



care
inspectorate

Getting ready to read

Guidance for providers and inspectors on
supporting early language development



HAPPY TO TRANSLATE

Background

Being able to read well is vital for a child's prospects at school and in life, yet one in five children growing up in poverty in Scotland leaves primary school unable to read well. There is a persistent educational divide in Scotland that, each year, prevents thousands of children from fulfilling their potential.

Early language skills – listening, understanding words, speaking, and building vocabulary – are the vital foundation that enable children to learn to read: children first learn to talk and then learn to read. When young children fall behind in language development, they are much more likely to struggle with reading when they start school. And, it is our poorest children who are most at risk of falling behind from an early age. *Delivering excellence and equity in Scottish education*, published in June 2016 identifies the need for a relentless focus on closing this attainment gap and the continued need to intervene early. We are committed to supporting this agenda and addressing inequalities in the work we do.

In 2014, Save the Children launched Read on. Get on. This campaign responded to the fact that currently, children from the most deprived areas are twice as likely to experience difficulties in language development by the time they start school, compared with children who have never experienced poverty. The campaign set a goal to ensure that every child has a good level of language skills by the age of five.

Supporting children to develop good early language skills before starting school is key to children being able to read well. This early support is one of the key drivers identified by Read on. Get on. and is the focus of Save the Children's 2015 report, *Ready to Read*.

Ready to Read explains that this can only be achieved if we commit to boosting the early language skills of our poorest children. Firm foundations in early language skills are critical to breaking the cycle of educational inequality – and to improving the wider life chances of the poorest children.

High-quality services and support for families can help overcome the impact of poverty, highlighting the potential for early learning and childcare services to support young children's language development.

How we will support early language development

We support the aims of the Read on. Get on. campaign, the Ready to Read report and the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Our inspection already supports the national Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) framework and the use of the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators to focus inspection on good outcomes for children. Highlighting important messages about early language development will further enhance our inspections which support the Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) framework. We look at children's experiences and outcomes and refer to the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators in our reports. This focus on outcomes will continue as we incorporate the New National Care Standards with the principles of dignity and respect, compassion, be included, responsive care and support and wellbeing into our work.

This document highlights some of the key aspects of early learning and childcare services provision that make a difference to children having good early language skills and sets out what we will consider when we inspect. It is for our inspectors to use as part of their inspection toolkit, but we also encourage service providers to use it to help develop their service and meet the needs of children and parents using their service. Together, we can help close persistent gaps in attainment for poorer children.



Sharing good practice

The Care Inspectorate Hub website will highlight examples of outstanding practice where services have helped parents help their children. These examples will support the priority area identified in the Ready to Read report of empowering and strengthening parents skills in supporting their children's early language skills.

The Care Inspectorate will make this guidance available for all services to look at on its website so they can look at these issues and think how they can take forward the messages in their services. For services that will not be inspected, we recognise that this is important in terms of supporting improvement and encouraging reflection. There are some questions included to help support reflection and self evaluation. This is not an exhaustive list and there will be other issues and some that are not relevant. Some issues will be more relevant depending on the setting. Some services will be operating in recognised areas of deprivation where poverty is an issue for many families and families may face specific challenges.

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careinspectorate.com

hub.careinspectorate.com

savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/ready-read-scotland

ican.org.uk/

scottishbooktrust.com/bookbug

rcslt.org/governments/scotland

educationscotland.gov.uk/inclusionandequalities/

savethechildren.org.uk

youngscot.org

gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright

booktrust.org



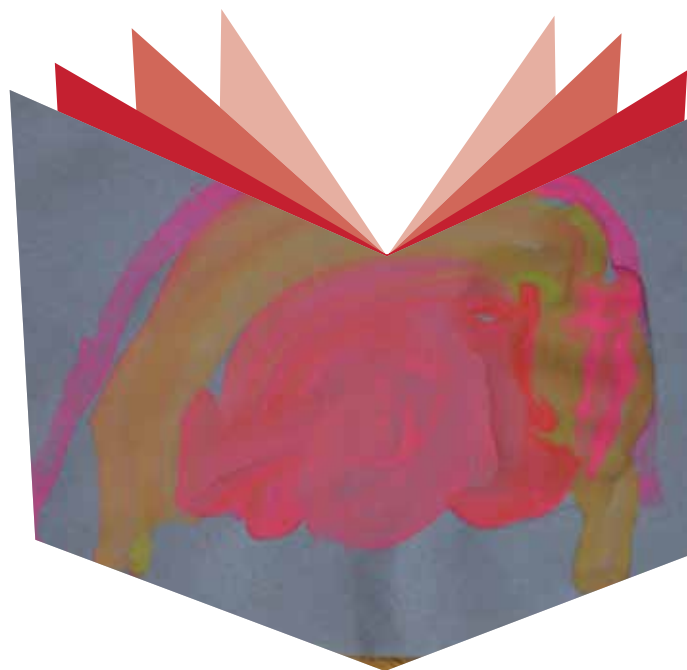
Helping parents help children

High-quality early learning and childcare can contribute greatly to developing children's early language skills, with consequent impact on reading attainment and reducing inequalities. A good home learning environment is also enormously important and families that create a good home learning environment are able to boost children's early language development.

The Ready to Read report explains some of the barriers to engagement in a child's learning that poverty can create for families. In particular, the stress of living in poverty can make it harder for parents to show consistently positive behavior and to stay engaged with their children's learning. The impact of material deprivation can also mean that children lack access to books and toys at home. Parents with lower educational levels can find it harder to support their children to achieve good early language development.

Early learning and childcare services have an important part to play in bridging the gap between home and service, by engaging with parents about their child's development. They can give guidance and advice on how to engage their children in activities that best support their early language development. For example, when children are new in services, in helping them to settle in, there may be good opportunities to engage positively and creatively with parents and model ways with them to promote early language development, for example reading with children at bedtime as part of good routines.

Some parents appreciate and benefit from guidance and support, but some may be harder to reach and struggle to accept help or support. Despite the challenges, services need to reach out to all families to support their child's learning. Services should work closely with families to plan and deliver support for children's early learning within the service and at home and share information about progress and development. Services can and should support their staff too, to understand the best ways to engage with parents and further develop their skills in working with families.



How early language development looks

Quality of care and support

The quality of the interaction between staff and young children in the service is vital in promoting early language skills. Observation will allow inspectors to give feedback on when this is being done well and if this could be enhanced to extend and develop children's language skills. Services should take every opportunity to engage positively with children, babies and toddlers and ensure they have positive learning experiences.

Before children are fully able to speak, positive responses by adults to verbal and non-verbal cues, such as giving food when children indicate they are hungry, help build connectors in the brain that are the foundation for more complex communication in future. Staff in many services respond well to such cues, but it is important that they are aware of the link between responsive, nurturing care and early language development. As children's speech begins to emerge, parents and other adults can support development by continued positive, sensitive and consistent responses to children's early language and communication skills.

Using an animated and exaggerated voice, stressing vowels and important syllables, when talking to very young children can help them learn words faster. We will continue to acknowledge when this is being done well and reiterate the importance of high-quality, informed interaction with very young children.

Staff can help promote children's language skills by being aware of some key approaches and techniques. They should be aware of the need to simplify the language they use in terms of vocabulary, sentence length and complexity. They should consciously speak with children to prompt their use of language and be careful not to bombard them with too many questions.

Frequently speaking to children helps them become familiar with speech sounds and begin to learn words and language patterns, and the number of words a child hears directly affects their early speech and language development. Inspectors can reiterate these messages to staff when they are in services and observing interactions between staff and very young children. Sometimes, some children are engaged with very well while others receive less engagement and stimulation. Our observations can help services think about these differences and how they can ensure high-quality experiences for all children.

Staff should know the needs of all children well. If a child is vulnerable or at higher risk of experiencing developmental difficulties because of their circumstances, staff should be aware and take a positive, proactive approach to help them overcome any barriers. The Ready to Read report

provides more information about the typical path most children follow in their early language development and explores what good language development should look like at age five.

Questions to consider

- How do staff in services ensure they are engaging well with all children in the service?
- How does the service ensure there are robust arrangements to ensure the child's individual language development is reviewed, progress shared with parents and next steps planned?
- How does the service know all children are making good progress with their early language skills and that individualised support is in place?
- How well does the service analyse and use all available information to improve early language, speech and communication outcomes for children? For example, data about development reviews and some of the particular socio-economic factors that exist in the areas where the children and families using the service are living?
- How does the service ensure its responses to all children are nurturing, responsive and promote positive early language outcomes?



Quality of environment

For children under two, there is a link between the amount of time the television is on at home and what their achievement level will be when starting school. As the amount of television time increases, the child's score at school entry decreases. Awareness and knowledge of this varies. For example, we know many childminders already limit the amount of time the television is on, but the powerful messages from research highlighted in Ready to Read will help all services to understand and explain the links. Services can help parents by passing on these messages to them. Background noise from radios can also be an unhelpful distraction for children and can prevent caregivers from focusing on interactions with children.

A learning environment with access to a good range of appropriate resources is important for stimulating early speech, language and communication. The Ready to Read report highlights a number of activities that help to create a good learning environment for early language skills. Many early learning and childcare services will already have these activities integrated into their setting, but they can consider how the environment supports and enables them. Are there quiet areas where staff can sit with children? Are resources displayed at the right height for children? Are resources that stimulate creativity readily available? Activities identified as particularly useful to promote early language development include:

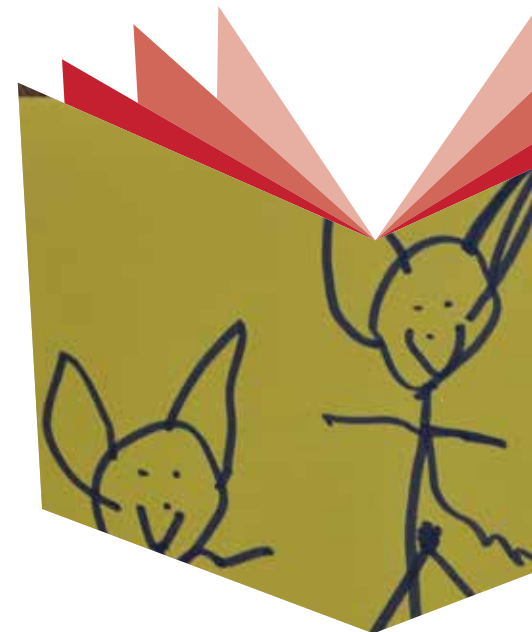
- reading regularly with a child, especially when this is interactive.
- having conversation with children – one-to-one communication is particularly beneficial
- helping a child to recognise letters in the alphabet
- singing songs, poems and nursery rhymes
- helping a child to paint, draw and take part in other craft activities
- providing access to a range of books and toys which are easy for children to see and get hold of, to encourage interest in books and reading.

These activities all help to introduce children to learn new words and their meaning. They prompt the use of language to communicate and explore ideas and support a child to understand patterns of language.



Questions to consider

- How does the service ensure that the environment, both indoors and outdoors, is stimulating and promotes early language, speech and communication for children in the setting?
- How does the service ensure children get individual time and attention from staff?
- How does the service ensure the noise levels and atmosphere are conducive to supporting and promoting children's early language development?
- How does the service help families create a good learning environment at home and bridge the gap between both environments to help ensure positive outcomes for children?



Quality of staffing

It is vital that services have staff who have an informed understanding of child development and how children acquire language skills. Staff who have this understanding and knowledge are more likely to be able to deliver high-quality learning experiences for children. It is particularly important that staff are confident speaking to children and understand how to engage them in activities that can best support their language development. For example, it is important that staff understand the need to ask young children open questions and allow time for them to think. This approach encourages children to experiment with ways of expressing themselves.

Staff need to understand GIRFEC, the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators and their own responsibilities for ensuring children get the right help at the right time. Staff need to be able to recognise signs of a child struggling with early speech, language and communication difficulties and the steps that can be taken to support them to improve. It is important that they are confident about when and how to refer children for specialist support, such as speech and language therapy.

A consistent, stable staff team will be more able to support children, promote attachments and get to know them and their families well. This can in turn help staff teams support children's early speech, language and communication skills. Services should be working to achieve this and be proactive in supporting children with these issues during key transitions.



Questions to consider

- How does the service ensure staff have the right skills, knowledge and understanding to support and promote children's early language and communication skills?
- How does the service know that training and development time is making a difference for children in the service in terms of promoting their early language development?
- How does the service ensure staff are deployed effectively to engage with all children and especially those identified as needing some extra support?
- How does the service ensure staff take a partnership approach with appropriate professionals to support children and families, especially during key transitions?
- How effectively does the review of staff performance reflect the need to ensure positive outcomes for children in the service in terms of their early language development?

Quality of management and leadership

Managers and leaders are responsible for making sure they and their teams are well informed and up to date with current best practice and research evidence. They need to know about and promote GIRFEC, the importance of early intervention and demonstrate excellent understanding of child development.

Managers and leaders should understand the best way to deliver their services to promote children's learning and support good child development outcomes. They should be aware of the impact that high-quality early learning and childcare can have on preventing early inequalities from emerging in children's speech, language and communication development. For example, it is very important that both boys and girls participate in early language, early reading and play-related activities.

Early learning and childcare services need to be led well in terms of ensuring that staff record and monitor children's experiences and development outcomes. It is helpful when leaders and managers observe practice in their service regularly, so that quality assurance is meaningful and linked to improving outcomes for children.

Managers and leaders should use research evidence to inform practice and they should pay particular attention to socio-economic inequalities. There should be a culture of positively and proactively working with other professionals, particularly speech and language therapists, to strengthen support for children and widen opportunities for learning that can strengthen early language development.

Questions to consider

- Is there a culture of using research to inform learning and practice within the service?
- Is there a culture of high aspiration for all children?
- Is quality assurance meaningful and linked to improving outcomes for children in the service? How do they know?
- What positive impact has the service's planning for improvement had on early language development and in reducing inequalities for children? How do they know?



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420