

# Understanding and supporting the Early Language Development of 2- and 3-year-Old Children Living in East Belfast

## Background

The EastSide Early Learning Community (ELC) is a collaborative partnership of community, voluntary and statutory organisations with a vision to improve the speech, language and social and emotional development outcomes for young children living in East Belfast. An Eastside ELC high level theory of change and in-depth framework has been co-designed with families and partners to understand what is required to support children's early learning outcomes. The ELC theory of change and domains framework may be viewed at <https://eastsideelc.org.uk>.

## Purpose of the Scoping

One of the high level outcomes of the ELC is to improve the speech, language and communication (SLC) development of children living in East Belfast. To better understand what is required to achieve this outcome, the ELC undertook a scoping task in Feb 2024. The Scoping aimed to consider 3 topic areas:

### 1. Current monitoring of SLC development

- To understand how children's early speech and language development is captured across East Belfast i.e. what tools are currently being used and for what purpose.
- To identify any training needs in using tools to monitor SLC

### 2. Current picture of SLC development in East Belfast

- Gather a sample of existing early language development data to gain a snapshot of SLC development in the area.

### 3. SLC training

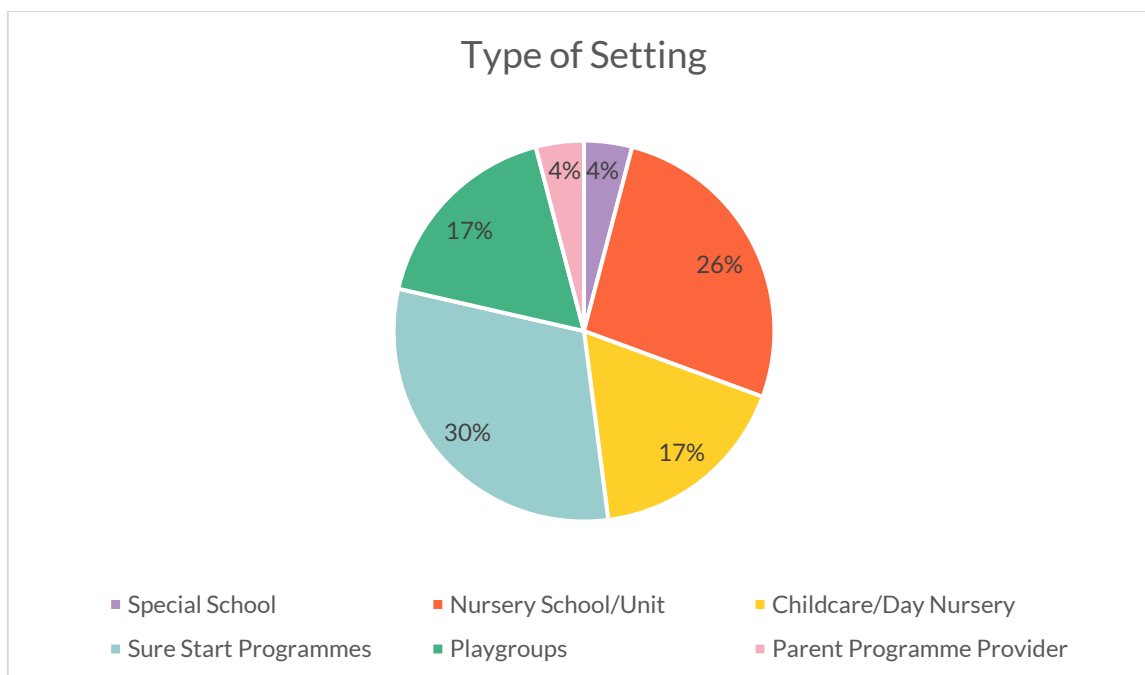
- Explore sources of SLC training currently being accessed by Practitioners
- Explore types of SLC training accessed by Practitioners
- Explore training needs/gaps identified by Practitioners

## The Scoping Exercise

In February 2024 all pre-school settings within the Early Learning Community were contacted and asked to complete an online questionnaire to gather information on area 1 and 3 as detailed above.

23 responses were received (74% response rate). See Appendix 1 for full questionnaire.

The range of settings who responded is summarised below:



**Topic Area 1 - Current Monitoring of Speech, Language and Communication Development**

a) *The questionnaire asked if Settings currently used any tools to help capture information about the speech, language and communication (SLC) development of the children in their setting. 87% of the 23 respondents currently use a tool to capture information about SLC development. A breakdown of tools used is noted below. Some settings used more than 1 tool.*

TOOL USED	NUMBER OF SETTINGS USING TOOL
Quest and Q Skills (CCEA assessments for pupils with Special Educational Needs)	1
Wellcomm *	14
Comet	4
Elklan Ages and stages	1
Bespoke tool developed in Setting	1
Early Years Foundation Stage Progress Check	1
SLT/OT Partnership Programme Assessment Tool (for children in EA Pilot Programme for Children with Social Communication differences))	1
Observation checklists	2
Education Authority Language and Communication Service assessment	1
Hanen Language and Communication Stages	5

\*In one setting the Wellcomm was used with specific children only

The Wellcomm Screening Tool<sup>1</sup> (part of the Wellcomm Speech and Language Toolkit) is the most widely used tool for screening. It was used in 14 out of the 23 Settings who responded to the questionnaire (61%). In 5 settings it was used alongside another tool/s.

79% of settings who use Wellcomm had also received additional training in how to use it.

**b) Settings were asked why they have chosen the tool/s they use.**

The Wellcomm is chosen for a variety of reasons e.g.

- Easy and quick to use
- Pack was funded and training given through Sure Start
- It gives a baseline and indicates progress
- Gives information needed to support the children
- Used by the Organisation/required by Funders
- The Big Book of Ideas (part of the Wellcomm Tool Kit) is useful

**c) Settings were asked how they use the information gathered through SLC screening.**

All settings use the information to monitor progress.

Most settings use the information to assist with planning.

Some settings use the information to provide data to funders.

Some settings use the information to assist with identification and referral of children to Speech and Language Therapy Services.

## Topic Area 2. Current Picture of Speech, Language and Communication Development in East Belfast

To gain an understanding of the current early language development of children in East Belfast, the monitoring data from East Belfast Sure Start for 2022/2023 was used. East Belfast Sure Start use the Wellcomm Screening Tool and also note the child's Communication and Language Stage as described by Hanen Learning Language and Loving It Programme<sup>2</sup> (see Appendix 2).

The Wellcomm Screening Tool has different sections to use depending on the chronological age of the child. Each age band section has 5 items that look at understanding of language and 5 items that look at use of language. It then gives a score of red, amber or green:

Red	those most likely to need intervention from a specialist service
Amber	those for whom extra support and the highlighted activities may be enough to help them develop age-appropriate language skills
Green	those not considered in need of any extra input or assessment <i>at the moment</i>

In Sure Start, the Wellcomm Screening Tool is used to screen the children once they are settled into the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds. This first screen is always completed by the end of October. The screening tool is used again in the summer term (end of May/beginning of June). This shows the progress of each child during their time in the Programme.

## Wellcomm Screening results 2022/2023 – autumn and spring screens completed with 41 children.

	Autumn 2022	Spring 2023	Comment
<b>Red</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>19%</b>	During their time in Sure Start, children are supported by staff with significant additional training in encouraging SLC development.
<b>Amber</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>27%</b>	
<b>Green</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>54%</b>	Despite a high level of SLC support, only 54% of children leave the Sure Start programme with age appropriate SLC development.

## Hanen Communication and Language Stages – autumn and spring data for 43 children

Hanen Stage and age typical age range	Autumn 2022	Spring 2023
Discoverer: 0-8 months	7%	0%
Communicator: 8-13 months	16%	2%
First Words User: 12-18 months	23%	5%
Combiner: 18-24 months	26%	12%
Early Sentence User: 2-3 years	23%	35%
Later Sentence User: 3-5 years	5%	46%

NB – Wellcomm Screening Tool and Hanen Stages refer to children with neurotypical development. Children who are neurodiverse may follow a different but equally valid developmental path.

Although a small sample, the Sure Start data is likely to be fairly representative of children in East Belfast who live in the ward areas with higher levels of deprivation.

For this population, the data suggests that

- At 2 years, around 50% of children have significant speech, language and communication need (SLCN) and 20-30% have age appropriate SLC development.
- At 3 years, having had additional SLC support, around 50% of children have age appropriate SLC development. This in turn means that 50% of children are entering their pre school year with some level of speech, language and communication need.

## Comparison with Pre-Covid data (Wellcomm Screening Tool only)

	Autumn 2018	Spring 2019	Autumn 2022	Spring 2023
<b>Red</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>Amber</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>27%</b>
<b>Green</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>54%</b>

The data for the Autumn screen is similar pre and post pandemic. What is striking is the SLC development of the children at the Spring screen, when they were just about to enter their pre-school year. Pre-pandemic 71% of children entering their pre school year had SLC development typical for their age whereas post-pandemic this figure dropped to 54%.

This observation is similar to findings of research studies which aimed to explore the impact of the pandemic on child development.

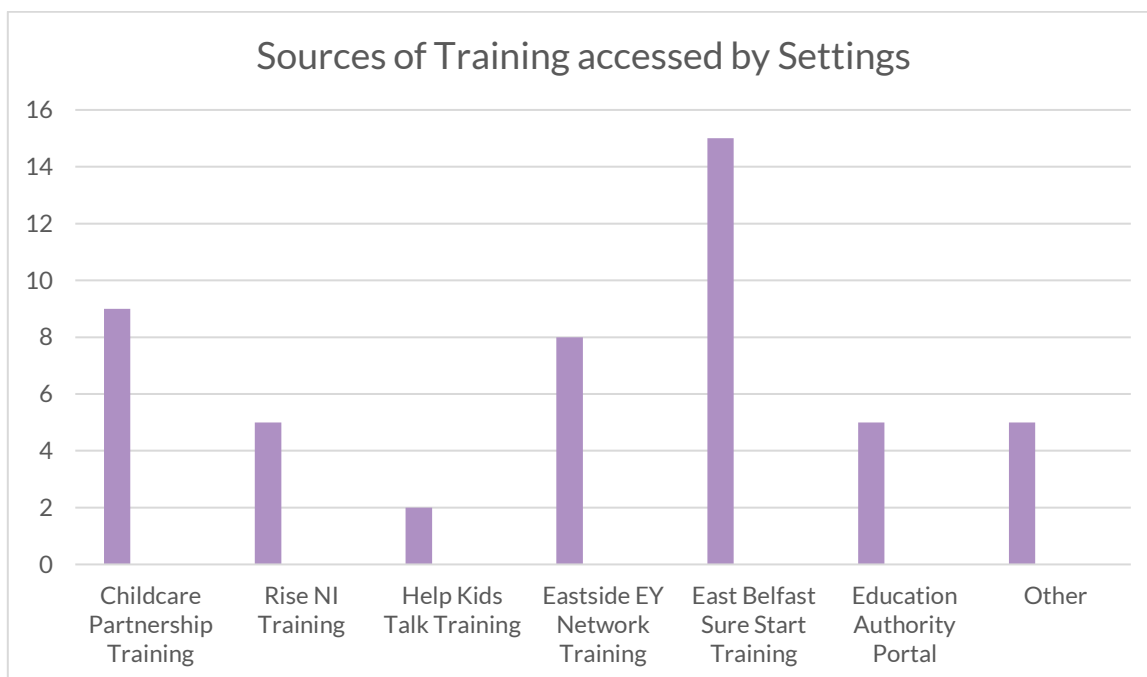
In May 2022 a report by the Education Endowment Fund<sup>3</sup> noted that “the proportion of children in their sample reaching the expected levels in all areas – communication and language, physical development, literacy, maths, and personal, social and emotional development – was 59% in 2021, compared to 72% for the 2019 cohort.”

In July 2023, Feijoo et al<sup>4</sup> found “a relationship ...between interlocutor variability and participants’ vocabulary, indicating that those participants with fewer opportunities for socio-communicative diversity showed lower expressive vocabulary scores.”

### Topic Area 3. Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) training for Practitioners

a) **Settings were asked where they accessed training about SLC development.**

Responses are illustrated in the chart below.



Sources of training listed as ‘other’ included in house Speech and Language Therapists, Makaton website and Solihull Approach website.

There is a high level of uptake of training offered through SureStart and the Early Years Network. Of the 15 non Sure Start settings who responded to the questionnaire, 60% accessed training provided by Sure Start and the Early Years Network.

b) **Settings were asked what type of SLC training they had attended in the past 5 years.**

The training listed covered a wide range of topics. The range of topics has been summarized under the broad categories listed below.

SLC development and screening	Strategies to support SLC development (including specific approaches)	SLC in context of brain development	Developmental differences that impact of SLC	SLC included in other training
Development guides	Makaton	Play, learning and the brain	Global developmental delay	Early Years Degree
Ages and Stages	Hanen Learning Language and Loving It	Chatting Time	Autism	Level 5 Training
Wellcomm Screening Tool	Hanen Teacher Talk	RiseNI OCN level 2	Selective Mutism	SEN speech and language module

Speech Sound Development	Elklan SLC support	Solihull Approach	Gestalt language learners	
	Intensive Interaction	Foundations of SLC		
	Talk Boost			

c) ***Settings were asked if they would like additional SLC training.***

100% of respondents said they would like additional training to support SLC development.

d) ***Settings were asked what topics they would like covered in additional training.***

3 options were offered and respondents were given the opportunity to identify additional areas they would like to receive training in.



## Summary and future considerations

### Topic Area 1. Current Monitoring of Speech, Language and Communication Development

- The Wellcomm Screening Tool is the most widely used tool across the area.
- As Wellcomm is currently being used, there may be an opportunity for the ELC to gather Wellcomm data (% of children scoring red, amber and green) from settings who use it to provide a more comprehensive current picture of SLC development across the Eastside ELC area.
- Going forward, there is an opportunity for ELC members to consider all using the same method of progress monitoring. When considering an appropriate tool, factors such as ease of use and helpfulness in goal setting should be considered. The learning from the Hanen Learning Language and Loving It Pilot may be relevant e.g. how Practitioners found it helpful to have a shared language to describe SLC development. Integrity with ELC objectives is also important e.g. inclusive of neurodiverse children and those who are learning English as an additional language.

## **Topic Area 2. Current Picture of Speech, Language and Communication Development in East Belfast**

- The baseline data gathered from East Belfast Sure Start suggests that on entry to the pre pre school year 20-30% of children have age appropriate SLC development. When screened again at time of leaving the Sure Start Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds, this figure had risen to 50% of children having age appropriate SLC development (i.e. on entry to pre-school year).
- As suggested above, many settings in the area use the Wellcomm Screening Tool and so there may be an opportunity to gather data from a wider range of settings.

## **Topic Area 3. Speech, Language and Communication Training for Practitioners**

- Responses to the questionnaire suggest an ongoing hunger among Practitioners for more training in SLC development and how to support it.
- The responses would appear to support the concept of an SLC Learning Pathway that begins with an introduction to SLC development and then moves on to explore in more detail strategies that Practitioners can use and also how to understand and support the other issues that impact on SLC development. Children presenting with speech, language and communication needs frequently are developmentally complex and need support in areas such as regulation, focus and information processing.
- The high uptake of training offered through Sure Start and the Early Years network offers an opportunity for the ELC to
  - a) Commission and offer future training
  - b) Explore relevant training offered through other providers e.g. Childcare Partnership, RiseNI, Education Authority Portal, and signpost ELC members to these.
  - c) Provide a forum where ELC members can recommend training that they have found helpful, particularly the areas in which members have expressed a need for further training

We are very grateful to all the Practitioners from the Eastside Early Learning Community who responded to the questionnaire. Thank you.

Anne McKee  
Independent Speech and Language Therapist  
13 March 2024

## **References**

1. Wellcomm Speech and Language Toolkit. GL Assessment
2. Weitzman, E and Greenberg, J (2002). 'Hanan Learning Language and Loving It'. The Hanan Centre.
3. Tracey et al (2022) 'The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's socio-emotional wellbeing and attainment during the Reception Year.' Education Endowment Fund Report
4. Feijoo, S et al (2023). 'Language acquisition in a post-pandemic context: the impact of measures against COVID-19 on early language development'. Frontiers in Psychology Vol 14



# Eastside Early Learning Community (ELC) Scoping

The purpose of this scoping exercise is to gain an insight into how information regarding the speech, language and communication (SLC) development of children is captured across the ELC and how staff access training in the area of SLC development.

There are 2 short sections in the questionnaire.

Questions 1 to 7 are about how information regarding SLC development is captured.

Questions 8 to 11 are about how staff access training in the area of SLC development.

\* Required



1. Which option below best describes your setting? If you select 'other', please describe your setting. \*

Day Nursery

Playgroup

Nursery School

Other

2. What is the age of the youngest child you can have in your setting? Please answer in years and months e.g. 2 years 10 months. \*

Enter your answer



3. Do you currently use any tools to help you capture information about the speech, language and communication development of the children in your setting? \*

Yes

No

4. If you answered 'yes' to Question 2, what tool(s) do you use e.g. Wellcomm Screening Tool, Comet, Early Talk Boost Tracker. Please name or describe the tool/tools you use.

Enter your answer

5. If you use the Wellcomm Screening Tool, have you received any training or support?

Yes

No

6. Please explain briefly why you chose the tool/measure you use.

Enter your answer



7. How do you use the information you gather about children's speech, language and communication development? Please tick all that apply. If you select 'other', please tell us about the other ways you use the information you gather about SLC development.

To monitor progress

To assist with planning and goal setting

To provide information required by funders etc

Other

8. Where do you access training about speech, language and communication development?  
Please select all that apply. If you select 'other', please tell us about all the other places where you access SLC training. \*

Childcare Partnership's training courses

Rise NI training

Help Kids Talk training

Eastside Early Years Network Training

SureStart

Education Authority Portal

Other

9. What training about speech, language and communication development have any staff in your setting completed in the last 5 years. Please describe the type of training if you can't remember what it is called. \*

Enter your answer



10. Would you like additional training in speech, language and communication development? \*

Yes

No



11. What areas of speech, language and communication (SLC) training are you interested in (for you and the other staff in your setting). Please select all that apply. If you select 'other', please give as much information as possible about the type of SLC training you are interested in.

- General information about SLC development including ages and stages
- Training about strategies that Practitioners can use to support the development of SLC
- Deeper knowledge of other developmental areas that enable SLC to develop e.g. self regulation, sensory processing, infant mental health
- Other

12. Please provide the name of your setting if you are happy to do so e.g. Sure Start Little Learners. This will enable us to follow up with those who haven't responded yet. We really appreciate you taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Enter your answer

Submit

## **APPENDIX 2 – Hanen Communication and Language Stages (Learning Language and Loving It 2002)**

### **Stage 1: Discoverer (birth to 8 months)**

The infant goes from communicating reflexively to becoming really interested in others and wanting attention. She does not yet know how to send messages directly to another person to get what she wants.

### **Stage 2: Communicator (8 to 13 months)**

The infant sends purposeful messages directly to others using a combination of eye gaze, facial expressions, sounds and gestures. She becomes very sociable.

### **Stage 3: First Words User (12 to 18 months)**

The infant begins to use single words.

### **Stage 4: Combiner (18 to 24 months)**

The child demonstrates a burst in vocabulary and begins to combine words. She also starts to take more turns in a conversation.

### **Stage 5: Early Sentence User (2 to 3 years)**

The child progresses from using 2 word combinations to five word sentences and can now hold short conversations.

### **Stage 6: Later Sentence User (3 to 5 years)**

The child uses long, complex sentences and can hold conversations.