.

4. What shapes the home learning environment

Key takeaways

- The HLE is shaped by relationships, routines and everyday interactions, which vary across families and reflect diverse communication styles, cultures and caregiving practices.
- Family circumstances and structural conditions, such as housing, income, work patterns, health and access to services, strongly influence the time, capacity and resources available for early learning.
- Support works best when it builds on family strengths and realities, offering flexible, culturally responsive approaches that fit naturally into daily life.



Families play the central role in creating and sustaining a nurturing HLE. Services across health, education, libraries, Family Hubs, Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations and wider community spaces can help by offering consistent messages, supportive relationships and simple, practical ways to embed learning into daily life. When family strengths are recognised and communities work together to provide accessible and culturally responsive support, all children are better able to thrive.

Families shape children's early learning through the relationships they build, the routines they follow and the opportunities available within daily life. The HLE is influenced by a range of interconnected factors, including family strengths, cultural practices, structural circumstances and children's individual needs. Understanding these influences helps services provide support that is relevant, appropriate and responsive to the diversity of family life.

Relationships, interactions and daily life

Warm, responsive relationships form a key component of the HLE. Consistent back-and-forth interactions help children develop early communication skills and a sense of security. Everyday routines such as mealtimes, travelling, shared reading and play provide natural opportunities for early learning and connection. Families support children in different ways, and these interactions may involve gesture, facial expression, movement, vocalisations, spoken language or the use of augmentative and alternative communication.

Family circumstances and pressures

Families often manage a range of circumstances that can influence the time, capacity and resources available for early learning^{8, 11}. These may include household finances, housing arrangements, shift work, health needs, caregiving responsibilities and access to local services. Families caring for children with SEND may also be managing additional appointments, care routines or safety considerations, which can affect how and when they are able to engage in early learning activities. Siblings may take on different roles within the household, and these dynamics should be understood within the wider context of family life.

Structural and environmental factors

Structural factors such as household income, housing stability, access to childcare, local transport and the availability of community resources, can influence how easily families are able to engage with early learning opportunities¹². Wider pressures, including the rising cost of living and workforce challenges across early years services, may also affect the consistency and accessibility of support. These factors sit largely beyond the control of individual families and shape the environments in which early learning takes place.

Cultural identity, diversity and caregiving practices

Families draw on a wide range of cultural traditions, languages and caregiving practices, all of which influence how early communication, interaction and learning are supported. These variations shape how activities such as book sharing, play and everyday routines are approached. Recognising this diversity helps ensure that support for the HLE is relevant, respectful and aligned with families' own experiences and values.

What this means for support

Effective support for the HLE begins with an understanding of families' priorities, circumstances and existing strengths. Approaches that are flexible, culturally responsive and aligned with everyday routines are more likely to be sustainable and meaningful for families. When local services work collaboratively and focus on providing practical, accessible support, families are better positioned to embed early learning within daily life.



5. Applying the COM-B model to support behaviour change

Key takeaways

- Parents' home learning behaviours are shaped by capability, opportunity and motivation; understanding these helps explain why a behaviour may or may not take place, and where support could make a difference.
- Support is most effective when it addresses the underlying barriers such as confidence, access to resources, time pressures or beliefs about child development, rather than assuming lack of interest.
- Behaviour change tools such as COM-B and EAST help practitioners move beyond assumptions, understand barriers, and design practical, strengths-based and sustainable support.



Understanding barriers and enablers

The COM-B model provides a practical way to identify why a behaviour may or may not be taking place, and where support can make a difference:

Capability – knowledge, skills, confidence

Opportunity – time, resources, supportive environments, social norms

Motivation – priorities, values, enjoyment and perceived benefits

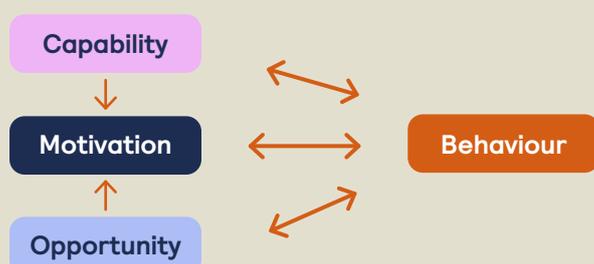
Behaviour – The everyday actions we want to support such as chatting, playing, reading and responding to children's cues.

Taken together, these three elements help explain why a behaviour may or may not take place, and where support could make a difference.

For example, a parent may value reading but feel unsure how to share stories (capability), have limited access to books (opportunity) or feel reading is not something “people like them” do (motivation).

The COM-B model highlights that behaviour is influenced by capability, opportunity and motivation^{13, 14}.

Understanding what each component means in practice can help to shape the support offered. Capability barriers (such as limited knowledge of child development or low confidence) call for modelling, coaching and encouragement. Opportunity barriers (such as the cost of books, digital exclusion or irregular working hours) highlight the need for practical solutions including free resources, flexible services and accessible community spaces. Motivation barriers (such as negative past experiences or uncertainty about the value of reading) show the importance of positive framing and trusted messengers who can make early learning feel enjoyable, relatable and meaningful.



The EAST Framework

Once these barriers are understood, support can be designed using the EAST principles¹⁵ so early learning behaviours feel:

Easy

Messages are simple and broken into small steps.

Attractive

Activities feel enjoyable and achievable.

Social

Behaviours are modelled by relatable families and practitioners.

Timely

Prompts are offered at the right moment, during everyday routines or key transitions.

Using COM-B to understand barriers and EAST to design solutions, helps practitioners move beyond assumptions and provide support that is practical, strengths-based and sustainable.

Implications for practice

- Share clear, evidence-informed messages about how children learn through everyday interactions, using strengths-based language and practical examples.
- Model language rich interactions and explain what children gain from them, helping parents understand why behaviours are important as well as how to do them.
- Reassure families that small moments matter, such as chatting during mealtimes, naming objects during daily routines or responding to a child's gestures and sounds.
- Recognise and build on cultural, linguistic and caregiving strengths, validating the practices families already use.
- Support parents who feel unsure by offering simple strategies they can adapt to their routines, values and communication styles.
- Use informal conversations, group sessions and trusted community partners to build confidence in ways that feel accessible and non-judgemental.
- Provide high-quality, trusted resources that help families understand child development and feel more capable, especially where barriers or past negative experiences may reduce confidence.

Speech and Language UK case study: Testing messaging to inform how we talk to families about talking



6. Principles for practice

Key takeaways

- Effective HLE support starts with respectful, strengths-based relationships that recognise parents as experts in their children's lives.
- Inclusive, culturally responsive and accessible approaches ensure support fits families' routines, communities and communication styles.
- Consistent, sustained and co-designed support helps build trust, confidence and meaningful engagement.



Learning from parents, partners and the National Literacy Trust's work, the following principles offer a foundation for supporting parents and carers in the early years.

1. Respect and positive regard

All parents want the best for their children. Effective approaches are inclusive, non-judgemental and grounded in respect for the realities of families' lives. Approaches that recognise families' circumstances and strengths help build trust and support positive engagement.

2. Partnership and shared expertise

Parents are their child's first and most important educators. They hold unique and valuable knowledge about their child. Partnerships flourish when practitioners listen to, recognise and respond to parents' insights, and work alongside them to support early learning. Shared decision-making ensures support is meaningful and relevant to families' contexts.

3. Strengths-based and empowering

Building on what parents are already doing well helps to strengthen the HLE. Celebrating existing skills, routines and aspirations, while offering tools, encouragement and reassurance, helps parents feel confident, capable and able to build early learning into everyday life.

4. Accessibility, relevance and inclusion

Support is most effective when families can easily access it and when it reflects their culture, language and community context. Activities and resources should welcome and celebrate diversity. Adapting support to families' routines, communities and preferred ways of engaging makes participation more achievable and sustainable.

5. Consistency, sustainability and relationship-building

Trusting relationships take time to develop. Ongoing, reliable support builds trust and has a greater impact than one-off interventions. Consistency across local services and clear, shared messages help families feel supported. Opportunities for families to build connections within their community can strengthen engagement and confidence.

6. Parent voice

Listening to parents is essential for designing effective and sustainable support. Families bring lived experience, cultural knowledge and insights that professionals alone cannot provide. Involving parents in shaping priorities, content and delivery will ensure interventions are relevant, respectful and responsive to local needs.

7. Child voice

Babies and young children express their views in many ways, often non-verbally, through play, gesture, expression and interaction. Practitioners can tune into children's cues, expressions, play and interactions to understand their interests and experiences. Noticing and responding to these perspectives helps ensure support reflects what matters to young children.

Together, these principles provide the foundation for effective, relationship-based work with families. The following section outlines how universal and targeted approaches can apply these principles across the local early years system to deliver a balanced and accessible HLE offer.

Co-designed materials

Developing resources alongside parents ensures they are relevant, practical and inclusive. Co-design helps materials reflect families' cultures and languages, fit into daily routines and address real barriers. Co-design takes time and commitment, and it is rarely a linear process. It requires listening, testing, adapting and sometimes slowing down to get things right. Approaches include:

- Hosting focus groups with both families and partners. Joining established community groups where parents feel comfortable may be most effective.
- Running events where families can trial drafts of resources and provide feedback – again these could be part of existing family/community groups.
- Being open to change is key. Families offer insights that can challenge assumptions or redirect plans, and responding well often means letting go of initial ideas and allowing the work to evolve.
- Trusting relationships are essential for honest feedback. Parents may find it difficult to say when they do not understand a message, especially if they do not feel comfortable with the person delivering it.
- Co-design often involves multiple rounds of testing and revision; progress can feel slow, but this iteration is where the value lies.

Lessons from co-design

- Co-design can be demanding, but its impact is deeper and more lasting.
- Resources are more effective when families see themselves reflected.
- Small practical changes (e.g., clearer visuals, simpler language) often make the biggest difference.
- Involving families builds ownership and trust, which supports longer-term engagement.



National Literacy Trust case study: Working with families and practitioners to co-produce effective early years resources

7. Universal and targeted approaches

Key takeaways

- A strong HLE strategy blends universal support with targeted approaches to create a balanced, joined-up offer for families.
- Universal approaches build trust, promote consistent messages and normalise early learning behaviours across communities.
- Targeted support provides additional, tailored help for families facing greater barriers, ensuring they receive the right support in ways that work for them.

A balanced approach to strengthening the HLE includes both universal and targeted support. **Universal approaches** are most effective when they are woven into the moments and places families already use, promoting consistent messages and normalising early learning behaviours across a community. Activities such as rhyme times, story sessions, outreach in everyday spaces and simple resource packs create inclusive entry points, build trust and help identify families who may need extra support.

Targeted approaches provide additional, tailored input for families who face greater barriers, including those experiencing poverty, isolation, SEND, language barriers or low confidence. This may involve evidence-based parenting programmes, small-group activities, bespoke outreach or home-based support.

When universal and targeted approaches work together, families experience a coherent, joined-up offer. Universal activities help to shift social norms and reach families early, while targeted support ensures those who need more intensive input receive it in ways that work for them. This layered approach strengthens consistency, reduces inequalities and ensures that all families can access the right support at the right time.

Implications for practice

- Use universal approaches to build trust and create welcoming opportunities for engagement.
- Identify and respond early when families may benefit from more tailored support.
- Embed consistent messages across universal and targeted offers, so families hear the same encouragement from multiple trusted sources.
- Ensure pathways between universal and targeted support are clear, supportive and based on respectful conversations with families.
- Collaborate across local services to ensure families experience a joined-up offer and do not need to repeat their story.
- Monitor participation and feedback to understand which families are engaging, who is missing and where targeted support may be strengthened.
- A well-aligned universal and targeted model helps reduce inequalities, supports early identification and ensures that all families, regardless of need, have access to the right support at the right time.



BookTrust case study: Delivering universal and targeted programmes to support shared reading in early years families



Cheshire East case study: Driving early support for children with identified SEND through partnership working

8. Embedding the HLE in Family Hub and local delivery plans

Key takeaways

- Embedding HLE support within Family Hubs and wider local delivery plans helps ensure families receive consistent, strengths-based messages and modelling wherever they engage.
- Effective delivery relies on confident practitioners, strong partnerships, culturally attuned materials and clear pathways between universal and targeted support.
- A blended approach, combining digital tools with trusted, in-person relationships, helps reach more families while still supporting meaningful behaviour change.



Best Start Family Hubs provide accessible, non-stigmatising entry points for families, bringing together public, private and voluntary sector partners in one connected system. When HLE support is embedded within Family Hubs:

- families can experience relationship-centred support across many touchpoints
- messages are reinforced through trusted practitioners
- universal and targeted offers work together more effectively
- increased opportunities for modelling, practice and support are realised.

Strengthening the HLE is fundamentally a behavioural challenge. Parenting behaviours are shaped by confidence, environment, culture, opportunity and knowledge. Family Hubs are well placed to address these factors by integrating HLE activities into universal services while also supporting families who face additional barriers.

Key enablers for effective HLE delivery plans

Drawing on national guidance and learning from practice, effective delivery plans typically include:

- **Mapping local touchpoints** - identify where HLE messages naturally align with existing services and provision such as health appointments, early years settings, libraries, community groups and VCSE partners.
- **Workforce confidence and training** - practitioners need the knowledge, tools and confidence to model interactions and engage families in ways that are sensitive, inclusive and strengths-based.
- **Combining digital and face-to-face delivery** - use digital tools to share simple ideas, videos and guided prompts, while ensuring modelling and encouragement are delivered through trusted, in-person relationships.

- **Co-designing with families** – family panels, conversations and community-led service design ensure support reflects lived experience and local needs.
- **Strong partnerships with VCSE and businesses** – voluntary and faith groups, baby banks, food banks, sports clubs and local businesses often have established, trusted relationships with families. These partners can extend reach and help embed HLE messages in familiar spaces.
- **Cultural and linguistic inclusivity** – materials and sessions should reflect local communities, with multilingual content that is not only translated but tested with families to ensure messages are clear, meaningful and culturally relevant.



Southwark Family Hubs case study: Increasing parental confidence through modelling and resource sharing



Liverpool Family Hubs case study: Strengthening access to services through a business partnership with the Very Group



National Literacy Trust case study: Reaching families in everyday spaces through a partnership with First Bus Cornwall

Digital offers: Opportunities and limitations

Digital tools can significantly extend the reach of HLE support. When used well, they offer:

- flexible access to videos, prompts and story sessions
- opportunities to normalise chatting, playing and reading
- community connection (e.g., moderated online groups)
- multiple languages and culturally relevant content
- insights into family needs and patterns of engagement

Digital offers can also be an effective bridge to in person sessions.

However, digital-only approaches do have limitations:

- campaigns alone rarely lead to sustained behaviour change without ongoing support and trusted relationships.
- families may lack the confidence, reassurance or practical resources needed to turn messages into action.
- digital exclusion, affordability and language barriers can limit reach and deepen inequalities.



Halton Family Hubs case study: Increasing access to Home Learning Environment support through a digital offer



Combining evidence-based programmes and community campaigns

Structured parent-child programmes can build skills, confidence and sustained behaviour change through modelling, guided practice and feedback.

Community campaigns raise awareness, reduce stigma and normalise early learning behaviours at a population level.

When used together, they can reinforce one another:

- campaigns create safe, familiar entry points
- programmes offer practical strategies and build families' confidence
- families can move seamlessly from noticing a message, to attending a session, to embedding new routines at home

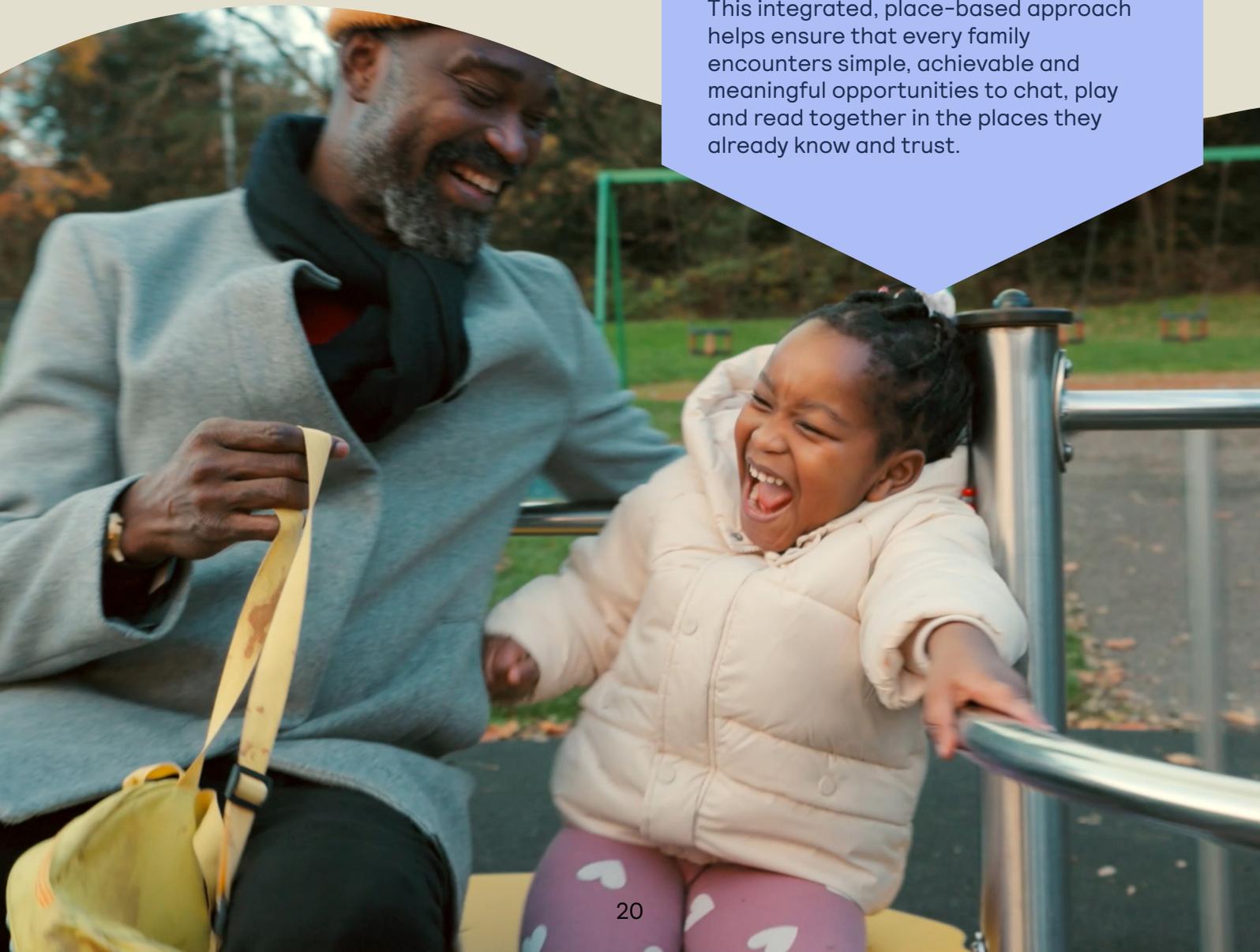
This joined-up approach strengthens both reach and impact.

Implications for practice

To embed the HLE effectively across local systems:

- provide consistent, strengths-based messages across all services
- ensure practitioners are confident to model and encourage early language and communication within everyday interactions
- use both digital and face-to-face approaches, with in-person modelling as the foundation
- work closely with VCSE, local volunteers and community partners who already have trusted relationships with families
- co-design with families to ensure relevance and sustainability
- create clear pathways between campaigns, universal activities and targeted support

This integrated, place-based approach helps ensure that every family encounters simple, achievable and meaningful opportunities to chat, play and read together in the places they already know and trust.



9. Creating enabling environments

Key takeaways

- Families are more likely to engage in chatting, playing and reading when community spaces are welcoming, accessible and offer simple, low-cost resources.
- Strong local partnerships across health, early years, libraries, VCSE organisations and community groups help create a joined-up, consistent offer that families can trust.
- Removing practical barriers, such as cost, transport, opening hours or digital access, makes early learning opportunities more inclusive and sustainable.



An effective home learning environment is strengthened when families have access to supportive, welcoming and joined-up services. Creating enabling environments across local areas helps families feel confident, included and able to take part in early learning opportunities.

Access to resources and materials

Families are more likely to engage in chatting, playing and reading when they have access to high-quality, affordable resources. A place-based approach recognises that this support is delivered across a whole network of local partners, libraries, Family Hubs, voluntary and community groups, faith settings, sports clubs, food banks, baby banks and other trusted organisations. When these familiar spaces offer books and simple activity ideas, they help reduce barriers and make early learning opportunities accessible in the places where families already feel comfortable.



BookTrust case study: Supporting families who stand to benefit most from early shared reading through targeted programmes

Welcoming community spaces

Inclusive and welcoming spaces across the community play an essential role in supporting families with young children. Families often feel most at ease in places where they already have trusted relationships, and these settings provide opportunities for shared learning, social connection and informal support. A whole-place approach ensures that early learning messages and activities are available across the full range of local settings, making support visible, familiar and easy to access.

Strong local partnerships

Joined up working between early years settings, health services, libraries, community organisations and the voluntary sector help ensure families receive coherent messages and experience a consistent offer. Strong partnerships enable wider reach, shared expertise and coordinated support for families.



BookTrust case study:
Using multi-agency approaches to get families reading together



Dudley Family Hub case study:
Creating a peer support programme



National Literacy Trust case study:
Increasing voluntary and community support through a partnership with Brushstrokes in Sandwell

Workforce confidence and training

Children and parents benefit from having the knowledge, confidence and tools to model early learning activities, engage families and respond to diverse needs. Access to high-quality training, supervision and peer support strengthens practice and helps ensure families receive consistent encouragement across services.

Addressing access barriers

Considering practical factors such as cost, transport, opening hours, digital access and the availability of childcare helps to make sure more families can take part. Flexible, locally based support makes early learning opportunities more inclusive and reachable for families with different routines and responsibilities.



National Literacy Trust case study:
Working in partnership with national and local businesses in the Black Country

Embedding early learning across the system

When messages about the home learning environment are shared consistently across services and settings, families receive supportive prompts wherever they go. Embedding early learning within existing touchpoints such as health appointments, community groups and early years settings, helps reinforce simple, everyday behaviours.



Doncaster Family Hubs case study:
Embedding consistent messaging for families within local systems



10. What works in strengthening the HLE

Key takeaways

- Nurturing relationships are at the heart of an effective home learning environment. Warm, responsive interactions give children the security, confidence and connection they need to learn and thrive.
- Everyday routines offer powerful opportunities for learning. Simple interactions, such as chatting at mealtimes or singing during bath time, make a measurable difference when included in everyday family life.
- Shared reading and playful, creative activities are especially effective. When these experiences feel joyful, inclusive and low-cost, they strongly support language, confidence and connection.
- Outings to libraries, museums and community spaces, alongside adult-child shared digital use, enrich children's experiences and spark curiosity, helping families build language and learning beyond the home.



Nurturing relationships are at the heart of an effective home learning environment. Warm, responsive interactions give children the security, confidence and connection they need to learn and thrive. When parents feel supported and have the capacity to engage, everyday moments like chatting, playing and reading become powerful opportunities for early learning.

Responsive communication and serve-and-return interactions

Evidence summary

Babies learn through responsive “serve-and-return” interactions, where adults notice and respond to their cues^{16,17}. These early exchanges support language, social connection and brain development¹⁷⁻¹⁹. Everyday conversational turns, however brief, make a measurable difference to children’s communication skills.

[Evidence repository](#)

Supporting daily routines

Daily routines offer some of the richest opportunities for early learning, especially when families have limited time. Chatting at mealtimes, singing in the bath or narrating a shopping trip all help embed learning in moments that already exist e.g. ²⁰. Reassuring parents that these small, natural interactions make a big difference can be a powerful lever for change e.g. ²¹.

Implications for practice

Creating space for warm, responsive interactions helps children feel heard and understood. Practitioners can model serve-and-return communication by noticing and responding to children’s signals, narrating shared experiences and encouraging back-and-forth exchanges.

However, modelling alone is not always enough. Some parents, especially those caring for children with communication needs, developmental delays or complex SEND may benefit from more targeted support to help them recognise and respond to their child’s cues. Evidence-based approaches such as Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) offer structured, strengths-based support that can help parents build confidence and tune into their child’s individual ways of communicating.



Dingley’s Promise case study:
Creating inclusive story time sessions



Shared reading

Evidence summary

Early shared reading is one of the most effective ways to support children's language, literacy and broader development, strengthening vocabulary, comprehension and attention^{22, 23}. Babies benefit from story exposure from the very start, even before birth, because early auditory experiences help shape newborns' speech processing and later language skill^{24, 25}. Sharing books in the first months of life also supports communication, socio-emotional development and parent-child bonding^{17, 26}. Indeed, children learn most when reading is interactive, pausing, wondering and talking together and when story moments are frequent, playful and embedded in everyday routines^{27, 28}.

[Evidence repository](#)

Implications for practice

A focus on helping children build a joyful connection with books and stories will last a lifetime. Story time should feel inclusive, warm and engaging, a moment of closeness and enjoyment. Practitioners can be powerful role models by showing their own love of books, making reading aloud a daily routine and creating story-rich, welcoming spaces.

Encourage parents to talk about pictures, ask questions and follow their child's interests, and recognise that children engage with books in different ways, including talking, pointing, turning pages, looking at pictures, moving around or simply being close while an adult reads. Reassure families that small, regular story moments, at bedtime, on the bus or at any point in the day, all make a lasting difference.

Imaginative play and creative activities

Evidence summary

Play is a powerful driver of early learning and relationships, supporting language, creativity and social development. Shared imaginative play is linked to gains in vocabulary, turn-taking, executive function and socio-emotional skills, including for children with autism e.g.^{29, 30}. Creative activities, such as rhymes, drawing and music-making, also build language, fine motor skills and wellbeing³¹, while music-based interactions, including singing and using simple instruments, enhance language comprehension, social communication and parent-child connection³². Arts-based activities can further strengthen shared attention, self-efficacy and responsive relationships by offering positive, emotionally engaging contexts e.g.³³.

[Evidence repository](#)

Implications for practice

All play is a powerful way for children to learn and connect. Practitioners can model playful interactions by joining in pretend play, encouraging storytelling and celebrating creativity. For some parents, play does not always come naturally, and modelling and reassurance can help build confidence. Practitioners can also help families recognise that play does not need to be expensive or complicated. Everyday moments such as building dens with cushions and blankets, making up songs or playing with recycled materials, can offer rich opportunities for learning and connection. Encouraging and modelling low- and no-cost play helps reduce barriers and builds parental confidence. Everyday moments of shared play, guided by the child's interests, help build communication, confidence and joy in learning.



Outings

Evidence summary

Everyday outings to libraries, and community spaces create rich learning opportunities that spark curiosity, broaden language exposure and support children's early communication^{7,34}. Being out and about can offer additional moments for parents and children to communicate more often and more meaningfully through shared experiences³⁵. Early trips to libraries are linked to later reading habits and stronger comprehension³⁶.

 [Evidence repository](#)

Implications for practice

Outings can be simple yet powerful learning experiences. Practitioners can encourage families to explore their local area and community spaces, and support them to make these visits interactive, talking about what they see, asking questions and following the child's interests. These shared experiences help build language, strengthen relationships and foster a love of learning beyond the home.

Families can sometimes find cultural and community spaces unfamiliar and intimidating, particularly if they did not grow up using them. Practitioners can play an invaluable role in helping families feel comfortable and connected. This might mean signposting baby groups or early years play sessions at museums, organising visits or transport routes or, where possible, accompanying families to make first experiences welcoming and manageable. Supporting families by not only signposting what's available, but also how to access it, helps reduce barriers and increase take-up.

Digital activities

Evidence summary

Digital devices are part of everyday family life³⁷. Evidence shows a clear difference between passive screen use, which is linked with poorer language and developmental outcomes³⁸ and interactive, educational or adult-guided use, which can support vocabulary and early learning e.g. ³⁹. Assistive technology can help children with SEND communicate and engage with literacy. However, parental device use can reduce back-and-forth interaction, affecting children's language development^{40,41}. A balanced approach helps families use digital technology in ways that promote communication and connection.

 [Evidence repository](#)

Implications for practice

To help children benefit from digital activities, families can be supported to:

- Encourage co-use - watching, playing and exploring digital content alongside children
- Provide simple talk prompts during digital activities (naming, wondering, linking to real life)
- Signpost high-quality, age-appropriate content, including accessible options for children with SEND
- Promote balance, pairing digital activities with chatting, playing and reading throughout the day
- Highlight low- and no-cost resources and reassure families that effective learning doesn't require expensive technology
- Support families to use digital media in non-judgemental, realistic ways that fit their routines and values.



National Literacy Trust case study:
Combining digital and face to face activity in Middlesbrough

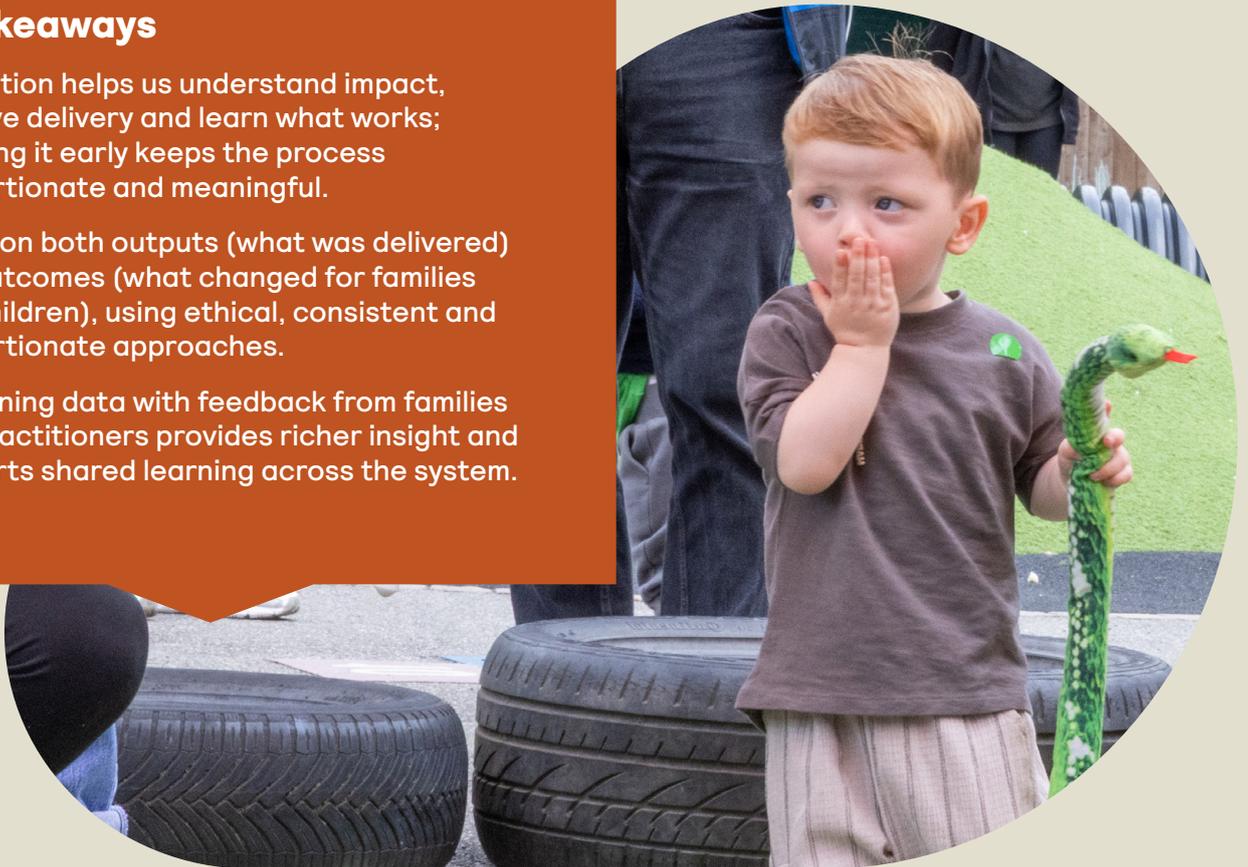


Liverpool Family Hubs case study:
Harnessing digital innovation through partnership working to increase access to Home Learning Environment support

11. Measuring success

Key takeaways

- Evaluation helps us understand impact, improve delivery and learn what works; planning it early keeps the process proportionate and meaningful.
- Focus on both outputs (what was delivered) and outcomes (what changed for families and children), using ethical, consistent and proportionate approaches.
- Combining data with feedback from families and practitioners provides richer insight and supports shared learning across the system.



Monitoring and evaluation are essential components of any programme delivery. They help assess whether activities are achieving intended goals, support learning and inform decision-making and demonstrate accountability and impact.

Why evaluation matters

Evaluation is a systematic process that applies research methods to assess the effectiveness, impact and value of your work. It supports:

Narrative of impact: Evaluation helps to understand and communicate how work contributes to change and whether aims are being achieved.

Informed delivery: Evaluation provides insights to refine strategies, improve delivery and guide future planning.

Credibility and accountability: Evaluation ensures that resources are used effectively and that activities remain focused on core outcomes, building credibility and accountability with stakeholders.

Key considerations for evaluating your work

When designing HLE activities, integrate evaluation from the start. Consider the following principles:

Start early: Plan evaluation alongside project design

Define clear aims: Decide on what you want the evaluation to tell you

Keep it focused: Know why you're evaluating and ensure all evaluation activity aligns with this

Be proportionate: Match the scale of your evaluation to the size and complexity of your work

Be ethical: Ensure informed consent and protect participant data

Reflect and share: Use findings to improve your work and share learning with others

Be consistent: Standardise data collection and ensure clarity across teams

What to monitor and evaluate

Monitor outputs: Track the direct outputs of your activity, such as the number of families reached or resources distributed. This can be captured through attendance records, delivery logs or simple activity trackers.

Evidence your outcomes: Measure the changes or benefits resulting from your activity, for example, improved child language outcomes, parental confidence or HLE behaviours. Tools to do this include pre- and post-activity surveys, interviews and case studies.

Collect feedback from activity: Gather insights from participants and delivery teams to inform future activity. This could focus on what worked well and what didn't, suggestions for improvement or reflections on the delivery of the activity. Tools include feedback forms, focus group discussions or stakeholder interviews.



Resources

Resources for families

Best Start in Life Parent Hub

The Best Start in Life Parent Hub brings together trusted information and support from pregnancy, through children's early years and beyond; including information about pregnancy, babies and toddlers, childcare and early years education, school readiness and a childcare eligibility checker, as well as personalised weekly emails.

beststartinlife.gov.uk

BookTrust

BookTrust's government-funded early years programmes provide families with access to books and reading support. Bookstart Baby, Toddler, Pre-Schooler and BookTrust Storytime are delivered through early years partners in every local authority. Families can also access Bookfinder, a searchable tool offering thousands of hand-picked book recommendations. It helps families and early years educators discover engaging books tailored to a child's needs and preferences:

booktrust.org.uk/book-recommendations/bookfinder

CBeebies Parenting

The CBeebies Parenting offer includes up to date expert advice, support and content on all things parenting, for parents-to-be, right through to helping little ones grow up. CBeebies Parenting is an online community empowering parents and carers to help their children learn through play.

bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/parenting

Dingley's Promise

The Dingley's Promise website offers practical resources to support families of children with special educational needs and disabilities. These include guides on daily routines, sensory tools and training videos to help with communication and inclusive play. Families can also access links to specialist organisations for further advice and support.

dingley.org.uk/resources-for-families

Family Corner

The family arm of Early Years Alliance, Family Corner offers expert articles, activity ideas and online learning sessions on key areas of child development for parents of early years children.

familycorner.co.uk

NSPCC – Look, Say, Sing, Play

The NSPCC offer fun and easy tips to help parents include even more Look, Say, Sing and Play into their daily routines with babies and toddlers. Including resources tailored to Dads, and to support refugee and displaced mothers.

nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/look-say-sing-play/

Speech and Language UK

The Help for Families section on the Speech and Language UK website offers free resources, advice and tools to support children with speech, language and communication needs. Families can access progress checkers, symptom guides, webinars and the chance to speak directly with speech and language advisors, to better understand and support their child's development.

speechandlanguage.org.uk/help-for-families/

Words for Life

The National Literacy Trust's family-facing website, Words for Life, has been designed to provide parents, children and young people with low-cost, no-cost activities and support to improve their language, literacy and communication skills from home. Parents can find quick and easy tips and activities to discover new ways to boost children's literacy skills while having fun chatting, playing and reading together.

wordsforlife.org.uk

Resources for practitioners

Family Hubs: Using place-based strategies to support delivery

The National Literacy Trust's Place-Based Family Hubs Module provides a practical framework to support collaboration. It highlights the importance of understanding local assets, co-designing with communities and embedding consistent HLE messages across sectors, to ensure sustainability.

literacytrust.org.uk/resources/using-place-based-strategies-to-support-delivery/

BookTrust

BookTrust provides support to early years partners as part of its national early years reading programmes (Bookstart Baby, Toddler, Pre-Schooler and BookTrust Storytime.) This includes training, guidance and practical resources for early years partners (family hubs, health visitors, educators, libraries, community groups) to promote early shared reading in families they work with.

booktrust.org.uk

booktrust.org.uk/how-we-help/early-years-professionals/

Dingley's Promise

The Resources for Educators section on the Dingley's Promise website provides practical tools and guidance to help early years professionals support children with special educational needs and disabilities. It includes strategies for inclusive practice, communication tools like Makaton and visual timetables and assessment guidance developed with the Department for Education. These resources aim to build confidence, enhance skills and promote inclusive environments in early years settings.

dingley.org.uk/resources-for-educators

EEF toolkit

The Early Years Toolkit from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is an evidence-based resource designed to help early years professionals improve learning outcomes, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It summarises the best available research across key areas of early development—such as communication, literacy, maths and self-regulation—highlighting the average impact, cost and strength of evidence for each approach.

educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit

Foundations Family Hubs Planning Framework

The Family Hubs Planning Framework by Foundations (the What Works Centre for Children & Families) is a detailed guide designed to help local authorities plan and evaluate Family Hub models. It offers step-by-step processes, templates and tools to assess local needs, workforce capacity, and service integration. While not specific to the Home Learning Environment, it supports embedding HLE and similar priorities into broader Family Hub strategies through a structured, evidence-informed approach.

foundations.org.uk/our-work/resources/family-hubs-planning-framework

foundations.org.uk/toolkit/practice-guides/parenting-through-adversity-0-10

National Centre for Family Hubs Toolkit

The National Centre for Family Hubs Toolkit, hosted by the Local Government Association, offers comprehensive support for practitioners and local authorities involved in developing and delivering Best Start Family Hubs. These resources are designed to help practitioners embed evidence-based, whole-family approaches and improve service coordination across sectors.

local.gov.uk/national-centre-family-hubs/toolkit

National Literacy Trust Best Start in Life resources

The National Literacy Trust provides a wide range of free, practical resources to support early years practitioners and local organisations in boosting children's early speech, language and communication skills. These resources are designed to be easy to use, inclusive and adaptable to different community needs. Each resource has an accompanying practitioner guide, with insights on how the resources benefit interactions and how to build them into practice.

literacytrust.org.uk/communities/best-start-in-life

Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood

The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood has released a series of animated films to support the social and emotional development of babies and young children. These films help families and practitioners understand how everyday interactions influence brain development and emotional wellbeing. They align with the Shaping Us Framework, which highlights the importance of nurturing relationships in the early years.

centreforearlychildhood.org/help-resources/the-explainer-series

Save the Children Knowledge Bank on Play

The Early Years Knowledge Bank from Save the Children UK provides a collection of resources to support practitioners working with young children, especially those experiencing poverty. The resources aim to deepen understanding of play, offer practical ideas for embedding it into early years practice and support advocacy for its importance. Practitioners can access insights, tools, and evidence to help ensure all children benefit from meaningful play experiences.

savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/child-poverty/uk-child-poverty/early-years/knowledge-bank/play

Speech and Language UK

The Speech and Language UK website provides educators and professionals with free resources, training and evidence-based strategies to support children with speech, language and communication needs. These tools help staff identify challenges early and build inclusive, language-rich environments in early years and school settings.

speechandlanguage.org.uk/educators-and-professionals

Speech and Language UK Key Messages

Speech and Language UK provides a set of eight downloadable key messages to help practitioners talk with families about supporting children's speech, language and communication. These messages can be printed or adapted to suit different formats and contexts. Each message offers clear, evidence-informed guidance that practitioners can use to encourage positive conversations with families about how everyday interactions support children's language development.

speechandlanguage.org.uk/educators-and-professionals/resource-library-for-educators/how-we-talk-to-families-about-talking/key-messages/

Stronger Practice Hubs

Stronger Practice Hubs, launched in November 2022 and funded until at least March 2029, are part of the UK Department for Education's early years recovery support. Delivered with the Education Endowment Foundation and the National Children's Bureau, they help nurseries, childminders and other early years settings adopt evidence-based practices to improve education quality. Best Start Family Hubs can work with Stronger Practice Hubs to strengthen their support for parenting and early language development.

strongerpracticehubs.org.uk

The ShREC Approach

Developed by the Education Endowment Foundation, ShREC stands for Share attention, Respond, Expand and Conversation. It provides a practical framework for enhancing adult-child interactions during shared activities like book reading.

educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/the-shrec-approach

Practical tools and frameworks for evaluation

EEF

A resource pack that includes guidance and templates to help you design, set up, implement and report on programme evaluations.

educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/evaluation/evaluation-guidance-and-resources

Magenta Book

Guidance from HM treasury and the Evaluation Task Force about things to consider when designing an evaluation.

details: gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book

The National Centre for Family Hubs

A variety of resources discussing important aspects to consider when evaluating work in Best Start Family Hubs.

See especially the section for evaluation:

local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Evaluating%20family%20hubs.pdf

Example report of evaluation of Best Start Family Hubs:

gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-family-hubs

Evidence repository

Why early language and the home learning environment matter

In 2024/25, 31% of children in England started school without meeting expected levels of early development¹. There are large and persistent inequalities between groups, with 48.7% of economically vulnerable children and 79.4% of children with special educational needs not meeting expected levels. Across all groups, a higher percentage of boys than girls fell below expected levels. Similar disparities are seen in the Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL) areas of learning, which are central to early development^{1,2}.

Additionally, everyday interactions like chatting, reading and playing – some of the most powerful predictors of children’s development, including language and literacy skills – are in decline³. In 2025, fewer than 1 in 2 parents (45.9%) reported reading with their children daily, down from 2 in 3 (66.1%) in 2019, while the percentage of parents who chatted with their children each day has also fallen sharply over the past six years, from 9 in 10 (90.3%) to 7 in 10 (70.2%). Play and singing show a similar trend, dropping from around 3 in 4 families in 2019 (76.2% and 68.4% respectively) to 1 in 2 or fewer (51.2% and 46.3% respectively) in 2025.

Worryingly, preliminary research published by the Department for Education in January 2026 found that virtually all UK children aged two (98%) watched television, spending an average of 127 minutes per day doing so⁴. This is more than double the maximum screen time recommended by the World Health Organisation for this age group⁵. Although some of this screen use was shared and interactive, the combination of falling early development outcomes, reduced shared learning activities, and high levels of screen use among very young children highlights the need for purposeful action to embed early learning into daily routines.

These early gaps matter. Not meeting expected developmental levels at pre-school reduces the likelihood of achieving them at later stages of schooling e.g.,^{6,7,8}, creating a negative ripple effect. It also risks doubling the likelihood of experiencing literacy, employment, and mental-health challenges in adulthood e.g.,^{9,10}. In this context, strengthening the home learning environment is not only about improving early outcomes; it is also a matter of social and economic justice.

To address this, the government has set an ambitious goal: by 2028, 75% of five-year-olds in England should reach a Good Level of Development (GLD)¹¹. Achieving this requires raising the current rate of 68.3% by 6.7 percentage points, a significant change given last year’s progress of only 0.6 percentage points¹. Strengthening the home learning environment is a key lever in achieving this and must be embedded across early years provision, local authority planning, and family-facing services.

The home learning environment – what it is

The home learning environment (HLE) encompasses the total learning ecology of the home. It refers to the everyday experiences, interactions and conditions in and around the home that shape children’s learning from birth onwards, including how adults and children interact, the routines and activities they share, the emotional climate of the household, and the resources and support families can access e.g.,^{12,13}.

Child development and the nature of the home learning environment are also shaped by the wider systems in which families are embedded, including their communities, cultural contexts, and broader society e.g.,^{14,15,16}. Crucially, the HLE is not a fixed physical space but a set of relational, cultural and sometimes commercial practices through which children learn language, develop a sense of identity and belonging, and build resilience¹⁷. Together, these interacting influences create the conditions that support children to thrive from birth.

How it works and why it matters

Learning is a continuous and cumulative process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood, with particularly strong and long-lasting foundations laid in early childhood, when children go through a period of rapid and dynamic development^{18,19}. This makes the early years a critical window for supporting development across domains and shaping positive outcomes across later childhood, adolescence and adulthood^{20,21}.

Early learning primarily takes place in an environment of interactions and relationships and is rooted in a child's experiences across multiple interconnected systems: the home, local communities, cultural and societal contexts, and broad structural conditions^{e.g., 14, 21, 22}. Children develop and learn about the world and how 'to be' in the world by exploring it through everyday interactions and activities that unfold within these micro- and macro-environments^{e.g., 19-22, 23, 24, 25}. During early childhood, a time when development happens rapidly and is heavily influenced by contingent interactions, especially recurrent ones^{20,26}, most children's experiences are centred around the home and the immediate community, daily routines and carer-child exchanges, and the background they unfold against. This makes carers, the home and its immediate surroundings key sources of early learning even in contexts of adversity, and a strong influence on life-long developmental trajectories^{e.g., 7, 20, 27, 28}. The stronger, more stable, more secure and stimulating early environments and interactions are, the stronger the foundation they create, strengthening the likelihood of positive developmental trajectories and enduring positive outcomes in childhood and beyond^{e.g., 21, 26, 29}.

Across countries and time, research has found links between cross-domain child outcomes and home learning environment attributes such as responsive communication, learning resources in the home, parental capabilities, shared engagement in early learning activities such as reading, playing or singing, and outings to community places^{e.g., 15, 30, 31, 32}. These interlinked facets influence children's expressive and receptive communication, social and cognitive development, reading skills, attitudes and habits^{e.g., 32, 33, 34, 35, 36}, as well as literacy and numeracy achievement across school stages^{e.g., 7, 37, 38, 39, 40}. We discuss these key facets and their influence on language-specific – as well as more general – child outcomes in more detail in the following sections.

Even under conditions of disadvantage, aspects of the HLE maintain their positive influence over child outcomes. A strong early HLE can support early language and broader development in contexts of low socioeconomic status, formal parental education or income^{e.g., 41, 42, 43}, with protective contributions that extend into early and late adolescence^{e.g., 38, 39, 44, 45, 46}. Together, these highlight the Home Learning Environment as a critical domain in the pursuit of equitable child development and education.

What shapes the HLE?

While the home learning environment can be a powerful driver of early outcomes, it is important to recognise the context in which families work to support their child's home learning. The HLE is multifaceted and does not exist in isolation but is embedded into context: families support children's learning within the realities of everyday life, and the HLE is shaped by the interaction between family characteristics, circumstances, motivations and values, and wider social, cultural and structural forces^{e.g., 14-17, 47}.

Understanding the HLE requires paying consideration to what happens during daily interactions as well as to the wider conditions that enable or constrain families' opportunities. Empowerment in inclusive practice comes from shifting 'fixing deficits' mindsets to recognising and amplifying children's and families' diverse ways of being and engaging with the world and their role in supporting early learning and development⁴⁸.

Relationships, interactions and daily life

At the heart of the HLE are children's everyday relationships and interactions. Much early learning and development, especially during the first three years of childhood, happens through everyday routines and interactions rather than planned activities^{e.g., 20, 22, 49, 50}. Daily routines such as mealtimes, travelling, shared reading, play and daily household tasks provide repeated, meaningful and naturally occurring opportunities for conversation, turn-taking, joint attention, connection and shared enjoyment^{e.g., 21, 49-51, 52}.

Warm responsive back-and-forth interactions with familiar adults during these daily routines form the building blocks of early language and learning.

Daily routines and carer-child relationships vary across families, and carers support children's communication in many different ways, reflecting the diversity of cultural and caregiving practices and families' unique needs, values, assets, experiences and traditions^{e.g., 51, 53}. There is no one 'right' approach; what matters most is the consistency and responsiveness of interaction between child and caregiver^{e.g., 20, 54}, with inclusive approaches essential for understanding how learning is embedded into real family contexts and how best to support it.

Family circumstances and pressures

Early learning interactions and routines take place within the complex realities and often competing demands of everyday life. Families often simultaneously juggle a range of circumstances that influence the time, capacity and resources available for early learning^{e.g., 50, 55}. Research highlights that factors such as household finances, housing and work arrangements, mental and physical health needs, caregiving responsibilities, and access to local services can all influence families' shared early learning capabilities^{e.g., 3, 50, 56, 56, 57}. Day-to-day pressures such as financial strain, irregular work or housing, and caregiver stress can often lead to difficult trade-offs like working longer hours, limiting books or toys, or reducing travel, all of which can affect opportunities for shared reading, extended conversations, outings or engagement with community support^{e.g., 50, 56, 58}.

Families caring for children with SEND may also be managing additional appointments, care routines or safety considerations that shape how learning fits into daily life^{e.g., 48, 58, 59}. Household dynamics matter too: Siblings may take on different roles, and caregiving as well as household responsibilities are often shared in ways that reflect family circumstances^{e.g., 50, 56, 54, 60, 61}.

Without attention to household-level factors, as well as how they interact and how they shape the way families embed early learning, the impact of otherwise promising support or interventions may be limited^{e.g., 62, 63}. Importantly, these factors do not reflect a lack of parental commitment: families consistently value and prioritise children's learning even under significant pressures^{e.g., 50, 54, 58, 64}. These patterns are best understood within the wider context of family life rather than as individual choices.

Cultural identity, diversity and caregiving practices

Families draw on a wide range of languages, cultural and storytelling traditions, and caregiving practices to support children's language and broader learning^{e.g., 48, 53, 54, 63}. These can shape notions and ideas about child development, caregiver roles and engagement, and what communication and learning look like across different homes, as well as how routine learning activities such as play, book sharing and outings are approached and integrated into daily family life^{e.g., 48, 51, 53, 63, 65}.

Recognising cultural diversity and the diversity of caregiving practices within it is therefore essential for ensuring that HLE-related policy and practice is relevant, equitable and effective. Policies that rely on narrow or prescriptive models of learning risk overlooking family strengths and may marginalise those whose practices differ from dominant norms^{e.g., 48, 66, 67}. Asset-based approaches, by contrast, build on the resources and routines families already use^{e.g., 48, 65-68}. Supporting rich communication in the home must therefore begin with affirming the legitimacy and value of all language varieties children encounter and use. This avoids marginalising dialects, accents and diverse literacies associated with, for example, Black, migrant or working-class communities^{e.g., 66, 68, 69}. Attending explicitly to how race and structural inequality shape early learning opportunities is necessary if HLE-related initiatives are to support positive outcomes for all children.

Community assets and affordances

Community conditions sit at the intersection of family life and structural context. Access to libraries, parks, museums, green spaces, transport and family services shapes how easily families can embed language-rich routines into everyday life^{e.g., 70, 71}.

When community infrastructure is scarce, poorly designed or not culturally welcoming, opportunities for play, curiosity and conversation are reduced, as are opportunities to access support^{e.g., 47, 72, 73}. UK evidence shows that lower library borrowing and limited community provision cluster in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage and map onto lower achievement of pre-school communication outcomes at scale⁷⁴, while reduced access to parks and museums can narrow opportunities for rich talk and play^{e.g., 75, 76, 77}.

However, availability alone is not enough. Inconvenient hours, transport barriers, cost and perceptions that spaces are ‘not for us’ can limit engagement even where provision does exist^{e.g., 78, 79, 80}. Effective responses involve co-designing spaces and services with families and valuing assets and informal learning opportunities already present within communities^{e.g., 46, 61, 62, 66}.

Structural and environmental factors

Structural factors such as poverty, national wealth disparities, policy choices, neighbourhood resources, family structure and socioeconomic background are powerful forces that shape the conditions in which early learning takes place, including families’ access to early childhood services and learning opportunities^{e.g., 15, 65, 68, 81, 82, 83}. These system-level conditions set the terrain on which community resources and household practices play out^{14, 15}.

Notions of ‘family’, ‘home’ and ‘good parenting’ are not neutral. Policy and media depictions of childhood and family life reflect historical and contemporary power dynamics, shaped by social position, migration histories, and racialised expectations and influence whose experiences and needs are centred or marginalised^{e.g., 67, 84, 85, 86}. These political, economic and historical structures shape community resources and household practices, reinforcing cycles of advantage and disadvantage that shape children’s home learning environments^{e.g., 14, 69, 85, 86}.

Socioeconomic status, parental education and neighbourhood conditions influence not only access to learning materials, but also to emotional, psychological and social resources and support^{e.g., 41-43, 57, 70-74, 87, 88}, while pressures such as the rising cost of living and workforce challenges across early years services can reduce the consistency and accessibility of support^{e.g., 48, 54, 56, 58, 88, 89, 90}. Structural discrimination, poverty and national and local policy choices influence families’ access to early childhood services, learning materials, safe play spaces and time for shared activities^{e.g., 15, 81, 85, 87}. These factors also affect families’ physical and mental health and their experiences of support systems, as well as whose practices and learning needs are represented in standards, curricula and resources^{e.g., 66, 67, 69, 84, 85, 91, 92}.

Importantly, these are not family ‘deficits’. They are structural conditions that constrain how families can build on their strengths^{e.g., 84-92, 93}. Addressing them requires system-level change alongside recognition and amplification of family and local community assets.

What works in strengthening the HLE – facets of the Home Learning Environment and their influence on early development

Research consistently shows that the HLE is **multidimensional**, with several distinct but overlapping and reinforcing facets that influence early development, some of which are more susceptible to change than others⁹⁴: While these facets have proven influential over child outcomes across children with different demographic and developmental profiles as well as learning needs, it must always be acknowledged that empowering learning across diverse families through these facets requires inclusive, needs-focused and family-centered approaches.

- **Responsive communication and interactions** – back-and-forth (‘serve and return’) communications that build language, confidence and secure relationships.
- **Shared engagement in activities**
 - » **Language-rich activities** – storytelling, book sharing, singing and play that strengthen vocabulary, attention and early literacy.

- » **Play and creative experiences** – imaginative and dramatic play, arts, crafts, music and movement that foster curiosity, creativity, and motor and social skills.
- » **Outings and community learning** – trips to libraries, parks, museums and local spaces that broaden experiences and create opportunities to talk and learn together.
- » **Digital activities** – limited guided use of high-quality evidence-based digital tools that can support language and literacy, with an emphasis on balance and parental involvement ('joint media engagement') to scaffold learning.
- **Parent confidence and beliefs** – parents' knowledge of child development and belief in their role as educators strongly shape engagement.
- **Resources and support** – connecting families with books, spaces and community groups in ways that feel welcoming, inclusive and relevant to their lives.

Responsive back-and-forth interactions ('serve and return')

What it is and why it matters

Responsive carer-child interactions – often described as *serve and return* – refer to sensitive and stimulating back-and-forth communication and exchanges in which caregivers notice, respond to and build on children's verbal and non-verbal cues (e.g., looks, sounds, gestures and words) ^{e.g., 19, 95}. Rather than a discrete activity, these back-and-forth exchanges are an ongoing relational process embedded in everyday routines and a core mechanism for early bonding and development ^{e.g., 19-22, 25, 26}, with both their consistency (i.e. frequency and predictability) and quality (i.e. responsiveness) having unique but complementary influences on early development ^{e.g., 20, 96, 97}.

What the evidence tells us

From before birth and throughout early childhood, consistent interactions rich in affect and sensory stimuli shape the brain's architecture and support the development of neural pathways essential for later learning and behaviour ^{e.g., 26, 98, 99, 100}.

Recurrent, secure and responsive serve-and-return communications support carer-child bonding and emotional regulation from the earliest moments ^{e.g., 26, 29, 95, 99, 101, 102, 103}, with benefits for caregiver-child attachment and children's broader socio-emotional wellbeing observed from infancy into later childhood ^{e.g., 29, 95, 99, 101-104, 105}. Additionally, even before children reach the age of two, responsive back-and-forth communication supports both non-verbal and verbal language skills such as joint attention, babbling and, later on, early vocabulary ^{e.g., 95-97, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110}. As children grow, these interactions continue to benefit their social development, including relationships with their carers and the people around them, their social communication skills and social understanding ^{e.g., 95, 111, 112, 113}, as well as their expressive and receptive communication, including gains for vocabulary, language comprehension and narrative skills ^{e.g., 108, 109, 114, 115, 113}.

Importantly, the benefits of responsive serve-and-return interactions extend beyond structured or formal teaching contexts: exchanges during naturally occurring routines such as caregiving, travel and play can be powerful learning moments ^{e.g., 49-53, 116, 117}. When embedded within activities such as shared reading or shared play, responsive interactions further strengthen children's language and developmental outcomes ^{e.g., 118, 119}. Finally, the benefits of responsive serve-and-return communications for children's development are evident across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts, as well as for children with different developmental profiles ^{e.g., 48, 112, 119, 120, 121}. These benefits can persist for weeks, months and even years after the interactions occurred ^{e.g., 95, 96, 108-114}.

Shared reading

What it is and why it matters

Shared parent-child reading is one of the most robustly researched early home learning activities, with well-documented and long-lasting benefits across a wide range of language and literacy outcomes, as well as broader cognitive, socio-emotional and academic outcomes^{e.g., 33, 42, 122, 123, 124, 125}. Early shared reading is, at its core, not only about the mechanics of reading books and narrative comprehension, but about the high-quality interactions that books make possible during and after story-reading episodes: close physical and emotional connection, rich language and sensory input, shared attention, and meaning-making^{e.g., 68, 101, 106, 109, 122-126}.

Early shared reading can be effective as a structured formal teaching activity but it does not need to be structured to be valuable. Integrating reading and storytelling moments around daily family routines, reading and sharing stories with siblings or other family members, linking the stories to the child and family's interests and their environment, and integrating play when sharing stories all help children make sense of language and the world around them, and see stories and books as part of routine life^{e.g., 49-52, 60, 124, 126, 127}. Repeated readings of familiar stories allow for deeper communication and help children consolidate learning, deepen comprehension, and practise emerging language skills^{e.g., 128, 129, 130} and, over time, frequent shared reading helps establish positive, predictable routines around books, which in turn support ongoing engagement with reading^{e.g., 49, 52, 131, 132, 133}.

What the evidence tells us

From pregnancy to age two

With infants and toddlers, shared reading is not primarily about sitting through or comprehending an entire story from start to finish. It's more about developing healthy routines and introducing a variety of nurturing relational and communicative experiences that shared engagement with books enable^{e.g., 101, 122-127, 134, 135, 136, 137}. From the earliest weeks and months, and even before birth, early shared reading contributes as much to parent-child closeness and child wellbeing as it does to early communication skills: existing research links it with benefits for carer-child bonds and child self-regulation^{e.g., 101, 124, 132-137, 138, 139} as well as early communication skills such as joint attention, vocalisations and perceptual processing^{e.g., 33, 54, 124, 133-136, 140, 141}, building foundations for later socio-emotional, language and literacy development. Finally, early reading begets continued shared and independent reading in the following childhood years and beyond^{e.g., 132, 133, 136, 142, 143}.

As children develop

As children grow, shared reading provides a supportive context to encounter, explore and understand unfamiliar concepts, novel vocabulary, and more complex language structures than are typically found in everyday conversation or play^{e.g., 54, 136, 144}. It also facilitates opportunities for caregivers to ask questions, define words and explore meaning, discuss pictures and words, extend talk and interaction around story elements, and scaffold understanding^{e.g., 54, 123, 136, 137, 145, 146, 147}. Shared reading can also be a space to explore emotions and diverse social interactions in a safe, responsive context, contributing to empathy, prosocial behaviour, and emotional wellbeing^{e.g., 122-124, 136, 145, 148}.

Indeed, research shows that frequent interactive early shared reading leads to lasting gains in a host of domains, including early expressive and receptive language, print awareness, phonological skills, reading attitudes and behaviours, and socio-emotional competencies, as well as pre-school literacy and even numeracy achievement^{e.g., 121-129, 131-135, 144-149, 150, 151, 152, 153}.

The benefits of early shared reading also go beyond the pre-school years. Research has found that reading can have a positive cumulative lasting effect on children's academic as well as non-academic outcomes across schooling stages and beyond^{e.g., 33, 42, 46, 122, 14, 136, 154, 155}. Frequent and interactive early shared reading can benefit children's communication, language, literacy and school achievement, as well as their social adjustment across and beyond primary and secondary school^{e.g., 33, 36, 38, 122-124, 145}. It can also link to fewer mental health difficulties in adolescence¹⁴⁸. Early shared reading also fosters continuity in positive attitudes towards reading and reading behaviours from pre-school years into schooling and beyond, laying foundations for generational cycles of readers^{e.g., 36, 38, 54, 132, 142, 154}.

Importantly, the benefits of early shared reading have been documented across children of different ages, language backgrounds, and learning needs, including bilingual children, children with autism, and children at risk of dyslexia, as well as in contexts of socioeconomic adversity^{e.g., 54, 140, 145, 146, 151}.

The quality and quantity of early shared reading episodes

Both the frequency and quality (i.e. responsiveness, interactivity) of shared book reading episodes make unique contributions to early learning and development, and children benefit most when shared reading is interactive, responsive and consistent^{e.g., 123, 134, 147, 157}. Interactive reading – where adults and children engage in meaningful communication and interactions around the text – help children become active participants in the reading process rather than passive listeners^{e.g., 124, 138, 156, 157}.

Interactive practices that encourage participation, such as dialogic reading, where carers ask open-ended questions, expand on children's responses and encourage them to retell story elements, have been shown to increase conversational turns and vocabulary usage, facilitating shared attention, narrative capabilities and oral language development, and enhancing children's expressive and receptive language outcomes above and beyond more passive shared reading^{e.g., 123, 127, 136, 146, 153}. These strategies can also help children think about, interpret and engage more deeply with the story, and connect the text to their own experiences^{136, 156-158, 159}. Similarly, using props, integrating play or acting out stories during shared reading enriches this interaction by bringing the narrative to life, increasing joint attention, extending engagement time, and providing embodied contexts for practising new vocabulary and narrative structures, which support oral language and narrative competence in young children^{e.g., 126, 160, 161}.

Shared play

What it is and why it matters

Shared play refers to the joint engagement in interactions that include a dynamic interplay of activities but also of sensory experiences, cognitive processes, behaviours, and affective states^{e.g., 162, 163}. It is often characterised by a mix of exploration and discovery, positive emotions, imagination and communication, and can include a range of playful child-led or jointly guided interactions between caregivers and children (and their peers), including sensory or pretend play, puzzle games, physical play and creative exploration^{e.g., 164, 165, 166}.

Shared play provides a responsive, motivating, and emotionally and physically safe context in which children can explore their environments, emotions and ideas, practise skills and experiment with boundaries, social understanding and relationships^{e.g., 161, 163-167, 168}. It also offers caregivers opportunities to encourage creativity and autonomy, scaffold learning, and enable the development of positive predictable interactions centred on children's interests^{e.g., 49, 167, 169}. Together, these characteristics make shared play a key driver of – and mechanism for – early cognitive, language, social and emotional development.

What the evidence shows

Shared play supports early development through multiple interconnected pathways and has well-documented benefits for children's cognitive and communicative capabilities, their social wellbeing and even their early academic outcomes.

From early on, shared play can provide enjoyable exploratory opportunities that stimulate and scaffold children's sensory-motor development and cognitive capabilities, and it has also been linked with benefits for attention, emotional regulation, and emergent cognitive flexibility, which in turn link with later academic and non-academic outcomes^{e.g., 163-165, 170, 171}. Shared play can also foster complex thinking skills such as symbolic and critical thinking, particularly when it involves shared goals, problem-solving or pretend play^{e.g., 163-165, 171-173}. Additionally, active and artistic shared play can help children explore physical boundaries, strengthen self-regulation and develop gross and fine motor skills, coordination and spatial awareness¹⁶³⁻¹⁶⁶.

Caregiver-child play creates important early opportunities for bonding, collaboration and social learning^{e.g., 163, 172, 173}. It also often naturally prompts opportunities to negotiate differences and engage with others' (sometimes competing) perspectives^{163, 171-174}. Supportive, safe and consistent playful interactions help children express, explore and manage emotions and social relationships^{e.g., 168-174, 175}. As children navigate these playful interactions, they develop empathy, problem-solving and flexible thinking^{e.g., 165, 167, 171}. These experiences strengthen caregiver-child bonds as well as broader socio-emotional competencies such as cooperation, emotional regulation, social communication and

conflict resolution^{175, 176}. Shared play can also support children's wellbeing by buffering stress, fostering affective development, and building self-confidence and resilience^{e.g., 163, 164, 175}.

Last but not least, shared playful interactions that are responsive, supportive and build on children's interests also create stimulating, motivating and emotionally safe contexts that encourage children to communicate, negotiate meaning, and construct narratives^{e.g., 169, 172, 175, 177}. In doing so, they strengthen vocabulary, storytelling and pragmatic language skills^{e.g., 161-164, 168, 174, 176}. For example, pretend and symbolic play can be particularly beneficial for language development because children use complex vocabulary, narratives and grammatical structures to sustain imagined scenarios^{e.g., 163, 173, 174, 176}.

Across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts, play-based interactions are consistently associated with positive developmental outcomes^{e.g., 174, 178, 179, 180, 181}. Over the last decade, a growing body of child-centred research highlights its potential not just as an equitable, adaptable home learning strategy but also as a broader pedagogical approach for early learning support^{e.g., 178, 181, 182}.

Musical and rhythmic activities

What they are and why they matter

Shared musical and rhythmic activities refer to singing songs and nursery rhymes, playing with instruments and making music, and movement-based activities such as dancing. Musical interactions are inherently multimodal, combining sound, movement, facial expression and touch, making them especially accessible, stimulating and motivating^{e.g., 183, 184, 185}.

Through these sensory-rich, highly engaging relational activities that naturally support creative communication and socio-emotional development, early musical activities provide a playful yet powerful way for children to connect and develop through rhythm, repetition and shared attention, even before birth^{e.g., 184, 186, 187}.

What the evidence shows

Shared caregiver-child musical interactions support early attachments and socio-emotional capabilities. They provide predictable structures while allowing flexibility, play and shared enjoyment, strengthening carer-child closeness, joint attention and communicative gestures, co- and self-regulation, and responsiveness^{e.g., 179, 183, 184, 188}. Additionally, integrating songs and nursery rhymes into daily routines can also strengthen engagement and communication with extended family members through familiar culturally meaningful songs and rhymes passed across generations, thus building and reinforcing a shared identity, a sense of belonging, and intergenerational bonding^{e.g., 188, 189, 190}.

Research also shows that musical engagement supports auditory processing, cognitive flexibility, and early language development^{e.g., 190, 191, 192}. Exposure to a mixture of rhythm, pitch, melody and speech enhances children's ability to perceive, discriminate and decode sounds, supporting pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition and language comprehension^{e.g., 193, 194, 195}. Evidence suggests that musical home enrichment has a unique positive effect on early communicative gestures and language comprehension even when broader aspects of the home learning environment are considered, highlighting a distinct role for music in early communication development^{e.g., 191}.

Nursery rhymes are a particularly powerful and popular musical activity. Their simple repetitive structures and strong rhythmic patterns support memory for linguistic forms and have been associated with early literacy-related skills, including phonological awareness, listening skills, expressive language and later reading outcomes^{e.g., 196, 197, 198, 199, 200}. Additionally, musical games can promote turn-taking, cooperation, emotional understanding and prosocial behaviour^{e.g., 184, 201, 202}, while movement-based musical activities can support physical development, creativity, imagination and cognitive flexibility^{e.g., 192, 203, 204, 205}.

Arts and crafts

What they are and why they matter

Arts and crafts activities can include drawing, painting, modelling, collage, creative construction, and a wealth of other creative activities. These activities combine creative expression with fine motor practice, cognitive engagement and shared interaction, allowing children to explore ideas, make decisions and express emotions, supporting learning across cognitive, emotional, social and physical domains ^{e.g., 205, 206, 207}.

What the evidence shows

Shared engagement in artistic activities supports children's cognitive and sensory-motor development by strengthening perceptual skills, visual-spatial understanding, and early cognitive concepts such as colour, shape and pattern ^{e.g., 208}. Drawing, painting and early mark making, such as painting with fingers, drawing with crayons or chalk, scribbling, can be particularly useful for children's early literacy as children use marks to tell stories, label objects and explore symbols ^{e.g., 208, 209}. These activities allow children to represent ideas, experiences and meaning visually before they can express them fully through speech or writing ^{e.g., 184, 186, 210}. Early drawing, painting, and mark-making can also support the development of fine motor control and hand-eye coordination, which are critical foundations for later writing and self-care skills ^{e.g., 211, 212, 213, 214, 215}.

Shared creative activities also strengthen creativity, cognitive flexibility, expressive and representational skills, planning, memory, problem-solving and critical thinking as children experiment, make decisions and negotiate meaning with responsive carers and peers ^{e.g., 216, 217, 218}. When artmaking is shared, it also encourages communication, cooperation and social understanding: Evidence shows that artistic caregiver-child interactions such as painting together strengthen responsiveness, joint attention, self-efficacy and attachment while also supporting parental wellbeing and confidence ^{e.g., 208, 219, 220, 221}. These relational gains are important outcomes in and of themselves, as well as factors that create conditions for language development through increased contingent talk and shared meaning-making.

Crucially, art can provide a safe often non-verbal medium for emotional expression, particularly for children who may find verbal expression challenging, supporting emotional regulation, resilience, and stress reduction and mental health ^{e.g., 219, 220, 222}.

Outings

What they are and why they matter

Shared outings to environments beyond the home – such as parks, libraries, museums and community spaces – expose children to novel sensory inputs, experiences, language and social contexts, broadening their learning environments while creating rich opportunities for joint attention, exploration and communication ^{e.g., 75, 223, 224}. Whether in natural spaces or community settings, outings provide rich sensory input, opportunities for exploration and discovery, and meaningful contexts for shared talk and learning, broadening children's experiences and development, and strengthening caregiver-child interactions²²⁵.

What the evidence shows

From early on, outdoor and community experiences provide enjoyable exploratory opportunities that stimulate and scaffold children's sensory-motor development and cognitive capabilities ^{e.g., 226, 227}. Through engagement with manageable uncertainty and challenge – such as climbing, balancing, rough-and-tumble play, or exploring unfamiliar spaces – within safe and supportive contexts, outings also provide children with opportunities to engage in developmentally appropriate risk-taking and discovery ^{e.g., 224-227}. This helps build children's confidence, emotional regulation and executive function, situational awareness and, and physical development as they playfully navigate their environments ^{e.g., 76, 224-227}.

Research shows that parent-child interactions during outings can be more frequent and responsive than those at home ^{e.g., 75-77, 224}. Natural environments in particular are associated with increased

conversational turns and connected talk, supporting early language, bonding and social development e.g., 76, 77, 228. Nature-based experiences also support cognitive flexibility, creativity, problem-solving and emotional wellbeing e.g., 229, 230, and even cognitive and psychosocial school-related outcomes e.g., 76, 77, 224, 231, 232.

Visits to libraries, museums and cultural or community spaces extend children's vocabulary, conceptual knowledge and social understanding, supporting curiosity and communication, and contributing to positive early schooling outcomes. Museum and library experiences have been shown to increase the quantity and quality of parent-child interaction and communication e.g., 75, 233, including engagement in literacy activities e.g., 233, while longitudinal evidence suggests that early library visits can account for more frequent later leisure reading and stronger reading comprehension e.g., 133.

Digital activities

What this is and why it matters

Digital activities include children's engagement with digital devices for a range of purposes, including educational, interactive and recreational use. While the evidence base is more mixed than for other home learning activities, research suggests that some *supported, high-quality and developmentally appropriate* digital activities can contribute positively to children's learning, including language and literacy development e.g., 234, 235, 236, 237.

What the evidence shows

Evidence indicates that the impact of digital activities on children's development varies considerably depending on the *type, quality and context* of screen use. Several studies have found that higher levels of screen time in young children are associated with poorer developmental outcomes, as well as reduced opportunities for conversations with parents e.g., 238, 239. Recent UK research found that two-year-olds with the highest levels of screen time had poorer language scores than their peers with the lowest levels of screen time, although gaps relating to income and variety of home learning activities were greater⁴.

Importantly, much of the evidence highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of screen use. For example, a review of studies involving children from birth to age 12 found that while higher overall screen time was associated with poorer language outcomes, higher-quality screen use (particularly for educational purposes) was associated with stronger language skills²³⁸. Similarly, educational and interactive screen use, such as shared ebook reading or app-based activities that require active engagement, are associated with better learning outcomes than recreational or passive screen use like watching television^{240, 241}.

There is also some evidence of the complementary or supportive role that digital activities can play alongside traditional literacy experiences. For example, earlier research found that children were more likely to have an above-average vocabulary when they shared stories in both print and digital formats, compared with children who engaged with print alone²³⁶. Experimental and intervention studies further suggest that developmentally appropriate interactive digital activities can contribute to vocabulary learning and shared reading, including among children from low- and middle-income backgrounds e.g., 237, 242. However, while a meta-analysis found that digital reading could offer a slight advantage for comprehension and vocabulary learning in young children compared with print reading, children from lower-income backgrounds showed less benefit and researchers stressed that careful selection of materials and adult support was crucial²⁴³.

Importantly, the varied evidence base in this area emphasises the need for a nuanced understanding of screen use. Different forms of screen time – including passive, recreational, educational, interactive and sedentary use – have different implications for learning and development, and these effects vary by child age, developmental stage, and individual needs e.g., 5, 244, 245, 246. This suggests that questions about screen use should focus both on *how much* time children spend with screens and on *how and with whom* digital activities are experienced.

Carer capabilities and capacity

Unsurprisingly, research finds that during early childhood, parents' decisions around supporting and engaging in early learning are closely linked with care, wellbeing and happiness concerns^{50, 247}. What these decisions look like and how they unfold is often informed and influenced by parental capabilities and capacity. Crucially, these are not about whether parents *want* to support their child's learning and development – indeed, that should be assumed. Rather, they are about the tools that empower and enable them to do so (capabilities) and the contexts that influence how and when those tools can be explicitly directed to early learning support (capacity).

Facets of carer capabilities such as their knowledge and beliefs about child development – as well as self-efficacy – influence everyday decisions about play, talk and routines, and how parents interpret children's cues and respond to their interests e.g., 32, 248, 249. Research links higher parental self-efficacy with more frequent engagement in learning activities, greater responsiveness and use of language-rich interactions, and stronger child language and developmental outcomes e.g., 249, 250, 251. Similarly, strengthening general and topic-specific parental knowledge and beliefs around supporting child development has been linked with improvements in both shared engagement in early learning activities and child outcomes^{252, 253}. It can also be easier to support early learning when parents feel confident in their capabilities to do so and empowered in their role e.g., 254, 255, 256.

Carer capabilities are situated within and influenced by the broader structural, cultural and daily routine contexts discussed previously. Capacity factors such as time, daily demands, mental or emotional wellbeing, financial (in)security and availability of local support can constrict or enhance parents' capabilities e.g., 3, 50, 55. They can influence both the frequency and responsiveness of interactions, even when parental capabilities are strong, and not for a lack of desire or awareness of importance on parents' account e.g., 50, 55, 57, 64, 257. Accounting for and integrating carer wellbeing, culturally or emotionally specific aspects of carer and family life across support initiatives can benefit parent-carer interaction frequency and sensitivity as well as child communication, social and cognitive development²⁵⁸.

Resources and local support

Access to books, toys and community-based opportunities has measurable and lasting benefits for children's communication and broader development. Home access to print materials, such as books and writing resources, can influence vocabulary growth, language comprehension, and later reading outcomes e.g., 30, 31, 34, 36. These resources provide repeated opportunities for shared reading, talk and exploration, which are central to early language development.

Beyond the home, libraries, children's centres and community groups extend learning opportunities while also supporting parents themselves e.g., 233, 259. Engagement with local services can strengthen parents' social networks, reduce isolation, and increase access to information and support, all of which benefit children's development e.g., 50, 72-74, 78. Community-based resources also offer structured and informal opportunities for shared activities – such as story-times, play sessions and creative groups – that promote parent-child interaction, language-rich experiences, and school readiness e.g., 83, 133, 233, 260. Ensuring equitable access to high-quality resources and integrated local support is therefore a key component of strengthening home learning environments and supporting families effectively.

Case Studies



National Literacy Trust: Working with families and practitioners to co-produce effective early years resources

This case study demonstrates how the National Literacy Trust works with families and practitioners to co-design, test and refine content, ensuring resources are accessible, trusted and effective in supporting early communication and interaction within everyday family life. The approach is evidence-informed, combining lived experience with behavioural science, drawing on the EAST principle and the COM-B model to support meaningful engagement and behaviour change.

What was done:

When developing the [Walk and Talk cards](#), the National Literacy Trust worked closely with families, family hub practitioners, campaign partners and speech and language therapists to co-produce the resource. This ensured that content combined evidence-informed messages with families' lived experience and was delivered in a clear, practical and engaging format.

Behavioural science frameworks were used alongside co-production to guide development. The EAST principles informed decisions about format and delivery, ensuring content was simple, visually engaging and easy to act on. The COM-B model shaped messaging to build parents' capability (knowledge and confidence), opportunity (prompts embedded in everyday routines) and motivation (positive reinforcement, non-judgemental tone and explanations of the benefits of behaviours suggested).

Early ideas were tested in stay-and-play groups, childminder settings and nurseries. Parents provided direct feedback on what felt relevant, inclusive and usable, as well as what created barriers to engagement.

Families' feedback challenged professional assumptions. For example, parents expressed a strong preference for bespoke illustrations rather than photographs, leading to a redesign that better represented diverse families and felt less formal and less judgemental. Decisions about tone, imagery and usability were made collaboratively, with families' perspectives carrying equal weight throughout the process.

The Walk and Talk cards form part of a wider suite of [National Literacy Trust resources](#) used nationally by family hubs, early years practitioners and community partners as part of their broader support for families with young children.

Overcoming barriers:

Information overload and complex messaging can be a significant barrier for families, particularly where confidence is low or previous experiences of services have felt judgemental. Working alongside parents to co-develop content ensured messages were relative, strengths-based and grounded in everyday family life.

Combining co-production with behavioural science helped remove barriers and normalise everyday interaction, making it easier for families to engage. By testing the resources in familiar settings where families felt at ease, parents felt more able to be honest about what worked and what didn't, rather than giving answers they thought professionals wanted to hear.

Impact:

The Walk and Talk cards have achieved substantial national reach with over 64,000 resources distributed across 75 local authority areas and used by family hubs, early years settings and community organisations.

Practitioners report that the cards support engagement with parents who may be less confident or less likely to respond to written guidance, while parents value the non-judgemental tone and simple prompts that can be used in everyday moments.

A Dad Matters Coordinator from Home-Start Manchester said:



The parents (I work with) felt that a lot of dads didn't have the confidence with children and are often reluctant to speak to professionals. The Walk and Talk booklets were received very positively because the parents felt they were presented in a format that was accessible for dads and non-judgemental. The colours are very gender neutral. There are dads represented on most of the pages, and it feels like [a] resource that dads will appreciate.



A parent who has frequently used the cards said:



The tips and information with the Walk and Talk cards has really helped me. Turning my child round to face me in his pram today, so he can see my lips and face when we are talking and taking out his dummy, it's the little things that I can do.



Parents continue to play an active role beyond initial development, sharing the cards within their communities and feeding back on their use in practice. This ongoing co-production has increased credibility, strengthened trust, and ensured the resource continues to meet families' needs because it is shaped with families rather than simply designed for them.

Lessons for practice:

Co-design resources with families

Involving families from the outset helps ensure content is relevant, inclusive and practical. Families' insights can challenge professional assumptions, leading to resources that feel accessible and trustworthy.

Be realistic about co-production

Meaningful co-production takes time and requires openness to challenge and change. Testing ideas and adapting initial assumptions is not always easy, but it leads to clearer, more strengths-based messaging that builds parents' confidence and fits better with everyday family life.

Combine co-production with behavioural science

Using behavioural frameworks such as EAST and COM-B, alongside lived experience, strengthens resource design by ensuring content is both evidence-informed and grounded in real family life.

Test and iterate in settings

Prototyping and testing resources with families and practitioners enables refinement based on usability as well as content, improving effectiveness and engagement.

Engage practitioners and parents early

Early and sustained engagement with delivery partners helps align messages across services, builds shared ownership, and ensures resources are embedded within existing practice rather than introducing separate or conflicting messages.



Speech and Language UK: Testing messaging to inform how we talk to families about talking

This case study highlights the importance of testing messaging with target audiences to ensure they're accessible, relatable and impactful.

What was done:

Speech and Language UK worked with Future Narratives to develop a set of messages and recommendations to reach parents and raise awareness and engagement with the home learning environment. They ran two focus groups with a small number of parents, as well as an online survey of more than 1,000 parents. A further follow-up survey looked at the responses of 100 parents. Parents looked at different messages and framing and shared their responses.

Overcoming barriers:

When searching for advice families are more likely to follow information from a trusted source. The project highlighted that parents know that speech and language development is important and they want to understand how to help. Parents appreciated messages that were specific, straightforward and written in a neutral style. Advice around sensitive topics like screen time performed best when it was framed positively, focusing on the benefits rather than the negatives. Parents appreciated nuance, too; every family's situation is different.

Advice from professionals like speech and language therapists, health visitors, GPs and childminders or nursery workers was the highest rated, with social media influencers getting the lowest rating. Likewise, in-person, word-of-mouth advice and information found on trusted websites rated highly, while social media channels did not.

The key messages are available on [this webpage](#). They highlight that parents can make a difference – and explain to them how, giving specific, practical advice in a neutral style. The sector also needs to make every in-person contact with a professional count, as these interactions were important to parents, and any web-based information needs to be easy to find, with a clear source.

If advice is written by a speech and language therapist or a GP, that should be included. By implementing these strategies local authorities can have the maximum impact for the families they're supporting.

Impact:

Messages that focused on the impact of activities for their children were most impactful; understanding why they were being asked to do something mattered. What's more, messages that highlighted the impact on family bonding, brain development and communication skills really resonated.

Lessons for practice:

Ultimately, the project found that parents want to know what to do and they're willing to follow advice. Approachable, accessible messaging can make a big difference. Even in this project, 80% of parents reported in the follow-up survey that taking part in the project had already impacted their behaviour, whether in their own interactions with their children or in discussions with other parents.

Test messages with target audiences to increase motivation

Focus groups and surveys helped identify which messages resonated most with parents.

Use clear, specific, and neutral language to build capability

Parents preferred straightforward advice that avoided jargon and judgment.

Frame sensitive topics positively to boost motivation

Messages about screen time were more effective when framed around benefits rather than restrictions.

Highlight trusted sources to increase motivation and capability

Advice from professionals (e.g., speech and language therapists, health visitors) was rated highest.

Make every in-person contact count to increase opportunity

Parents valued face-to-face interactions with professionals, suggesting these moments are key for delivering impactful messages.

Ensure online content is easy to find and clearly sourced

Web-based advice should be accessible and clearly attributed to trusted professionals.



BookTrust: Delivering universal and targeted programmes to support shared reading in early years families

This case study shows how BookTrust's national, evidence informed Bookstart programmes support families to read together as part of everyday life, creating a positive home learning environment throughout the early years.

What was done:

Bookstart programmes include the universal 'Bookstart Baby' as well as targeted offers designed to support families who stand to benefit most from reading support. All these programmes are co-designed with families and partners to support bonding and connection, early development milestones and to help initiate and create positive reading experiences for children and their parents/carers. The programmes are delivered in every local authority, through BookTrust's network of over 27,000 early years partners, including, family hubs, health visitors, libraries and community groups. Partners tailor BookTrust programmes to meet the needs of families in their communities, settings and networks as part of their wider support to families.

For over 30 years the universal **Bookstart Baby** programme, an entitlement for every family with a new baby, has provided families with books, tools, knowledge and messaging to get reading in the first year of their child's life. Health visitors, family hubs, libraries and other early years partners engage families with Bookstart Baby, communicate the benefits of reading, share physical and digital resources, and help families to see how they can embed reading in their daily lives. The universal model, which includes a series of resources for families with additional needs, ensures that all children get opportunities to experience early shared reading.

Overcoming barriers:

Parents' and carers' own experiences and norms around reading can shape early shared reading habits – either reinforcing or discouraging it. When shared reading is explained or modelled by someone families trust or can relate to, it helps them see its relevance and importance. Partners use our Bookstart resources to open up conversations with families, and create memorable, celebratory moments that engage families in positive ways. Working with partners and families BookTrust carefully selects books with the features that make story times engaging and interactive to encourage parents to try reading more with their child. When parents and carers see their child's interest and growth firsthand, this becomes a powerful motivator to continue reading at home.

Impact:

Bookstart Baby reaches 90% of all new babies across England, in all local authority areas. 78% of parents responding to BookTrust's evaluation survey say that Bookstart Baby prompts them to read and share stories more with their child than they otherwise would. And 94% of BookTrust delivery partners responding to BookTrust's partner survey say Bookstart Baby is effective in supporting families to start reading with their children as early as possible.



Her little feet would start going and her hands would wave – she'd get so excited because she knew what was coming on that page. Seeing her reaction made it all worthwhile.

Parent – Bookstart Baby



Lessons for practice:

Support families to understand it is never too early to start reading and encourage families to make great use of Bookstart Baby resources in their baby's first year.

Help families to see how they can embed shared reading in everyday family life

Use clear, strengths based messages to build capability and confidence and show how simple story sharing in everyday moments contributes to bonding and children's development.

Model interactive shared reading

Demonstrate how to share stories in ways that are engaging and enjoyable (e.g. showing they can follow a baby's cues, using voices, talking about pictures, point, pause and respond). Reassure that there is no right or wrong way to share stories together.

Use book gifting moments to spark enjoyment, build motivation and encourage parents to continue to share stories together at home.

Embed consistent, positive reading messages across partners so families hear simple, aligned messages from trusted professionals, through multiple touchpoints.

Connect families to targeted programmes where needed, ensuring those facing greater barriers receive tailored, practical support in ways that work for them.



Cheshire East: Driving early support for children with identified SEND through partnership working

This case study highlights the importance of partnership working to drive effective inclusive early support for our youngest children (0–4) with identified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their families across Cheshire East.

What was done:

In response to high numbers of early years education, health and care plans (EHCPs) and limited early intervention, Cheshire East created two multi agency Early Years Forums in 2023, aligned to NHS localities and chaired by the SEND team. These aimed to deliver integrated inclusive provision for children, ensuring decisions are based on individual needs in co-production with families. Partners included Early Years staff, health professionals, Educational Psychology, Speech & Language Therapy and Portage, with Family Hubs as vice chairs. The Forums meet monthly to review children, share information and agree next steps within the graduated approach.

Overcoming barriers:

Children with developmental delays in two or more areas assessed by a health or education professional were often referred for EHCP assessment before receiving targeted early support, and families missed home learning guidance that could help progress. Referral information was frequently limited, making early decision making difficult.

Co-produced with health, education and parent carers, the Early Years Forum creates a single partnership pathway for early identification and tailored support. Parent and child voice is gathered in advance, allowing recommendations to be personalised and coordinated. Portage trained staff and family hubs provide targeted interventions, while aligning paediatric referrals ensures professionals share information and avoid duplication. Opening referrals to early years settings and family hub teams has increased early identification.

Impact:

Between April 2024 and March 2025, 302 children were discussed; 97 children met developmental milestones and exited the Forum, while 70 exited with an EHCP where needed. Referral quality to SEND Panels has significantly improved, inappropriate referrals have reduced, and children are identified earlier. In the South locality, paediatric waiting lists have decreased due to better multi agency information at first appointments. Families report trusting relationships, due to everyone having their input into plans, and children are experiencing confident transitions into settings due to robust transition services.

Lessons for practice:

Make time for co-production

We coproduced our early years forum and its processes over a six-month period before rolling out and met regularly to evaluate and make tweaks in the first year. As a result of the forum being shaped by the partnership all partners are committed and invested.

Consider reporting at the start

We made the mistake of having too many free text outcomes making it hard to pull together a thematic report. Develop a drop down set of outcomes for reporting and keep your free text for children's records.

Open referral routes beyond health

This improves early identification, while close alignment between universal Family Hub offers and targeted SEND pathways ensures children receive the right support at the right time, using a practical model of layered universal and targeted approaches.



Southwark Family Hubs: Increasing parental confidence through modelling and resource sharing

This case study illustrates how Family Hub practitioners embedded Home Learning Environment support into a structured parenting programme, by modelling everyday interactions, using practical resources and strengthening messages through trusted relationships.

What was done:

In Southwark, the National Literacy Trust worked in partnership with the 1st Place Family Hub to strengthen the Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC) programme. These parent support classes form part of the Family Early Help parenting strategy in Southwark, an 8-week evidence-based model that promotes positive behaviours in children, improved communication, and family interactions. Activity was planned to improve the quality and frequency of serve and return interactions between parents and their children. During sessions, staff distributed and modelled behaviours, demonstrating how everyday interactions build children's early speech, language and communication skills, as well as providing National Literacy Trust resources containing the same messaging, to refer back to at home.

Overcoming barriers:

Families who attend EPEC sessions often have low confidence in supporting their child's learning. To address this, practitioners shared National Literacy Trust messages and introduced Walk and Talk cards into group sessions, demonstrating how simple, everyday interactions can build early speech, language and communication skills. Staff modelled behaviours and interactions with children, showing parents how to use prompts during daily routines and offering practical examples they could try at home. The resource's strengths-based tone helped staff affirm and build on what parents were already doing well. By practising the tips together in a supportive environment, parents developed both the capability and the confidence to use similar interactional strategies outside of the sessions.

To maintain momentum, this approach was extended through buggy walks in collaboration with the Southwark Parent Forum, embedding consistent home learning environment messaging across community activities. Staff have worked closely with Southwark Parent Forum and the Family Hub to provide guidance on supporting parents with home learning environment activities, sharing resources to distribute and providing guidance on how to use them in settings.

Impact:

Parent feedback showed increased awareness of the importance of early communication, with many noting they had not previously understood how powerful simple, daily interactions can be, highlighting the value of direct modelling and clear explanation of resources.

One attendee said:



I have two older children that are teenagers and one toddler, you forget a lot of these things even if you have done it before.



Lessons for practice:

Integrate modelling into structured programmes

Use sessions like EPEC to demonstrate practical strategies. Showing how behaviours can be performed increases capability by giving families the tools to practice the behaviours themselves.

Reinforce messages through trusted practitioners

Practitioners should explain and model tips in a strengths-based way, praising existing behaviours. This helps build motivation by building on existing behaviours where positive results can be seen.

Equip the workforce with tools and confidence

Provide clear, practical resources and training so practitioners can confidently model behaviours and engage families inclusively.

Combine universal and targeted offers

Use Family Hub programmes to reach all families, while tailoring support for those with lower confidence or literacy, ensuring equity and accessibility.



Liverpool Family Hubs: Strengthening access to services through a business partnership with the Very Group

This case study shows how a national voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisation can work with business partners and Family Hubs to strengthen early language and literacy support for families experiencing disadvantage. It demonstrates how business partnerships can enhance Family Hub delivery, extend reach and embed home learning environment messages within everyday practice.

What was done:

In July 2025, the National Literacy Trust launched its place-based early years work in Liverpool, supported by a three-year partnership with The Very Group. The programme aims to support over 4,000 children aged 0–5 to develop early language and communication skills.

The campaign is delivered through local partnerships in the community, including Family Hubs and early years settings. One of those partners is the Five Children and Families Trust, working closely with Family Hub serving Speke, where intergenerational poverty and low literacy continue to impact life chances.

The National Literacy Trust acted as a system convenor, aligning business investment, national early years priorities and local Family Hub delivery. This included translating business objectives into Hub-appropriate activity

Delivery has included:

- Storytelling and shared reading activities, based on aspects of early language and communication acquisition, such as immersive storytelling of the Gruffalo in the forest.
- Book gifting and high-quality, evidence-based resource distribution to families through hub sessions and community events, particularly via family hubs and children's centres across the city.
- Literacy champion (local volunteer) recruitment and training for members of the local community, encouraging the sharing of literacy messaging and modelling behaviours to families.
- Practitioner-led modelling of HLE behaviours using high-quality, evidence-based resources.
- Business staff volunteering to support campaign delivery, preparing and attending community events and modelling behaviours to families.

Overcoming barriers:

Support from The Very Group has provided vital backbone capacity, enabling the National Literacy Trust to take a systems-change approach in Liverpool. This additional capacity has enabled deeper collaboration with key partners, including Family Hubs, the City Council and VCS organisations.

Funding, staff volunteering and advocacy has enabled additional activity to take place, raised awareness of existing resources, and improved coordination across partners. Enhanced marketing capacity and brand awareness also helped ensure more families were aware of the local services available to them and how to access support.

Impact:

By combining business investment with Hub-led delivery, the partnership increased capacity, visibility and reach, enabling sustained engagement with a wider group of families.

Business funding and staff volunteering has led to:

- Over 2000 children reached through community engagement activities
- Over 280 resources distributed to local families, which share support and guidance for developing a high-quality home learning environment
- Over 1500 early years book titles distributed to local families

Family Hub practitioners reported that the partnership strengthened their ability to promote early language and shared reading, supported positive engagement with families, and enhanced the Family Hub's early literacy offer.

A parent said:

“

I liked the cosy setting and Sophia loved the lights. I liked that we could chat about the story during the film and especially after it too. Sophia could think about what she saw.

”

The family have since joined a second community event and said:

“

A lovely session - the girls can listen to the story and then do activities which link to the story. I love that it brings the story to life for them. It is lovely that they get the book to take home and we can carry on storytelling and other activities at home.

”

Lessons for practice:

Use business partnerships to enhance, provision

Business partnerships can extend capacity, visibility and volunteer support when they are aligned with Family Hub priorities and delivered through existing services.

Value the convenor role

An independent, backbone organisation can add value by providing convening capacity, aligning business investment with Family Hub priorities and supporting partnerships that strengthen local systems.



National Literacy Trust: Reaching families in everyday spaces through a partnership with First Bus Cornwall

This case study illustrates how strong partnerships with local businesses combined with culturally attuned and community-centred approaches, can create inclusive opportunities for families to engage.

What was done:

In Camborne, Cornwall, a partnership between the National Literacy Trust and Cornwall by Kernow (part of First Bus) transformed a bus into a mobile literacy hub during Trevithick Day, a free one-day festival celebrating the town's rich, industrial history. The event and bus provided a familiar space for families to complete free, accessible literacy activities, including travel-themed storytelling and songs and rhyme time sessions.

Overcoming barriers:

Many families lack confidence in attending formal services or may struggle to access safe spaces and resources, such as libraries. By partnering with First Bus, the National Literacy Trust were able to reach new families at a popular community event, via a known and trusted brand, in an everyday space. The bus was located between other known organisations – a local radio station and sweet seller, which also helped increase footfall.

Creating an inclusive community space gave families new opportunities to engage with the home learning environment and learn about its importance, through trusted messengers. Families were also able to access free resources they might otherwise miss if they do not attend traditional services.

The space also helped reinforce that Home Learning Environment behaviours can happen anywhere, increasing families' confidence and creating more opportunities for engagement in everyday settings.

Impact:

Over 100 families visited the bus and took part in activities, many engaging with the National Literacy Trust for the first time. This activity was replicated the following year with a double decker bus, which increased the scope of activities, and provided a quieter space for children who may have felt overwhelmed. The bus company has continued to distribute resources on their service, creating further opportunities to reinforce key messages and spark conversations.

Lessons for practice:

Build strong partnerships and leverage local businesses and VCSE organisations

This extends reach and allows for embedding Home Learning Environment messages in familiar spaces. Using everyday community settings increases opportunity by harnessing social support and creating non-intimidating, relationship-centred touchpoints for families.

Tailor materials and activities to reflect local communities

This ensures cultural and linguistic inclusivity which increases opportunities for families to engage and learn about positive behaviours.

Maintain continuity through ongoing resource distribution

For example, sharing literacy packs on bus services, beyond the event, increased capability through continued awareness of the behaviours, as well as sharing ideas and strategies to make the behaviour more enjoyable.

Create adaptable spaces for diverse needs

For example, hosting quieter areas on a double-decker bus makes experiences inclusive and accessible.



Halton Family Hub: Increasing access to Home Learning Environment support through a digital offer.

This case study highlights the importance of innovation and access in enhancing a local digital offer for families.

What was done:

In Halton, the council have partnered with BeeBot AI, to create an interactive desktop and mobile application that offers 24/7 access to children and family services.

Overcoming barriers:

Halton's digital offer aims to address the challenge of traditional service hours not meeting the needs of many families' schedules. The interactive desktop and mobile application offers 24/7 access to children and family services. AI-driven chatbots are available to answer common questions and provide guidance on a range of topics. The platform is designed to be inclusive, with features under development to support Deaf users and safeguard vulnerable families.

Individuals can also opt in to receive push notifications which send relevant and timely information, such as updates on the different stages of pregnancy, which can then act as signposts to further information and other services. One of their automated pathways is based around school readiness; using the information from their Starting Reception booklet, the team have broken the content down into a series of 38 different messages that parents can sign up to receive through the platform. Once signed up, parents receive a different message directly to their phone every 3 days which provides some key child milestone information, some hints and tips for parents to help and encourage children at home and links to additional resources that can help.

Impact:

The platform provides detailed analytics, offering the council valuable insights into user behaviour. As more residents utilise the app, data driven decision making becomes increasingly possible, enabling the council to better tailor support to residents' specific needs and make iterative improvements to the app. Should residents require further assistance, they can easily contact an officer through the live chat function.

Lessons for practice:

Extend access through digital tools

Offering 24/7 access helps families engage with services outside of traditional hours, which is especially important for those with irregular schedules.

Use AI and automation within digital offers

AI-driven chatbots and push notifications allow for increased timely guidance and signposting to services.

Design inclusively to reflect all demographics

Halton's development of features for Deaf users aim to increase accessibility and overcome traditional barriers to digital engagement.

Use data to inform future content and delivery plans

Analytics from the platform allow for data-driven decision-making, helping councils identify gaps and refine services. This ensures content is reflective of the local communities it's designed for.



BookTrust: Supporting families who stand to benefit most from early shared reading through targeted programmes

This case study highlights the importance of reading resources and support in creating reading enjoyment, a positive home learning environment and overcoming inequalities before they deepen.

What was done:

BookTrust focuses its work on children and families in greater need of support, who stand to benefit most from early shared reading. A wide body of evidence shows that reading helps overcome inequalities before they deepen and BookTrust delivers a series of national targeted programmes to ensure that children from low-income or vulnerable family backgrounds experience the lifelong, transformative benefits of reading. Access to books is not universal, and many parents face challenges and need guidance or support to read with their children.

BookTrust targeted programmes, delivered in every local authority, provide children and families with access to books and shared reading support. BookTrust works with its national network of early years partners to create pathways to reach children and families through 1:1 and group interactions. The programmes provide layered and flexible support to help unlock the full potential of existing support in local early years systems.

Overcoming barriers:

Bookstart Toddler and Pre-schooler are national early years reading support programmes for 1–4-year-olds from lower-income households, funded by government to reach 40% of eligible families in every local authority. They are designed to respond to needs identified by our early years delivery partners around children's speech and language, and social-emotional and wider development, as well as the attainment gap between children from more and less affluent backgrounds.

Each item in the Bookstart Toddler and Pre-schooler packs has been co-produced with families on low-incomes and early years delivery partners to spark reading habits.

The books are carefully selected to support children's development and foster the interaction which is key to shared reading; engaging, representative, interactive and high-quality books make reading more fun. When parents/carers and children see each other's enjoyment, they're motivated to read together more often.

BookTrust also has specific programmes for children from vulnerable family backgrounds because shared reading can be an important tool for nurture and connection in families where children may have experienced disruption or trauma. Story Explorers is BookTrust's new early years offer for kinship, foster and adoptive families, providing monthly kits with books and resources to support joyful story sharing experiences at home.

Impact:



If I could just put in a bottle. The joy and the happiness and the laughter... She just loves Octopus Shocktopus!, every single night we've had it... That book has brought so much joy and that's the book that she wants and there are different conversations about that book every single time we read it.

Kinship carer – Story Explorers



BookTrust resources offer an opportunity ... to model the joy of sharing books with children and demonstrate the benefits of learning, development and quality time. It's also a good tool to use when assessing children's language and understanding.

BookTrust Health Visitor partner



- 80% of Bookstart Toddler and Pre-schooler partners say these programmes are very important to their organisation
- 71% of parents and carers say they believe more strongly in the benefits of reading for their child having engaged with these programmes.

Find more information in this [impact report](#).

Lessons for practice:

Early years partners can use BookTrust's evidence-informed Bookstart programmes to support parents and strengthen the HLE, and to reduce early inequalities. This support helps ensure that families who stand to benefit most can access high-quality books and reading experiences.

Share engaging books to increase motivation.

Titles with features that spark children's interest, that reflect children's identities and interests make shared reading accessible, relevant and enjoyable for families.

Create clear pathways to sustained support.

Combining 1:1 conversations, group interactions and follow-up touchpoints helps families build a consistent reading habit, nurturing a positive home learning environment.

Trusted practitioners who understand community and families' needs (including Health visitors, Family Hub staff, library partners, early help teams and early years practitioners) can use BookTrust resources as practical tools to start conversations, and make support for reading feel personalised and welcoming.



BookTrust: Using multi-agency approaches to get families reading together

This case study highlights the importance of partnerships and multi-agency approaches to ensure that families in need of support experience the benefits of early shared reading.

What was done:

Bookstart (BookTrust's early years model) blends national programmes with local networks to make an impact in every community. Bookstart programmes are embedded in local service provision and multi-agency approaches, supporting local partners' priorities for families in their communities. Partners in early years teams, family hubs, early help, health services, children's centres and libraries can all use Bookstart programmes in their work with local families. When a local authority brings together a steering group of multiple early years partners and agencies (from libraries to arts and culture organisations to early education and health services etc.) they are able to coordinate activity and make the most of cross-sector engagement around early years reading.

Overcoming barriers:

Many families who stand to benefit most from early shared reading face challenges in embedding reading into family life. We know that libraries have an important role to play in supporting local families, many of who feel unsure about visiting libraries, are unaware of local library support for early years families and lack confidence in reading with their child.

BookTrust Storytime, the national government-funded libraries programme, which complements other BookTrust early years programmes is delivered in over 90% of public libraries, in every local authority area, and is codesigned with families and partners. It helps address barriers by creating welcoming, engaging and enjoyable group story sessions for families, with children aged 0-5 years, in which early years partners show families the magic of reading aloud. By offering fun, interactive experiences in familiar community spaces,

the programme helps families build early reading habits that can then be continued at home. BookTrust Storytime supports important connections between libraries and family hubs, children's centres or family centres and early help teams, in some areas as part of local authority-wide early years reading strategies.

This multi-agency approach makes reading support easier to access, strengthens trust, and helps families who might not usually use library or early years services experience the benefits of shared reading together.

Impact:

BookTrust early years programmes are delivered in over 2500 libraries, 342 family hubs, 5700 early education settings and by around two thirds of health visitors. Partnership working between these and other partners and organisations create strong reading support for local families.

For example, 83% of BookTrust Storytime partners work with other organisations to encourage families to engage with the programme. 70% of these partners told us that BookTrust Storytime was effective in supporting families who were new to the library, or who would not normally use library services, to have a positive experience.



The resources have been a vital tool in helping us engage with partner organisations who work directly with families who are facing challenges. They are an excellent way in to then promote our other services.

BookTrust Library partner



Lessons for practice:

Early years partners can use Bookstart Programmes and BookTrust Storytime to build important connections between libraries and family hubs, children's centres or family centres, early help teams and community organisations

Group storytelling plays an important role in helping families to build reading habits. When early years partners model reading aloud, it builds parents' and carers' confidence to try sharing stories together at home.



Dudley Family Hub: Creating a peer support programme

This case study highlights the importance of creating welcoming community spaces and supportive relationships between families and practitioners

What was done:

Dudley Family Hub's developed a peer support programme commissioned through Dudley CVS (Council for Voluntary Service). This initiative has created a borough-wide network of peer-led community groups, including stay-and-play sessions, outdoor activities, and themed support groups for dads, young parents, LGBTQ+ families, and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Overcoming barriers:

Families may struggle to find resources and spaces that feel truly reflective of themselves and their unique circumstances or may not feel comfortable visiting a Family Hub. Dudley Family Hubs aim to overcome this by creating safe, inclusive spaces that support the local community, offering authentic, lived-experience-based support, to help parents feel less isolated and more confident in their parenting journey. The sessions provide opportunities for families to take part in and observe behaviours being modelled in a space where they feel comfortable to question and practice themselves. This supports behaviour change as the groups provide a social model and information for families. Families are encouraged to attend on an ongoing basis and by witnessing other parents interact and model positive behaviours with their children, they are seen as 'something someone like me would do.' Organisations are afforded space within the Family Hub for their activities, therefore helping move footfall into the hub, raising awareness of and making families feel comfortable in the venue.

All community groups were required, as a condition of the funding, to complete Parent Infant Emotional Wellbeing level one training, and have ongoing access to training provided to family hub teams. This supports consistency of messaging, and high-quality provision.

Impact:

Real Mama Tribe is a not-for-profit peer support organisation in Dudley that forms part of the network. Its main aim is combatting social isolation in motherhood and support parent and infant wellbeing. Real Mama Tribe received feedback highlighting that the peer-to-peer model helps parents and carers to access information, as it feels less daunting coming from someone considered 'equal,' as opposed to a hub or health care professional. A parent who attends the organisation's monthly book swap and early literacy skills sessions said:



Attending book swaps has been brilliant for my family and little one. It gave me ideas for books he might enjoy, and I could swap back ones he didn't enjoy so much so others can enjoy them. It has given me inspiration for my little one on reading, putting on different voices for him to really get into it with me and help his imagination. He absolutely loves reading his books now. Nursery have even commented that it's one of his favourite activities to do there and often takes himself off to the book corner to read.



Lessons for practice:

Engage trusted local community organisations.

By establishing a broad network of community groups, working in partnership with the family hub offer, families are able to access services where they feel most comfortable, and are signposted across services, by trusted professionals.

Establish rigorous systems to support partnership working.

Dudley CVS and Dudley Family Hubs work closely together, and with their community partners to ensure training, updates and networking opportunities are available to all. This ensures families receive a coordinated service, and consistent messaging from all providers. Planning for sustainability is an essential aspect of this work, and with higher funding available during the first phase, Dudley is now moving into a support and maintenance phase of delivery.

Enable local community organisations to deliver activity within family hubs.

Inviting community providers to deliver services within Best Start Family Hubs, reduces barriers to access, increasing opportunities for families to access wider services through trusted professionals. It also encourages families to view Best Start Family Hubs as safe, non-threatening spaces.



National Literacy Trust: Increasing voluntary and community support through a partnership with Brushstrokes in Sandwell

This case study highlights the role of the voluntary and community sector in reaching newly arrived and migrant families with support that feels welcoming and culturally relevant.

What was done:

Brushstrokes Community Project in Sandwell supports refugee and asylum-seeking families. They partnered with the National Literacy Trust, to enhance their newly established stay and play sessions and train their Family Support Worker as a Literacy Champion (local volunteer), to support the language development of children in these families.

Overcoming barriers:

Many of the families Brushstrokes support face language barriers and social isolation and therefore may not visit traditional services. Equally they may feel unsure of who to trust or how to find information that feels appropriate to them. By partnering with the National Literacy Trust, the two organisations worked together to create and deliver tailored sessions that use visual resources to meet the specific needs of families. The sessions were peer-led, with a trained, Volunteer Early Years Literacy Champion, modelling language behaviours and building trust through relatable, culturally sensitive interactions.

Joining the stay and play group, National Literacy Trust staff worked closely with the group leader to deliver sessions linked to their family facing resources, available in 19 languages, and incorporated positive messages about the importance of reading, singing and playing with their children. Families were gifted books and resources, which included tips and ideas to take away with them. By seeing positive communication behaviours modelled, and practicing them, the activities will have increased parents' confidence in completing them again themselves. Hearing about the benefits of these strategies from staff, and messaging within the translated resources, families may also feel more motivated to try them at home.

Impact:

15 families were reached across the five sessions and in a survey of participants, all 12 that completed the survey said they were likely or very likely to: read more books, sing more songs, try more play activities, chat more with their child and share stories at home.

One parent who attended, said:



At the sessions I was given books and information about reading to and with my child, my child was 14 months at the time, and I remember thinking how will I do that, it's impossible. I grew up in Kenya and my parents were unable to read and write so this is not something that we grew up doing. At first it was hard, but I kept on trying and following the guidance from the sessions. My daughter 21 months and she loves books and will now bring books to me for her to read to her. I feel she will now be more ready for school and to learn from the guidance given in the sessions.



The group leader has supported families to attend other National Literacy Trust events, including those at venues, such as libraries and family hubs, enabling the families to access wider services.

Lessons for practice:

Embed messaging across a range of services

Effective partnership working can enable consistent messaging to be shared by services that families come into contact with at different touchpoints, increasing capability by increasing awareness of different communication strategies. This also allows activities to act as an entry point to other services. Families who attended Brushstrokes sessions were later supported to access libraries and Best Start Family Hubs.

Use community focused, localised messaging

The provision of multilingual resources with visual prompts, made messaging accessible to families with limited English. Tailoring messaging to reflect families' backgrounds and experiences, harnesses the power of social norms, increasing opportunity by making suggestions feel more relevant and achievable.

Engage trusted community groups and volunteers

Peer-led sessions allow families to see behaviours like reading and singing modelled. Seeing such behaviours performed can help them feel achievable. Equally, addressing negative feelings about suggested learning activities in a comfortable space, can decrease hesitation and increase motivation.



National Literacy Trust: Working in partnership with national and local businesses in the Black Country

This case study highlights the role of businesses in reaching families disengaged with traditional services by running activities in everyday spaces.

What was done:

In the Black Country, National Literacy Trust partnerships with Morrisons, Asda, Transport for West Midlands and the Albion Foundation, have enabled the delivery of early years events in familiar, accessible venues such as cafés, community rooms and sports halls, further increasing reach and engagement.

Overcoming barriers:

Many families may feel hesitant to access statutory services. Morrisons, Asda and the Albion Foundation provided vital assets such as free venues, promotional support, mascots and snacks, while Transport for West Midlands provided bus passes, all of which helped embed literacy engagement into new community settings. These events also provided a valuable networking platform for local services and partners to strengthen their connections and raise awareness of the broader, early years system of family support available.

Impact:

Mascots like Baggy Bird increased engagement, particularly among male carers and younger families. Delivery in unusual venues, also increased the engagement of new families; they had the opportunity to engage with a range of services, and some went on to attend additional events. Transport for West Midlands were able to provide (through The West Midlands Bus Scheme), free bus passes, enabling thousands of journeys to events and services, therefore supporting the National Literacy Trust to make events more accessible to many low-income families.

Lessons for practice:

Use familiar community spaces to increase engagement

Delivering events in local venues such as cafés, sports halls and supermarkets, enables families to access services in environments they know and trust.

Partner with local businesses to increase access to support

Support from local businesses (e.g., free venues, snacks, bus passes, mascots) made events more accessible and appealing, therefore increasing opportunities to engage. They reduced logistical barriers, such as transport, and attracted new audiences such as male carers and young families.

Normalise early learning through cross-sector partnerships

Embedding literacy activities into everyday, non-traditional settings helps motivate families by harnessing social norms; by sharing new communication behaviours in these settings it helps them to be perceived as 'something someone like me' would do.



Doncaster Family Hubs: Embedding consistent messaging for families within local systems

This case study highlights the importance of embedding consistent Home Learning Environment messaging within local systems and touchpoints.

What was done:

Doncaster's Talking Together programme was developed in response to a growing need in Doncaster for early intervention to address declining speech, language and communication (SLC) skills in children under five. By working directly with parents in their homes, the programme strengthened the Home Learning Environment and empowered families to support their child's development. Doncaster adopted a triangulated approach—targeting children, parents and professionals.

Overcoming barriers:

A two-step training programme was launched for professionals working with children aged 0–5, delivered in-house by a speech and language therapist, enabling them to deliver child-centred interventions either in the home or in small groups at family hubs.

Practitioners provide in-home and group-based support using parent coaching to build knowledge and skills around early communication. These sessions, overseen by a speech and language therapist, support children aged 2–4 with early communication strategies. Strategies are tailored to each family's routines, making them easy to implement and sustainable. Parents receive real-time feedback during sessions, helping them understand what works and why, thus boosting their confidence and competence in supporting their child's development. A focus on positive reinforcement, and highlighting progress, enables parents to see the impact of their actions, which, in turn, strengthens their belief in their ability to support their child.

To increase access and reduce isolation, practitioners actively connect families to universal services. They arrange sessions in local Family Hubs, helping parents feel comfortable in community spaces and encouraging peer interaction. This creates a supportive environment where families can continue learning and engaging beyond the intervention.

To embed a sustainable culture of communication across Doncaster, an integrated offer of universal support includes a Facebook page and website sharing tips and advice, a regular presence in family hubs and drop-in advice sessions on speech, language and communication.

Impact:

The Talking Together programme is delivering tangible improvements for children, families and the wider early years system in Doncaster.

In 2024–25, 110 children completed the intervention. Of those:

- 57% met their speech, language and communication (SLC) milestones and were stepped down to universal services.
- 36% were referred to NHS Speech and Language Therapy for further support.
- 7% had ongoing special educational needs (SEN).

Since the programme's launch in 2022, referrals to NHS Speech and Language Therapy have reduced by 28%—from 1,366 in 2022 to 979 in 2024—demonstrating the effectiveness of early, targeted support in reducing pressure on specialist services.

Parent feedback:



The sessions have really helped [child]'s talking. It has given me lots of ideas for play and the communication and support has been great. A great support for anyone who has worries with children's speech.



Lessons for practice:

Equip parents with practical, easy to understand strategies that fit into their daily routines.

Use coaching methods that build on what families are already doing, rather than introducing all new strategies and behaviours. This principle can be replicated in any setting by focusing on strengths-based, personalised support.

Create accessible, welcoming environments where families can engage without stigma or referral.

Locating sessions in familiar community spaces like Family Hubs and offering drop-in advice removes barriers to participation. Services elsewhere can adopt this model by embedding support within existing community infrastructure. Map and integrate local touchpoints so messaging can be aligned with health appointments, settings and VCSE partners.

Celebrate progress and reinforce success.

Regular feedback that highlights positive changes boosts parental motivation and encourages continued engagement. This approach can be transferred to other programmes by training practitioners to use affirming, reflective techniques that build emotional investment.



Dingley's Promise: Creating inclusive story time sessions

This case study explores how story time can be shared with children in an inclusive way that supports a variety of needs.

What was done:

Story time sessions were delivered to support children with a variety of needs using an inclusive approach, alongside interactive and sensory resources.

Overcoming barriers:

Early years learning environments can be busy places, if routines, boundaries and expectations of staff are also not consistent it can be particularly challenging for children with additional needs to navigate. Conflicting external pressures, such as ensuring children are 'school ready' can sometimes lead to rules and expectations being placed on children, which don't effectively support or respond to children's individual needs.

The early years educator led story time used a visual timetable and sand timer, to share with children in the playroom that it was '5 minutes' until story time. Resources needed to support the story were gathered and additional early years educators joined to model taking part.

Children were free to take part as they wished. One child hovered close by at the end of a toy unit, whilst looking towards the book, another child peered towards the group from inside the cosy cove whilst scrunching sensory scarves in their hand. Three more children continued to play in their chosen areas, one using blocks to stack and fall, another tipping and pouring in the water tray and the third sitting at the table with crayons to mark make.

During the story, resources, such as sensory bottles and props to support the story, were offered to children to hold, and the early years educators modelled story telling as they took on different parts of the story and modelled new vocabulary and repeated refrains.

Children were encouraged to join in however they felt most comfortable, by observing from a space where they felt comfortable,

by touching or engaging with the resources or by repeating words. The early years educators responded to children's facial expressions and body language, and sensitively encourage them to join in.

After the story the resources were left out for the children to explore; some chose to do this together, others responded to the story in their own way. For example, a child who had stayed at the creative table throughout the story, drew a picture of a lion in response to what they'd heard.

Impact:

Children learn better when they feel safe and secure. They feel safe when they have routines and are allowed opportunities for repetition. Knowing what to expect allows children to be regulated and helps develop self-confidence, self-awareness and supports nurturing resilience and independence. All children learn in different ways, and by providing story time in an inclusive way, their individual needs can more easily be met. Over time, this positive approach to stories will help to develop children's lifelong learning and love of literature.

Lessons for practice:

Reflect on your current approaches to story time

Consider the expectations, or rules, you place on children and families at story time or during group activities. Reflect on their purpose and consider the positive and negative impact on all children, including those with additional needs.

Consider the role of educators and volunteers during story time or group activities. By observing children's responses and sensitively supporting them to join in, and by acting as role models and bringing stories to life, educators will help increase positive interactions with stories.

Develop materials and sensory resources around stories, tactile hands-on experiences help children to remember spoken language.

Re-visit stories frequently, allowing children to get to know them well and be able to join in, understand and talk about them.

Sensitively observe and join children in their play, notice if they are repeating language and narratives from the stories read together.

Have books and resources available in lending libraries so children can replicate stories at home.



National Literacy Trust: Combining digital and face to face activity in Middlesbrough

This case study illustrates how digital reach and community-based support can reinforce each other to drive sustainable behaviour change.

What was done:

In October 2025, the government launched a new campaign to raise awareness and drive take up of all Best Start in Life services, policy offers and settings. This campaign (which builds on the previous *Start for Life* and *Hungry Little Minds* campaigns) brings together all services, offers and support available to help guide and support parents from pregnancy, through their child's journey to starting school and beyond.

The National Literacy Trust combined large-scale digital activity from the Best Start in Life campaign, with face-to-face modelling from trusted local volunteers and community groups in target areas across the country, to ensure families were better supported to overcome barriers to engagement.

Overcoming barriers:

Language barriers can be a challenge for many families. To overcome this, the National Literacy Trust in Middlesbrough works with the Local Authority, Family Hubs team and partner organisations, to help reach and engage these families. As part of this work, staff attended the Middlesbrough MELA – a large multi-cultural festival, to share key campaign messages, model positive learning behaviours and distribute resources.

Ahead of the MELA the team shared, through digital channels, key messaging about the importance of speaking and reading in your home language. At the event, staff shared Better Start in Life resources; Chat, Play, Read booklets, Little Moments Together cards and Walk and Talk trail cards (in different languages).

At the MELA, staff shared and raised awareness of the multi-lingual resources: Chat, Play, Read booklets, Little Moments Together cards and Walk and Talk cards,

giving families the capability to access messaging in the languages they know best. This included a local volunteer who delivered a family-friendly storytelling workshop, where children and families explored the traditional Nakshi Kantha art form through story creation, motif drawing, child-friendly stitching and interactive listening and recording activities.

Activities were scaffolded further by Facebook posts following in-person activity, sharing the importance of chatting and reading in home languages. Families were encouraged to follow the Facebook page at the in-person event and engage with a competition, with volunteers who attended also sharing content on their own channels.

Emerging partnerships with groups supporting ethnic minority communities, asylum seekers and refugee families, are helping to raise awareness of language development, improve access to resources and strengthen community connections through joint participation in local events. A tailored communication schedule has been shared and implemented across Family Hubs, schools and council channels, to support consistent message sharing. Meanwhile, BSIL resources continue to be embedded within key early years pathways, including the Best Start and Early Years Literacy pathways.

Impact:

By combining in-person and digital messaging around the MELA, staff were able to increase the frequency of messaging to target families. In-person, the team talked to 56 parents and 34 children. Online, the competition was viewed by 1882 accounts, received 34 entries and was shared by key partners, including Bok Bok books and Close Knit community group.

Through growing partnerships with organisations supporting ethnic minority communities, asylum seekers and refugee families, events have continued, allowing further opportunities to model positive learning behaviours and signpost additional support. Plans are in place to deliver training for partners and volunteers working with the same groups, equipping them to confidently model communication strategies and support access to digital resources.

Lessons for practice:

Combine digital and face-to-face activity

The dual approach of digital reach and face-to-face modelling created a feedback loop that reinforces behaviour change, increasing capability by further creating awareness of, and promoting strategies, as well as building community capacity.

Amplify national content in ways that work for local audiences

Tailoring messaging to local audiences, both in-person and online, increases the likelihood of engagement, as it provides social support for the suggested activities and creates social norms. This integrated, place-based model has proven scalable and impactful, with stronger outcomes observed in areas where digital and in-person engagement were combined.



Liverpool Family Hubs: Harnessing digital innovation through partnership working to increase access to Home Learning Environment support

This case study highlights digital innovation through partnership working to increase families access to evidence-based Home Learning Environment support and guidance.

What was done:

Liverpool City Council's Wonder Hub is an online space providing families with digital content, hosted on Liverpool's Family Information and SEND Directory (LFISD). It is a space for parents to find fun ideas, evidence-based advice and activities to support young children's learning and development at home, through promoting play and positive interactions. It includes a mix of content from a range of organisations that support early language, literacy and communication in the home, including content from the PEEP Learning Together Programme, CBeebies Parenting (formerly Tiny Happy People) and National Literacy Trust.

Overcoming barriers:

Information overload and struggling to find accessible and relevant information can be a barrier for many families. Wonder Hub aims to overcome this by sharing reliable parent-facing content from a range of trusted organisations in one freely available space.

The CBeebies Parenting and National Literacy Trust digital offer were developed in response to a need for families to freely access digital resources and tools for supporting their young children's learning and development at home. The ideas and guidance can also be easily embedded into services, both universal and targeted, by practitioners.

National Literacy Trust resources can be accessed via the Wonder Hub directory page and aim to increase parental knowledge and motivation for supporting young children's early language and literacy at home, offering suggestions of simple everyday opportunities for families to engage and positively interact with their children.

Impact:

The digital content from CBeebies Parenting and National Literacy Trust was chosen to be included as part of the Wonder Hub Home Learning Environment digital toolkit, as they both offer a range of high quality, accessible, freely available digital resources for families of children aged 0-5, full of expert and up-to-date guidance. Wonder Hub promotes the importance of play for supporting children's learning and development in the home learning environment, so the team wanted a digital offer to strengthen our approach, with fun activity ideas, tips and advice to help families support their children's early learning and development. They also wanted to focus on simple no-and-low-cost strategies for supporting speech, language, communication skills and literacy in the home learning environment, through everyday play and positive interactions. CBeebies Parenting and National Literacy Trust digital content both aim to improve speech, language and communication skills. This is a key priority in Liverpool and crucial for young children in achieving good levels of development in early speech, language and literacy.

This coordinated approach ensures that families can easily access consistent, trusted guidance whenever they engage with services, reinforcing key messages and supporting a rich home learning environment. Sharing messages and resources from national organisations, supports staff capacity and simplifies the process of directing families to one space. It also enables families who speak English as second language to quickly translate the information into their own languages, for example, the Chat, play, read booklets can be accessed easily in over 18 different languages.

Wonder Hub displays are situated in each of the twenty-two Family Hub sites, which are displayed with a QR code to direct families to the LFISD. Each centre also has a HLE lead who have undertaken CBeebies Parenting Champion and National Literacy Trust training. Furthermore, there are National Literacy Trust Literacy Champions who can offer specialised early literacy and language support. A simple Wonder Hub booklet with a QR code on the front cover has been developed in partnership with National Literacy Trust, to give out at family learning activities and events.

Practitioners model different types of focused low-cost play ideas and story-sharing activities with families and discuss how these meet with specific areas of learning and development. National Literacy Trust's Sing with Me and Chat, Play Read booklets are given to parents as part of our targeted support. QR codes for National Literacy Trust Sing with Me digital resources are also shared on family hub WhatsApp and Facebook groups, to support the universal offer. National Literacy Trust Words for Life posters and CBeebies Tools for Talking posters and resources are also displayed and available at each site, to compliment the HLE offer.

Lessons for practice:

Use digital platforms to increase access to support and guidance

Wonder Hub provides free, city-wide access to trusted digital content, helping families engage with early learning support at times that suit them.

Embed consistent messaging across services

By using the same content across both universal and targeted services, families receive consistent advice wherever they engage.

Free up practitioner time to focus on direct support

Using national digital resources allows staff to spend more time engaging directly with families.

Offer content in multiple formats to increase accessibility

Providing resources in varied formats (e.g., video, text, interactive tools) helps reach families with different preferences and literacy levels.

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The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity that empowers children, young people, and adults with the literacy skills they need to succeed.

Literacy changes everything. It gives you the tools to get the most out of life, and the power to shape your future. It opens the door to the life you want. But low literacy is inextricably linked to poverty. Over the last 30 years, we have continued to work with people who need us the most, supporting schools, families and communities on a local and national level.

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