



THE I CAN EARLY TALK PROGRAMME

Introduction

The 2005 *Sure Start Children's Centre Practice Guidance* sets out a vision of an approach to improving the life chances of all children through integrated service delivery designed around children's and families' needs in line with *Every Child Matters*.

Communication is a foundation life skill. Its development underpins children's ability to learn and to build relationships. I CAN's Early Talk programme is a systematic, evidence-based approach to developing pre-school children's communication skills. The programme is based on full integration between health, education and the voluntary sector. Both parental participation and Early Years' workforce development are integral to it.

As the programme to roll out Sure Start Children's Centres across England gathers pace, I CAN is seeking a strategic partnership with the Department for Education and Skills to ensure that all Children's Centres are equipped to develop young children's communication skills effectively. The final section of this paper outlines what this could mean in practice.

I CAN Early Talk: What it delivers

I CAN Early Talk helps pre-school children develop the communication skills they need for learning. This UK-wide programme acts as a catalyst for integrated provision across health and education by:

- ensuring communication-supportive learning environments for all children;
- securing effective early intervention for children with speech, language and communication disabilities in inclusive settings;
- providing advisory support and information for parents;
- delivering structured professional development, information and advisory support for early years' practitioners in partnership with children's services;
- making a significant impact on meeting the needs of children with mild to moderate speech and language difficulties, thus enabling local therapy services to focus resources elsewhere;
- taking whole cohorts of children with severe and complex communication disabilities off NHS speech and language therapy waiting lists by meeting their therapeutic and educational needs in a single inclusive service;
- providing a rewarding working environment with enhanced job satisfaction for professionals in national shortage specialties.

I CAN Early Talk: How it works

The programme operates in settings that provide day care and/or education to children under 5. Statutory and private and voluntary sector partners employ all staff within Early Talk settings as well as providing premises. I CAN accredits the service they provide. Appendix 1 gives detailed information about the service model and a summary account of how the programme works in two different settings.

'Universal' settings, which all early years provision should aspire to, provides a 'communication friendly environment' in which all children's speech, language and communication can develop to its full potential. 'Enhanced' settings are able to provide focussed interventions for children with delay or other cause for concern. 'Specialist' settings are aimed at children with severe problems, drawing on I CAN's fourteen years' experience in developing cost-effective early intervention for children with severe difficulties in inclusive settings.

Early Talk aims to create comprehensive local networks of early years settings within local areas so that all children's speech, language and communication can develop to its full potential. The Early Talk programme offers 'universal', 'enhanced' and 'specialist' levels of support across the full network of local early years' services.

I CAN Early Talk: The need

Communication is a foundation life skill. Learning, literacy and building relationships all rest on a child's ability to communicate.

The 1999 Comprehensive Spending Review¹, *Sure Start targets*², *Birth to Three Matters*³, *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*⁴ and *Time to Talk ... Speaking and listening for learning*⁵ all recognise the need for well developed language skills as essential to early learning, preparation for formal schooling, and life achievement.

Despite this, concern about children's communication skills have increased in recent years. The Basic Skills Agency reports a significant drop in the speaking and listening skills of British children. In 2002, the Agency found that 66 per cent of primary school head teachers believe that only half of all children entering school have the communication skills they need for an effective start to learning.

There are also the needs of the one in ten⁶ children who have a communication disability. These children struggle to talk and understand others. For some, problems can be relatively short term. But others suffer from severe and persistent speech and language problems that impact adversely on their ability to learn and to relate to other people.

This invisible disability has a direct and often very negative impact on their life chances. It can occur on its own or in conjunction with another SEN or disability. There is a very high incidence of communication disability for children with other primary disabilities.

¹ Department for Education and Skills. (1999) *Origins of the Sure Start Programme*. London: DfES., p.5.

² Harris, F. (2002). *The First Implementation of the Sure Start Language Measure*. London: City University, p.1.

³ Sure Start. (2002) *Birth to Three Matters*. London: Sure Start Unit.

⁴ Department of Education and Employment. (2000) *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*. London: DfEE., p.6.

⁵ Department for Education and Skills. (2003) *Time to Talk...Speaking and Listening for Learning*. London: DfES.

⁶ Law, J., Boyle, F., Harris, A., et al. (2000) Prevalence and natural history of primary speech and language delay: findings from a systematic review of the literature. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 35, p.181.

For example, all children on the autistic continuum have a communication disability, along with most dyslexic children, 60 per cent of children with cerebral palsy, many children with Down's Syndrome, many deaf and hard of hearing children and a range of other conditions. The Teachers Training Agency has commented that "most children with SEN have strengths and difficulties in one, some or all of the areas of speech, language and communication".⁷

There are major gaps in effective provision, despite both the importance of communication for all children and the high incidence of communication disability. Research carried out for the Department of Education and Skills⁸, together with a recent survey carried out by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists identify the following as barriers to developing effective provision:

- Shortage and variability of skills and resources available, on the ground, to address children's needs consistently;
- Insufficient awareness amongst parents and professionals working with children of the importance of children's communication development and how to identify and support children who are falling behind in this area;
- Lack of collaboration (at strategic, management and operational levels) between the health and education staff responsible for assessing and monitoring children's progress and meeting their needs;
- Poor quality integration of communication focused work into the curriculum.

*Every Child Matters*⁹ recognises the demand for speech and language therapy services and the need for improved service delivery. It encourages innovative ways of working, including a move to providing support within an inclusive educational setting.

I CAN Early Talk: The evidence

Support for the communication development of young children must be considered within their educational and care contexts⁸. The evidence¹⁰ suggests that the improvement of outcomes for children in early years settings can be achieved through increasing levels of training and information supplied to early years practitioners and subsequent changes in practice, specifically in the quality of adult/child interactions and the involvement of parents. The Early Talk programme is designed to address both these needs directly.

Research carried out amongst more than 400 early years practitioners for the I CAN network highlighted the strong demand for improved staff training and also for materials to share with parents in order that both home and educational/care settings promote language development effectively. However, the required training and information is not reaching practitioners or parents¹¹. Early years practitioners have expressed their anxiety over their lack of knowledge about how best to help children coming into their settings with language difficulties¹². Early Talk programme provides a systematic, sustainable way of ensuring effective levels of staff expertise across early years' services.

⁷ TTA discussion paper, 1999

⁸ Provision for Children with Speech and Language Needs in England and Wales, DfEE Research Report, Law et al, 2000.

⁹ Department for Education and Skills. (2003) *Every Child Matters*. London: DfES.

¹⁰ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Simmons, P, Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B., and Elliot, K.,(2003) "Effective Provision of Preschool Education"; DfES

¹¹ Hall, E (2003), University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, Unpublished

¹² Locke A., Ginsborg, J and Peers I. (2002) *Development and Disadvantage: Implications for Early Years* IJCLD Vol 27 No 1

Evaluation of I CAN provision shows that parents of children with communication disabilities were very positive about their involvement with the services and the advisory support and information they received through it. They showed a high level of understanding and confidence in dealing with their children's language difficulties.¹³

Professional and government opinion is in agreement that the needs of children with speech and language difficulties can best be served by close inter-professional cooperation, and in the joint planning of services and integrated service delivery^{14,15}. Research¹⁶ shows that the I CAN model of intervention in the early years results in significantly greater improvements in language skills and social interaction for children with communication disabilities than in other settings.

There is also evidence to show that early intervention to address language difficulties can ameliorate primary problems and minimize associated difficulties¹⁷. Given that poor progress in language can influence behaviour, educational achievement and social functioning¹⁸ with eventual impact on social and economic status in the long-term, successful early intervention is crucial.

It is recognised good practice that the majority of children's speech and language needs should be met within an inclusive educational setting¹⁹. Managers from both health and education note difficulties recruiting to Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) posts and retaining staff²⁰. I CAN accredited settings provide attractive working conditions - in situations where SLTs and teachers can work closely together there are reports of greater job satisfaction, with potential tensions resolved.²¹ SLTs have indicated a commitment to an integrated education-based service provided the necessary support mechanisms are in place. The Early Talk programme provides just such systems for practitioners, which is important since recruitment and retention of speech and language therapists is an issue nationally.

OFSTED reports (Appendix 2) from centres which have developed to Early Talk 'specialist' level, testify to the quality of the provision these settings are able to provide. A detailed case study of the implementation of a component of Early Talk level 1 training (Appendix 3) demonstrate the feasibility of adapting this to meet local needs and implementing this across whole areas.

¹³ Geldard, C and Hall, A "The I CAN Early Years Programme: an in depth report on the development and delivery of I CAN Early years services and partners"

¹⁴ RCSLT (1996) *Communicating Quality*

¹⁵ HMI (1996) *The Education of Pupils with Language and Communication Disorders* (Edinburgh Scottish Office Education and Industry department and HMSO)

¹⁶ Law J., Dockrell, J. Williams K. and Seeff B (2001) *The I CAN Early Years Evaluation Project* City University, Institute of Education

¹⁷ Law, J., Garrett, Z and Nye, C (2003) *Speech and Language therapy Intervention for children with primary speech and language delay or disorder* (Cochrane Review). In Cochrane Library, issue 3 (Oxford, Oxford update)

¹⁸ Stothard, S.E, Snowling, M.J, Bishop, D.V.M, Chipchase B.B and Kaplan, C.A (1998) *Language impaired pre-schoolers: a follow-up into adolescence* Journal of Language, Speech and Hearing research 42

¹⁹ Law, J., Lindsay, G., Peacey. N., Gascoigne, M, Soloff, N., Radford,. Band, S with Fitzgerald L (2002) ` DfEE

²⁰ Law, J., Lindsay, G., Peacey. N., Gascoigne, M, Soloff, N., Radford,. Band, S with Fitzgerald L (2002) ` DfEE

²¹ Lennox N. and Watkins K. (1998) *Teaching and learning Together* RCSLT Bulletin

**Proposal for a DfES/I CAN Strategic Partnership:
Supporting Children's Centres to meet *Sure Start Practice Guidance* standards**

Raising the quality of early years provision in order to improve children's life chances is at the heart of the Sure Start Children's Centre programme. I CAN Early Talk offers an opportunity for local Early Years networks to offer an integrated evidence-based approach to child communication development, meeting three identified levels of need.

I CAN's role would be to support and accredit the service. Statutory or private and voluntary sector partners would provide premises and employ the staff.

I CAN's contribution would include the following elements:

1. **Needs audit** to inform local service development;
2. **Consultancy and support** for developing local Early Talk networks of Centres at the three levels;
3. **Accreditation:** For 'specialist' settings this involves an in-depth programme of work which culminates in a three day survey by a highly experienced Speech and Language Therapist and an educationalist, who develop recommendations and an action plan. For 'universal' settings I CAN have devised a self-assessment audit tool, implementation of which is moderated;
4. **Information and materials** for families and for practitioners;
5. **A tiered and structured programme of workforce development** for early years practitioners;
6. **Facilitation** for the establishment of local/regional practitioner networks to share knowledge and good practice;
7. **Membership** of I CAN's Early Talk network for local practitioners.

Using this model, the cost per individual Children's Centre of support from the I CAN Early Talk programme is relatively modest:

- Specialist and Enhanced Provision - £2,750 per Centre per year
- Universal Provision - £1,500 per Centre per year

These cost estimates are based on establishing 100 specialist or enhanced settings and 2522 universal settings across England by 2008/9. The total cost to the system would be some £4,025,000 over three years.

Strong DfES endorsement of Early Talk through the Children's Centre programme and its official guidance would be needed for the Early Talk programme to be disseminated in this way.

To ensure that Early Talk was rolled out systematically as part of the Sure Start Children's Centre programme, I CAN would also like to suggest that DfES consider systematic programme support for Early Talk. This would cover:

- Rolling out the Early Talk programme as a coherent national programme (e.g. so all specialist provision is not in one geographic patch, working with new Children's Centres as they set up etc.);
- Facilitating the development of local and regional networks;
- Evaluating the effectiveness of Children's Centres to support communication development;
- Evaluating the impact of Children's Centres on communication development through transition through Foundation Stage into Primary School.

DfES support for partnership working to implement the programme could be achieved by the secondment of a programme manager to work across the Department and I CAN to drive forward on implementation, create local networks and ensure appropriate evaluation of the developing service within Children's Centres.

Appendix 1

Examples of models of I CAN Early Years Centres

I CAN Early Years Centres

From 199X, I CAN has worked with a network of partners in education and health to develop a UK-wide network of new Early Years centres. These offer integrated pre-school education and speech and language therapy for children with severe and complex communication disabilities. Today there are [NUMBER] Centres across the UK.

All the Centres have been established through partnerships involving education, health and I CAN at strategic, management and operational levels. Each partner has clear contractual responsibilities for funding and/or providing specified elements of the service in the short and long term. I CAN's contribution includes a pump priming grant, staff and parent training, information, specialist advice and quality assurance. Statutory sector partners employ the staff and provide premises in inclusive educational settings.

Each I CAN Centre has a role not only in service delivery but also in disseminating the integrated service delivery approach through networks within their region. Each centre is managed by a steering group which has representatives from all the partners including I CAN and parental membership. The Department of Health provided core funding in the early stages of this programme.

Statutory sector partners provide premises and employ the staff; I CAN accredits the service. In collaboration with partner LEAs, PCTs, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, Afasic and a number of academic and other organisations, I CAN has developed an accreditation framework for services where preschool children with complex and severe communication disabilities are placed. The standards set identify the necessary features for meeting children's needs and improving outcomes; they were tested for reliability and validity in 10 settings and found to be a sound basis for audit and development planning.

From 2003 I CAN has rolled out its accreditation programme. Centres were offered a package of support to enable them to develop their service to meet I CAN's quality standards over a two year period. As a direct result of this scheme vital specialist services for children with severe communication disabilities were designed and developed.

The operation of each local centre is carefully tailored to local needs and circumstances, as the two examples below show:

North Tyneside Model

Partners – North Tyneside LEA, Northumbria PCT

Staffing – One Speech and Language Therapist, One Teacher, One Nursery Nurse, One Educational Psychologist

Location - Based in a local primary school

How the Centre operates – 8 children attend in the morning, 8 children in the afternoon, for six weeks. For the following six weeks after the placement, the team visit the children in their mainstream nursery setting, working with the children and training the staff in the local setting. The educational psychologist works with parents both in the centre and in their homes, giving advice, information and support. The team also run formal training courses for local staff for around 100 staff per year.

Rochdale model

Partners – Rochdale LEA, Rochdale PCT

Staffing - One Speech and Language Therapist, One Teacher, One Nursery Nurse, One Educational Psychologist

Location - Based in office, the team work from three pre school settings in the Rochdale area

How the service operates - 20 places are allocated in each setting for children with severe and specific speech and language difficulties. The team support these children in their settings, by working with the children individually or in small groups and training the preschool staff to a high level. Parents are given support, information and training individually or in groups at home or in the preschool setting. The team run training courses for all preschool staff in the Rochdale area.

Parental quotes from evaluations of the provisions include:-

“The I CAN provision has been life changing.”

“I don’t know where we would be if we hadn’t been fortunate enough to be introduced to I CAN and staff.”

“R has improved so much and (I think) looking forward to school”

“A truly excellent facility.”

“Thank you so much for giving B the best start she could ever have. Your warmth and encouragement have been an inspiration. Her progress speaks for itself.”

“ My son has come on so much this term. We have no temper tantrums at home because he can make himself understood now. He asks for things, is polite and can have a conversation now.”

“In my last comment sheet my one wish was to be able to have a conversation with H and I can now. Some words are a little unclear, but I can now have a conversation.”

“My daughter has progressed tremendously during her time at I CAN. She is now confident and her communication much improved. I , personally, am sad for her to leave. She has had so much good support from all sources,,,,, This has been such a good, worthwhile experience for her, I have been very impressed by the therapy and have learnt a lot myself from it which, will certainly make a difference at home.”

“I CAN nursery has been outstanding- O would not have made anywhere near the progress she made without it and she could not have been better supported or prepared for school anywhere else.

The information we have received has helped us to know how to help her development at home, and the Makaton training has made a big difference to our communication with O. We have felt very supported this year.”

“M’s confidence has improved so much he was very shy and didn’t mix well at he is now happy to talk to anyone, play with children he doesn’t know.”

Appendix 2

Quotes from OFSTED Reports referring to I CAN Early Years Centres

Quotes from 2001 OFSTED report, Carden primary School, Brighton 2001 Inspection number: 230759:

- 'The latter (100 place nursery) includes an 'I-Can' nursery unit, which is jointly funded by the local education authority, the health service and the 'I-Can Charity'
- 'Teaching is very good in the I-Can nursery unit'
- 'The children need much support to develop their language so that they can express themselves clearly when speaking, and have very low attainments on entry. Children in the I C nursery unit make very good progress in improving their communication and language skills because they are very well taught by a skilled team of a teacher, nursery nurse and speech and language therapist. They also make very good progress along the stepping stones towards the Early Learning Goals.'
- 'Children and pupils in the I-Can nursery unit and in the Key Stage 1 speech and language unit are extremely keen to learn and want to do their best to please the staff. They behave very well.'
- 'The quality of teaching and learning is very good in the I-Can nursery unit. The teacher, nursery nurse and speech and language therapist work very closely together ensuring a common approach so that the children know what is expected of them. Instructions are clear, activities are well chosen and they last for the right amount of time. As a result, children get down to work quickly, are interested in what they are doing and concentrate well. In the I-Can nursery unit and in the speech and language units, signing and symbols are used very effectively by staff as a means of communication and to cue children into an activity. For example signs and words are used to indicate to children what they will be doing, and to signify a change of activity, they are asked to move the sign.'
- 'The I-Can nursery unit is very well led and organised by the teacher in charge. She liaises closely with the nursery team and with the speech and language therapist attached to the unit.'
- 'The I-Can nursery unit provision is very effective and the children make very good progress in improving their communication and language skills. When they join the unit, many children have very little or no speech and their understanding of language is often poor. By the time they leave, many have improved significantly and are able to attend their local schools.'
- 'Children learn well because they are effectively taught. Lessons are very carefully planned and focus on the learning that is to take place.'
- 'There is a clear action plan for improving the unit's work and high levels of staff expertise are maintained through good levels of training.'

**Quotes from Quotes from 2004 OFSTED report, Mab Lane primary School, Liverpool.
Inspection number: 256813:**

- 'The provision for children in nursery and reception classes is very good.....The very good links with the I CAN unit benefit children other than those who are placed there.....'
- '.....the special skills of the I CAN staff are utilised in the main nursery benefiting other children whose speech and language is poor but not poor enough for them to receive specialist support.'
- 'Staff are particularly effective in providing good models of speech and teaching children to use signs to enhance meaning.'

Appendix 3

Implementation of level 1 training (case study submitted to [www. Talkingpoint.org.uk](http://www.Talkingpoint.org.uk))

Talk in a box- a project linking the 'I CAN Talk!' materials to language boxes

Background

Involved in setting up a project with the support of the Gillingham Education Action Zone (EAZ) to develop a series of role-play bags. The role-play bags contained props to enhance and support imaginative play on a focused theme. This project successfully promoted shared practice, liaison and professional dialogue between practitioners from a range of early years settings.

During feedback sessions practitioners commented on how useful the project had been in terms of enriching their children's role-play experiences. However they also raised concerns about the levels of language they had been observing.

This led us to identify a new project. We wanted to address the needs of the rising number of children in Gillingham identified with a moderate language delay. In addition we wanted to provide settings with resources that were attractive and interesting and to ensure that activities and approaches were practical and addressed the specific development of early language skills.

What we did

We have developed 40 boxes through funding from local businesses and universities. Each box is based around a core book, and some also have other related texts. They also contain puppets, props and creative materials selected to provide opportunities to enhance language development. In addition they contain games and activities to develop specific early language skills e.g. turn-taking, attention and listening etc.

These activities were drawn up through joint working with a speech and language therapist working for the EAZ. Suggested using 'widgit' symbols to enhance the activities. These are a series of symbols which can be used to provide visual support for communication. The boxes also contain the symbol's for 'good' looking, listening and sitting. The use of these is clearly demonstrated in the 'I CAN' video.

We wanted to ensure the practitioners were confident using the boxes and decided to provide a day's training to introduce the materials and activities. Funding for this was provided by the EAZ. As well as representatives from pre-schools we also invited health visitors, speech and language therapy assistants and co-ordinators from the National Childminding Alliance.

In order to measure the impact of the training session, language box and I CAN materials we asked those who attended to complete an assessment . This assessment will provide evidence of the individual child's language development and the practitioners confidence in delivering the materials.

Linking language boxes and I CAN Talk!

It was at this point that we saw an opportunity to draw the 'I CAN Talk!' materials into the project. I had been to the launch of the pack in June last year and since then had used the materials in some of my settings. We saw an opportunity through this project to introduce them to a much wider audience and to put the ideas into a context by linking them to the language box ideas and activities. I felt that the key principles of 'I CAN Talk!' were also the key issues underpinning our

language boxes. By using the video we were able to give the practitioners clear examples of the approaches and how the materials in the boxes could be used to support the children's language development.

We stressed to practitioners that we hoped that when they returned to their settings they would have the opportunity to discuss the principles of the training with their colleagues. We also gave the representatives of each setting a copy of I CAN Talk! at the end of the training session.

We are hoping to roll out this project across Medway in the near future, and early years advisors from other patches also attended the training.

Evaluations received from the training were positive with regard to the I CAN materials and the language boxes.

Drop and Swap

In two weeks we are having our first 'drop and swap' session where practitioners will return their box and exchange it for another. The practitioners are aware that this is a 'developing' project and our intention is to collate their evaluations and if necessary adapt the resources and strategies.

We are hopeful that practitioners and children will have benefited from positive experiences, new ideas and approaches and that we can continue to build on these successes in the future.

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