



Insight Report: Exploring School Readiness

Learning from The National
Lottery Community Fund's
A Better Start Programme

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About A Better Start

[A Better Start \(ABS\)](#) was a ten-year, £215 million programme supporting communities to give their babies and young children the best start in life. ABS was funded by [The National Lottery Community Fund \(TNLCF\)](#), the largest community funder in the UK. Between 2015 and 2025 ABS supported five partnerships based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham, and Southend to develop and test ways to improve their children's diet and nutrition, social and emotional development, and speech, language, and communication. Working with local parents and communities, ABS partnerships used scientific evidence and research to change local systems, including the way services are commissioned and delivered, taking a preventative, place-based approach and used evidence and learning to refine and adapt to local needs and contexts. Evidence from ABS has been used to inform local and national policy and practice initiatives addressing early childhood development.

Between 2019 and 2025 the [National Children's Bureau \(NCB\)](#) delivered an ambitious programme of shared learning and development support for ABS. The programme was also funded by TNLCF and worked within, across, and beyond the five partnership areas. To support the effective sharing of information and knowledge, NCB developed [Programme Insight Reports](#) which analysed learning generated across ABS under cross-cutting themes. Much of this learning is evident in the Department for Education's policy, [Giving every child the best start in life](#) (Department for Education (DfE), 2025a).

In 2025, the ABS learning and evidence programme led by NCB was extended by

TNLCF until 2026. The extended contract provides an opportunity to build on the successes of the 10 years of funding and will ensure that the wealth of evidence generated by the five partnerships can inform future policy, practice, and systems change. A series of four Insight Reports will be published, which will synthesise the evidence and learning generated by the five ABS partnerships and the National Evaluation of ABS which is being undertaken by the [National Centre for Social Research \(NatCen\)](#) (when available). The learning and knowledge documented in each Insight Report will be translated into actionable guidance with an accompanying best practice guide to support evidence to action. Consultations with specialists across the sector will inform the Best Practice Guides to ensure key messages are prioritised based on what can feasibly be operationalised.

Between April and June 2025, NCB conducted a desk review of more than 90 pieces of published evidence collated by TNLCF from the ABS partnerships. The review identified recurring themes and important learning across the Partnerships which was generated over the 10-year programme. This is the first in a series of Insight Reports that curate the learning. Insight Report 1 is focused on exploring school readiness. While school readiness was not an explicit objective of ABS, the holistic approach taken by the partnerships and the full-service portfolio offered to young children, parents and communities undoubtedly contributed to school readiness.



Report summary

This Insight Report reviews the wealth of evidence relating to school readiness generated by A Better Start (ABS), a ten-year, £215 million programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

This is the first of four themed reports developed to share the learning and insights from the five ABS partnerships with the wider early years sector. The theme for this first report is exploring school readiness. While school readiness was not a primary objective of ABS, the programme's holistic, place-based approach to early childhood development significantly contributed to preparing children for school. Each partnership developed vast learning around what works to support children, practitioners and caregivers to be school ready.

In England, school readiness is assessed using the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, which evaluates children's development across key learning goals. The evidence from ABS partnerships suggests a broader, more holistic view of children's development is beneficial. This view sees school readiness as a journey from conception to Reception, shaped by children's experiences, environments, and relationships.

Drawing on over 90 pieces of evidence from ABS partnerships in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend, this report utilises the UNICEF model of school readiness to explore three interrelated dimensions of school readiness:

- 1. Children's readiness** for school
- 2. Schools' readiness** for children
- 3. Families and communities'** readiness for school

Sixteen ABS projects are included in the report as case studies for how each dimension of school readiness was supported by ABS. Key findings include:

- Children's readiness was enhanced through outdoor play, nature-based learning, music and storytelling. These activities supported emotional regulation, communication, physical development and curiosity.
- Schools' readiness was fostered through improved collaboration between early years settings and schools, joint training, and summer transition activities. Practitioners benefited from long-term, personalised support and peer networks.
- Families' and communities' readiness was strengthened by building trusted relationships with practitioners, improving the home learning environment and providing culturally appropriate resources. Programmes tailored to individual needs helped parents gain confidence in supporting their children's development.

This report highlights the importance of engaging parents, using community spaces, and offering flexible, inclusive services to holistically support children. It also underscores the value of play-based learning and the need to move beyond narrow assessments of school readiness.

As the government aims to increase the proportion of children achieving school readiness from 68% to 75% by 2028, the evidence and insights from ABS offer valuable guidance for policy, practice, and systems change. Future reports will continue to synthesise learning from ABS to inform best practice across the early years sector.

Introduction

This section explores the definition of school readiness. Who measures it, how and when? We give further policy context to school readiness, and how it is being discussed by the government. Finally, we look at the concept within the ABS context.

What is school readiness?

In England, the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework ([DfE, 2025b](#)) defines being 'school ready' and 'school readiness' as how prepared a child is to start their first year of Key Stage 1 (Year 1 of Primary School). Readiness refers to early learning skills but also social, emotional, and practical skills. Indicators of being 'school ready' include being able to manage everyday tasks independently (such as eating, dressing, and using the toilet), as well as showing early social and learning behaviours such as listening, taking turns and playing with others. In England, the extent to which a child is 'school ready' is assessed by their reception-year teacher using classroom observation in the year they turn five years old using the standardised EYFS framework.

Many early years professionals and specialists in early childhood development call for a more holistic framing of school readiness, with a particular call for viewing 'school readiness' as a journey of development from birth (or conception) to Reception, rather than a destination to be assessed in the child's first year of primary school. There is a wealth of evidence on early childhood development which shows that children's brains are developed over time, in an ongoing process that begins before birth; children's early

experiences shape their brain architecture which provides the foundation for their future learning, behaviour and mental and physical health ([Harvard, 2007](#)).

A child's family and early years setting should be supporting them to become 'school ready' from their earliest days. The social, emotional and practical skills assessed at age five by the EYFS profile are built on a foundation of early childhood development skills which should be nurtured from conception to Reception.

How is school readiness assessed?

The Department for Education ([DfE, 2025b](#)) considers children to be 'school ready' if they have achieved a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of Reception, measured against Early Learning Goals (ELGs). The ELGs span 'prime' areas (Communication and language; Personal, social and emotional development; and Physical development) as well as 'specific' areas (Literacy; Mathematics; Understanding the world; and Expressive arts and design). To achieve a GLD, and therefore be considered school ready, children must reach the expected level in 12 ELGs across the three prime areas of learning and the specific areas of Literacy and Mathematics (see Figure 2).

If a child achieves a 'Good Level of Development', this indicates that they are well placed to progress into Year 1. The EYFS assessment data is used by teachers to identify areas of learning on which to focus during the Year 1 curriculum and are used

regionally and nationally to monitor children's development and learning (DfE, 2024).

Policy context

The concept of school readiness is of great interest to parents, early years educators, and policymakers. It has recently gained further attention as a result of the new Best Start in Life strategy (DfE, 2025a), where the government set their ambition to increase the proportion of children achieving a good level of development by the end of reception from 68% to 75% by 2028. Meeting this target will require action not only within early education and childcare, but also at home through family support and within communities. The short- and medium-term benefits of investing in early years services and family support are evidenced in research (Carneiro et al, 2025). The government's Opportunity Mission identifies the importance of family support to improve children's development and preparation for school (HM Government, 2024).

The government's Best Start in Life strategy, and the renewed focus on early years it has provided, have been widely welcomed. Recent research highlights the impact of children not being ready for school, including poorer attainment, widening health inequalities, reduced social cohesion and increased poverty (DfE, 2025a; Kindred², 2025). There are widely reported risks for children who start school before they are considered 'school ready'.

Some organisations (Kindred², 2025) call for school readiness to be framed earlier, at entry to Reception, emphasising skills such as independence, communication, physical development and healthy routines. Examples include dressing and eating independently,

using the toilet, showing curiosity, engaging with books, taking turns, expressing feelings, singing nursery rhymes, listening to instructions, and maintaining healthy habits like brushing teeth and limiting screen time.

Since the EYFS profile was first published in 2007, it has received significant attention from early years specialists and researchers. One perspective from across these groups critiques the promotion of formal learning elements, with the EYFS being called 'too much, too soon' (House et al., 2011). Some early years specialists call for a greater focus on play-based activities to support development and learning, suggesting an over concern with formal learning at the expense of play-based development, a concern sometimes labelled 'schoolification' (Bradbury, 2011). International practice suggests a more holistic, play-based approach better supports young children's development.

Some commentators (e.g. Kagan, 1999, cited in UNICEF, 2012) differentiate between:

1. **School readiness** as children being prepared to succeed in a structured learning setting;
2. **Readiness to learn** as a characteristic from birth that all children possess.

A further concern around the disconnect between teacher and parent perspectives has been identified (Kindred², 2024; UNICEF, 2012). Teachers reported increased numbers of children entering Reception ill-prepared (e.g. not being fully toilet trained, having difficulty paying attention and/or taking turns). Parents reported that they did not receive timely, appropriate information to enable them to support their child to become school ready. Contributing factors to this disconnect include reduced health

visiting appointments, limited access to family support services (since 2010 cuts), COVID-19 disruption and recovery, increased screen time for both children and parents, mismatched expectations between school and home ([Kindred², 2024](#)), and a lack of high-quality childcare ([DfE, 2025a](#)). Some of these concerns are echoed by early years' sector organisations who argue that too much emphasis is placed on the reception year. They recommend a change in approach which values a child's development from 'conception to Reception' ([National Children's Bureau \(NCB\), 2025](#)).

The EYFS has also been criticised for reinforcing inequalities around gender, race and class ([Bradbury, 2011](#)). The framework assesses children's fluency in English,

regardless of whether English is an additional language for them. In contrast, UNICEF's World Fit for Children (WFFC) mission statement ([2002](#)) presents school readiness as a holistic concept, stating that a good start in life encompasses physical health, emotional security, social competence and the ability to learn. Going one step further, the WFFC goals identify the importance of the environment that children are learning in; to support the holistic development of young children the environment should be "caring, safe and stimulating". Building on this, UNICEF ([2012](#)) identifies three inter-related domains of school readiness:

1. **Children's** readiness for school.
2. **Schools' readiness** for children and families.
3. **Families and communities'** readiness for school.

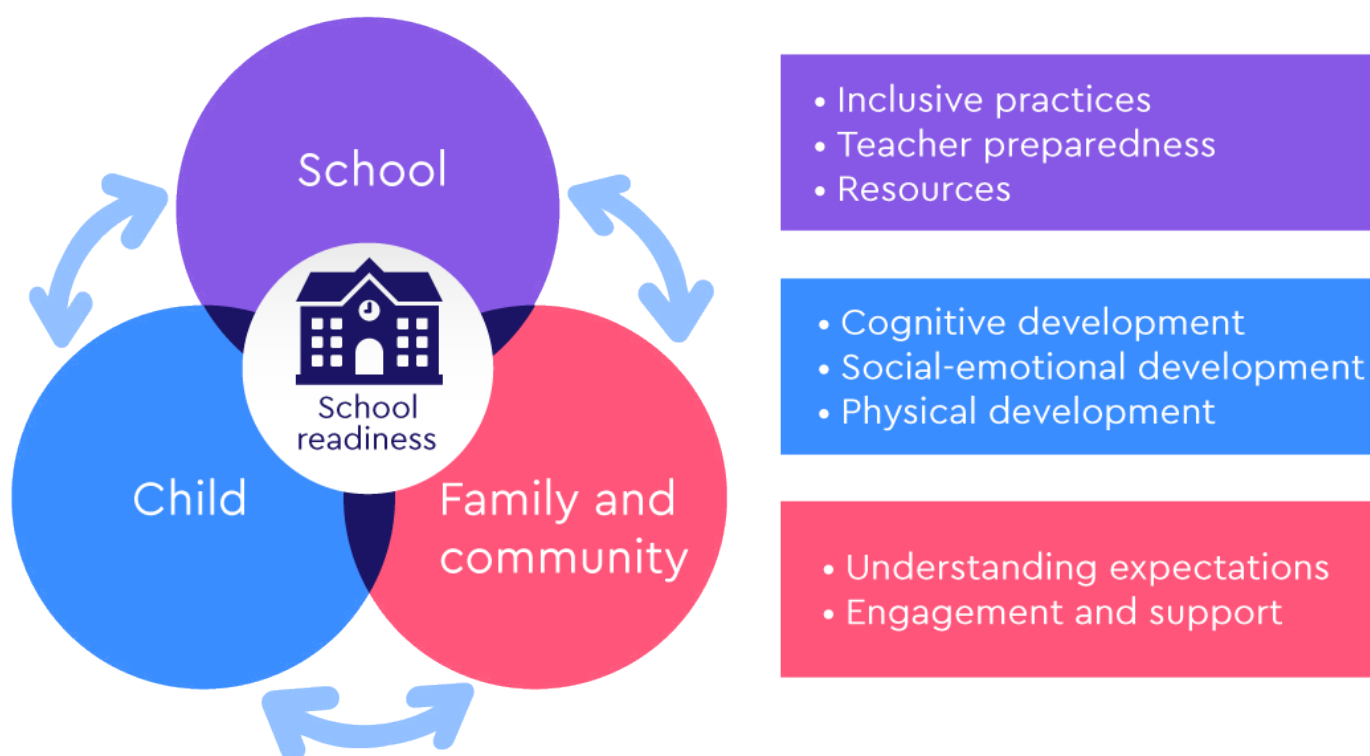


Figure 1: UNICEF's three dimensions of school readiness

This framing moves responsibility from families and children alone, recognising the role of schools and communities in supporting children and their families during the early years and through the transition to primary school.

A Better Start and school readiness

There were four outcomes that ABS sought to achieve. One focused on achieving 'systems change' by influencing the way that local health, public services and the voluntary and community sector work together to improve outcomes for children. The other three outcomes were focused on outcomes for children:

- Improving children's diet and nutrition to support healthy physical development and protect against illness in later life;
- Supporting children to develop social and emotional skills so they can develop

positive relationships and cope with difficult situations; and

- Helping children develop their language and communication skills, so that they can engage with the world around them.

These outcome areas directly contributed to supporting children's early childhood development, and therefore supported the foundational skills outlined in the EYFS and Early Learning Goals required for children to be considered 'school ready'.

Further, the design and delivery of the ABS programme, in partnership with families and communities, illustrated the benefit of engaging parents in supporting children's development. Given the government's commitment to school readiness, it is timely to share the evidence generated from 10 years of the ABS programme and offer insights into how school readiness can be supported in practice.

Figure 2: The 12 Early Learning Goals assessed to determine whether a child has reached a good level of development.

Areas of learning		Early Learning Goals	Children at the expected level of development will ...
Prime	Communication and language	1. Listening, attention and understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">listen attentively, responding with comments or questionstake part in conversations with teachers and peers
		2. Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">participate in discussions using new vocabularyexplain thinking, express ideas and feelings, using full sentences
	Personal, social and emotional development	3. Self-regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">understand feelings and begin to regulate behaviourfocus, respond and follow instructionswork towards simple goals with patience
		4. Managing self	<ul style="list-style-type: none">show confidence and independenceunderstand and follow rulesmanage personal needs, like hygiene and dressing
		5. Building relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">form positive attachmentsplay cooperatively and take turnsshow sensitivity to the needs of others
	Physical development	6. Gross motor skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">move confidently and safelyshow strength, balance and coordination in a range of physical activities
7. Fine motor skills		<ul style="list-style-type: none">hold a pencil effectively in preparation for fluent writinguse other tools such as scissors and cutlerybegin to show accuracy when drawing	
Specific	Literacy	8. Comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none">understand and retell stories using own words and new vocabularyanticipate events and use new vocabulary in discussions
		9. Word reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none">say sounds for letters and digraphsread simple words and sentences aloud, including sound blending
		10. Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">write recognisable letters and spell wordswrite simple phrases and sentences
	Mathematics	11. Number	<ul style="list-style-type: none">understand numbers to 10recognise quantities up to 5 without countingautomatically recall number bonds to 5 and some to 10
		12. Numerical patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none">count beyond 20compare quantities up to 10explore number patterns up to 10 such as odds, evens and double



A Better Start practice examples related to school readiness

This report explores practice examples from the ABS partnerships where at least one aspect of school readiness, as defined by the UNICEF definition (child ready for school, school ready for the child, families and communities ready for school), was supported.

16 projects were identified across the ABS partnerships as supporting school readiness. Short case studies explore the evidence and learning generated from each project around what worked to support different aspects of school readiness. An overview of the projects, and the elements of school readiness they supported is detailed in Figure 3.

1. Children's readiness for school

Services across the ABS sites often aimed to simultaneously develop multiple skills such as speech, language and communication skills, social and emotional skills and gross and fine motor skills. The examples here illustrate how different projects within each of the ABS sites contributed to the child being ready for school.

2. Schools' readiness for children

This dimension of school readiness includes examples that relate to early years' practitioners and teachers in schools being upskilled in understanding how best to develop the children's skills and being more confident in their own practice and its impact. It also includes examples of early years settings working in partnership with schools to ensure better transitions for young children from early years' settings to nursery and primary schools.

3. Families and communities' readiness for school

This dimension of school readiness includes examples that supported parents to develop their understanding of how to best develop their children's skills and also supported them to increase their own parenting skills and confidence. Some examples relate to the home learning environment and there are also examples of taking a wider, whole-community approach to school readiness and the benefits of this for young children.

Figure 3: Overview of programmes implemented across A Better Start partnerships, which addressed dimensions of school readiness.

		Child ready for school	School ready for the child	Families and communities ready for school
Blackpool	Ready Steady School	✓	✓	✓
	Early Years Park Rangers	✓		✓
	Parks and Open Spaces	✓		✓
Bradford	Better Start Imagine	✓		✓
	Forest Schools Play	✓		✓
	Talking Together			✓
Lambeth	Evelina Award	✓	✓	
	Making it REAL			✓
	Natural Thinkers	✓		✓
Nottingham	Dolly Parton's Imagination Library			✓
	Room to Play	✓		
	Small Steps at Home			✓
Southend	Let's Talk	✓		✓
	Storysacks	✓		
	Talking Transitions	✓	✓	✓
	Umbilical Chords	✓		✓

"[UNICEF] framing moves responsibility from families and children alone, recognising the role of schools and communities in supporting children and their families during the early years and through the transition to primary school."

Blackpool Better Start

Blackpool Better Start worked with local parents, early years settings and schools to develop and promote nine evidence-based school ready priorities to support children's development.

Blackpool services	Dimensions of school readiness supported by each service		
	Child ready for school	School ready for the child	Families and communities ready for school
Ready Steady School	✓	✓	✓
Early Years Park Rangers	✓		✓
Parks and Open Spaces	✓		✓

Ready Steady School

As a local authority, Blackpool faces multiple challenges: it is ranked as the most deprived in England (ranked 1 out of 153 local authorities [in 2025](#)); the Index of Multiple Deprivation score is 10 (the most deprived); and 58% of the population live in areas which are the most deprived in the country. In the academic year 2022/23, Blackpool had a lower percentage of children reaching a 'Good Level of Development' compared to the national average, 62.7% and 67.2% respectively ([JSNA Blackpool, 2025](#)).

The [Ready Steady School Project](#) has been running since 2022/23 and aimed to embed a shared approach to supporting school readiness outcomes across the Better Start Blackpool area. Ready Steady School brought together parents, early years settings and schools to share and test resources developed to support

children on their school readiness journey.

The Ready Steady School project brought together three stakeholder groups routinely (parents, early years settings and schools) to form a School Readiness Community of Practice (CoP). This group aimed to co-produce a shared language and shared understanding of the importance of school readiness for children in Blackpool. The School Readiness CoP collectively identified nine evidence-based school ready priorities which were considered the most important to support children in Blackpool to successfully prepare for school.

The 2023 School Readiness pilot brought together schools, early years settings and parents to test resources developed for each of the nine co-produced school ready priorities. These nine areas were reviewed following the first year of the pilot programme, which led to some names being changed (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: The nine school ready priorities identified by the School Readiness Community of Practice. The nine areas were reviewed following the first year of the pilot programme, which led to some names being changed, noted in the pink boxes.

Nine School Ready Priorities (Year 1)	Nine School Ready Priorities (Year 2)
Listening and attention	Listening and attention
Making choices	Making choices
Talking about your feelings	Talking about your feelings
Developing hand and finger strength and control	Developing hand and finger strength
Personal Hygiene	Toileting and keeping clean
Mealtimes	Mealtime independence
Getting dressed	Getting dressed
Recognising your name	Recognising your name
Expressive Language	Talking

The Better Start Early Years team worked closely with early years practitioners, including childminders, to train them on school readiness. They provided training on the nine priorities, coached parents, and modelled good practice to parents. Practitioners were also mentored to support self-reflection through a self-audit and developed their working in partnership with parents' practices.

Work in community settings included working with the Family Hubs to scale up the universal Ready Steady School offer, co-delivering weekly universal Ready Steady School sessions from Family Hub sites.

All children who started school in September 2024 were invited along with their parents to attend the sessions, with a dedicated practitioner in sessions to support parents with adapting activities to meet their child's individual needs. The Early Years team also attended all Blackpool primary school inductions, where the nine priorities were introduced to parents, the universal groups

were promoted, and families were given the Starting School story book and poster with activities to practice over the summer.

As well as supporting early years practitioners in their work with parents, direct work with parents by ABS staff sought to embed the priorities and strategies through weekly universal Ready Steady School sessions which focused on one priority per week and its relevance to supporting school readiness. Strategies were modelled to parents, and they were supported and coached to practice using them at home, supported by the provision of Home Learning Cards depicting each of the nine priority areas.

Outcomes

In the second year of the pilot, more parents used the Home Learning Cards at least once a week than in year one, with almost one third (30%) indicating they had used it five times. Parents reported that the children enjoyed using the Home Learning Cards with their parents.

"These cards are very beneficial for adults and kids – [my child] loves doing these activities."

Qualitative feedback from parents suggested that attending the Ready Steady School sessions developed their understanding of each priority, bringing to life the tasks children will need to do at school that they may not have considered prior to participating in the pilot project:

"Because of this card we bought a book about feelings and have been discussing much more."

"I didn't really think about it until the session. I've been getting her to take her dinner from the kitchen."

The nine priorities and supporting resources are now used consistently across the partnership by health visitors, early years settings, family hubs and schools. This means there is a consistent approach for modelling school readiness strategies with parents which supports their use in the home learning environment.

Early Years Park Rangers

Local research found that early years families did not prioritise going to the park or green spaces. Some parents reported concerns around the safety, appropriateness and cleanliness of the spaces. Some parents didn't feel confident in using outdoor spaces with their young children.

Blackpool Better Start commissioned [Early Years Park Rangers](#) to work within the Blackpool Council Park Ranger Team. The Early Years Park Rangers worked with children under four years old and their families offering year-round activities using the evidence-based Forest School approach. The project aimed to encourage and educate parents about the benefits of early years play, particularly in an outdoor environment, and supporting children to engage with nature. Weekly activities were offered by Early Years Park Rangers, both in parks and on the beach, tailored to different age groups. Resources were provided for families to support and encourage them to continue using the natural environment outside of the guided activities.

Outcomes

The Early Years Park Rangers worked closely with other Blackpool Better Start stakeholders, including community connectors, Family Hubs, library services and early years settings. The Early Years Park Rangers have been effective at signposting families between services and promoting consistent messaging about early years. Feedback from parents who participated in the service was positive.

"Baby Rangers was truly a magical, amazing set of outdoor classes for little ones! It made me make special memories with my little one outside which we would have never done!"

Parks and Open Spaces

The Blackpool Better Start [Parks and Open Spaces project](#) focused on enhancing

"It helped develop my baby's physical strength through tummy time and senses introducing to sights, sounds, smells and textures he wouldn't have been exposed to without coming to the session."

green spaces for children and families living in areas of socioeconomic deprivation. The Blackpool Better Start partnership recognised the importance of providing accessible, good-quality green spaces for families and invested £1.6 million to the Green Space development programme. The project created Early Years Play Zones while also supporting families and communities to build capacity to use and take ownership of these spaces through educational opportunities including the Early Years Park Rangers service and volunteering opportunities such as 'Friends of' groups.

Outcomes

A report outlining the process, implementation and impact of the Parks and Open Spaces investment was published in [2021](#). The report documents several positive impacts for children's early years outcomes in Blackpool through the creating of accessible, high-quality green spaces and

tailored play zones for children aged 0–4 years. The key impacts include:

- 1. Increased physical activity:** The Early Years Play Zones and natural play spaces encouraged physical activity among young children, promoting healthier attitudes toward exercise.
- 2. Social and emotional development:** Forest School programmes, gardening sessions, and community events fostered emotional resilience in children.
- 3. Support for families:** Early Years Park Rangers provided educational activities and resources, helping families engage with their children in outdoor play and learning.
- 4. Community engagement:** Local groups actively maintained and enhanced the spaces which offered a supportive environment for families and children.
- 5. Increased access to nature:** By repurposing neglected spaces and improving safety, the project made green spaces more accessible, addressing barriers like antisocial behaviour and poor infrastructure.

Overall, the initiative contributed to better physical, social, and emotional development for children, while fostering stronger community ties and healthier lifestyles.

Better Start Bradford

Better Start Bradford worked to improve home learning environments by focusing on the theme of 'Loving Language'. This project aimed to address environmental inequalities and improve home learning environments for children at risk of delayed language development.

Bradford services	Dimensions of school readiness supported by each service		
	Child ready for school	School ready for the child	Families and communities ready for school
Better Start Imagine	✓		✓
Forest Schools Play	✓		✓
Talking Together			✓

Better Start Imagine

[Better Start Imagine](#) was a key project within the 'Loving Language' theme of Better Start Bradford and was part of the world-renowned [Dolly Parton Imagination Library](#). It was an enhanced book-gifting scheme which provided children with a book every month from birth to their fifth birthday.

It was complemented with weekly story and rhyme time sessions and other activities held in local community venues, to promote and model the importance of sharing books with young children.

Better Start Imagine aimed to:

- increase the number of books in children's homes
- improve parents' understanding of the importance of reading and book sharing
- improve parents' confidence and engagement in sharing books with their children
- improve levels of communication and language skills

- improve levels of school-readiness.

Wrap-around sessions, including Story Time, Rhyme Time, and Baby Club, were delivered for parents in community venues to help them get the best out of the books that were delivered.

Outcomes

Ethnicity data shows that those registered for book gifting are largely representative of the wider Better Start Bradford community. Of all parents of registered children, 44% are recorded as having a main spoken language other than English. Feedback from families about the story and rhyme time sessions indicated that they made a positive difference to their children's speech, language and social development. Providing story and rhyme time sessions in nurseries, community groups, in collaboration with other projects and events (e.g. Bradford Literature Festival), amplified the importance of sharing books with babies and young children.



Forest Schools Play

The [Forest Schools Play project](#) was commissioned by Better Start Bradford to address the environmental inequalities in the area. Fewer children living in the Better Start Bradford area were achieving a Good Level of Development at age five compared to average GLD scores in other areas of Bradford and England overall. Several barriers existed for families living in the Better Start Bradford area. They had access to fewer parks and green spaces, and these spaces were viewed negatively in terms of their quality and safety.

Forest Schools Play worked with nursery settings to increase families' confidence and skills in accessing the outdoors and using the natural environment through play. The project sought to support and develop children's wellbeing and development through a programme of two-hour sessions every week for nine weeks.

Working with early years settings in the Better Start Bradford area, [Get Out More](#) took three-year-olds out to local woodlands and green spaces to learn through active play, crafts, games and exploration. They worked with settings to improve their resources for outdoor play, including equipment and grounds development. They also delivered Forest School training to staff, volunteers and parents and held weekly outdoor play sessions that were fun and engaging for families with 0–3-year-olds in parks across the Better Start Bradford area.

The project aimed to:

1. Improve children's social and emotional development, including confidence, sharing, attention and co-operation.

2. Build language and communication skills through interactions between worker and child and among children.
3. Improve parents' perceptions of local green spaces and increase the likelihood that they would continue to take their children to play in outdoor natural spaces beyond the end of the project.
4. Increase frequency and quality of outdoor play opportunities within early years settings.

Outcomes

An implementation evaluation and ethnographic study was conducted by the Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub ([2023](#)). Schools and nurseries reported significant and clear changes in children's development, including improved confidence, social interactions, communication, physical skills (fine and gross motor skills) and greater self-regulation.

Practitioners reported a change in the attitude of parents. Some, who were very reluctant to join in at the start and did not want their children to go outside to do the sessions, were actively taking part by the end and wanted their children to do more of it.

Family play sessions showed parents how accessible these activities are — that they don't need to spend much money or travel far to enjoy meaningful family experiences that benefit their children. As a result of the project, 35 nurseries have improved resources for outdoor play, including all weather clothing, Wellington boots and replacing equipment with more natural, heuristic items. Some nurseries have created

outdoor Forest School-type play areas. In one school, a staff member trained to level 3 in Forest Schools now runs sessions three times a week with children of different ages. Get Out More now delivers Level 1 and 3 training within the Bradford district.

Talking Together

Talking Together was a locally developed intervention designed to improve the home learning environment for children aged two who are at risk of language development delay. The project has three main elements:

- 1. A Talking Together screening:**
a universal validated language assessment for all two-year-olds, completed as a home visit.
- 2. The Talking Together programme:**
a targeted six-week home-based intervention to those identified as at risk of weak or delayed language development and
- 3. The Talking Together programme:**
additional support identified after the six-week intervention, tailored to individual family need.

This has been complemented with Owlets, a friendly group for families with children 18 months to three years with focused support for children's language through play.

Talking Together aimed to improve children's vocabulary and language skills; help more children develop age-appropriate language skills; improve

parental sensitivity, engagement and verbal stimulation within early parent-child interactions; improve children's behaviour; increase parents' confidence in interacting with their children and link parents up with further appropriate services.

Outcomes

The results suggested that the intervention may have had a positive impact on the home learning environment, parent-child relationships, and children's emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Qualitative interviews showed that practitioners consistently took a strengths-based approach to developing families' skills. This involved identifying and building on examples of good practice in the home, ensuring that families felt seen and celebrated. Staff considered this approach vital to the acceptability and success of the project, because it fostered trust and dialogue.

Parents spoke of their positive relationship with practitioners, suggesting that this approach was successful in developing key therapeutic relationships that supported learning. This demonstrated not only the importance of the content of the project, but the value in having sensitive and skilled practitioners who work holistically with families.



Lambeth Early Action Partnership

Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP) developed an award aimed to support early years practitioners and teachers. The Evelina Award focused on improving home learning environments and supported early years practitioners to provide high quality outdoor learning for children.



	Dimensions of school readiness supported by each service		
	Child ready for school	School ready for the child	Families and communities ready for school
Lambeth Services			
Evelina Award	✓	✓	
Making it REAL			✓
Natural Thinkers	✓		✓

Evelina Award for Communication-Friendly Environments

The [Evelina Award for Communication Friendly Environments](#) was a programme developed by Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP), that aimed to support early years practitioners and teachers in nursery schools, maintained primary schools and community, voluntary and private settings to:

1. Identify speech, language, and communication needs in children; and
2. Create supportive environments for language development.

The programme used regular individual or small-group coaching to further develop practitioners' knowledge and confidence around supporting speech, language and communication. This included one-to-one support for carrying out WellComm assessments, with practitioners receiving

role-modelling of best practices and opportunities to practise adult-child interaction strategies. Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) was also used to help practitioners reflect on and improve their own practice.

Evelina Award outcome data was collected using the WellComm assessment, a 10-point scoresheet that assesses whether children's speech, language, and communication (SLC) development is appropriate for their age.

Outcomes

WellComm scores increased by an average of 0.8 points between the child's first and last assessment. Those who scored amber or red at their first assessment (i.e. those with the highest level of need) saw an increase of 1.5 points, while those who initially scored green experienced no change on average.

Service Managers and Speech and Language Therapists reflected that this offer was different to other programmes, which tend

to lack an "individual focus." They felt the one-to-one work not only allowed them to tailor both the focus and amount of training they offered to practitioners but also enabled them to build "relationships" with staff through "being there week in week out."

Settings were assessed to receive the awards. Following an initial period of training and support, settings were re-audited. If a consistent change in practitioner behaviour and the setting environment was evident, settings were awarded either a 'Foundation level' or 'Enhanced level' Evelina Award. Audits continued at regular intervals, and settings were required to demonstrate continued behaviours to stay at the same level.

"[Foundation training] gives all practitioners a sort of basic understanding of communication development, interactions and how those support development ... and then when things aren't going right, what to do next – what they can do in their setting, and then who they can refer on to" – Speech and Language Therapist

Survey and interview respondents both reported significant improvements in their knowledge of typical speech, language and communication development as a result of Evelina training, as well as their day-to-day interactions with children.

Making it REAL

The [Making it REAL](#) approach to support families included identifying children who would benefit from home visits, planning and delivering literacy events, and practitioners using the ORIM framework (Opportunities,

Recognition, Interaction and Modelling) in their day-to-day practice.

Making it REAL outcome data was collected using the Toddler Home Learning Environment (THLE) (for 0–3 year olds) and the Pre-school Home Learning Environment (PHLE) (for 3–5 year olds). The THLE and PHLE both measure the frequency with which parents carry out various learning activities with their child. Data was only collected for children who received home visits (at the first visit and the end of the fourth).

Outcomes

The majority (63% – 72%) of practitioners agreed that Making it REAL had improved their knowledge, confidence and practice around supporting parents to provide a high-quality home learning environment.

Making it REAL child outcome data was only available for those children who had received home visits. Home Learning Environment Index scores for 0–3-year-olds (a 57-point measure) increased by an average of 3.7 points between children's first and last home visit, though this was not statistically significant. Scores for 3–5-year-olds (a 49-point measure) increased by an average of 7 points, which was statistically significant.

Natural Thinkers

Children living in the LEAP area were less likely to have a private garden and good access to green space. LEAP delivered the [Natural Thinkers programme](#) which supported early years practitioners to provide high quality outdoor learning for children and offered local 'stay and play' sessions for families. The service aimed to improve children's wellbeing and their communication and language development.



There is a growing body of research which suggest that interacting with the natural environment can be particularly beneficial for language development ([Tickell, 2011](#) and [Prins et al., 2023](#)). Specifically, children may find outdoor natural environments more calming (than indoor environments) which encourages imaginative and creative play that results in better language and communication skills ([Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000](#)).

The programme worked with childcare settings and children's centres. It aimed to improve the outdoor environments available in these settings through training, support visits, development plans, network meetings and setting accreditation.

Outcomes

Children who participated in Natural Thinkers were assessed using validated measurement tools including the WellComm measure and Leuven scales ([LEAP, 2021/22](#); [LEAP, 2024](#)). These measures were selected for their good reliability and validity.

Children's emotional wellbeing and involvement in tasks was measured using the Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children. The scale assesses children on two dimensions:

- 1. Wellbeing:** research has shown wellbeing in children to be associated with how well they are developing emotionally. A state of wellbeing is linked to self-confidence and self-esteem for children.
- 2. Involvement:** this assesses the extent to which children are involved in, and motivated by, activities. Children who are highly involved are judged to be intrinsically motivated to carry on with activities. These children

experience satisfaction and participate enthusiastically.

Between children's first and final Natural Thinkers assessments their wellbeing scores increased by an average of 0.55 points. Over the same period, children's involvement scores increased by an average of 0.62 points. Children from non-English speaking households had higher wellbeing scores at the beginning and end of the programme compared to children who came from English-speaking households. Children with special educational needs (SEN) benefitted significantly from participating in the programme as the proportion of children with high wellbeing scores rose from 33% to 66% from first to final assessments.

The WellComm assessment is a measure of children's speech, language and communication attainment. Children who participated in Natural Thinkers saw an average increase in their WellComm scores of 0.8 points between their first and last assessment.

Outcomes for practitioners who received training in delivering Natural Thinkers were positive. 100% of practitioners rated the training positively while 84% felt highly confident or very confident in planning and organising Natural Thinkers activities and 72% to 92% of practitioners reported positive experiences of communication and language development (CLD) programmes. Practitioners noted huge benefit from Natural Thinkers, identifying that outdoor activities had helped children to become "more outgoing and speak more."

Feedback on training was collected from practitioners where they identified the long-term, in-context and personalised support as a key mechanism of impact. Practitioners

rated the support received and project resources positively. Setting Leads reported that the training and support improved the promotion of communication and language development, identifying speech, language and communication needs in children, and delivering targeted support.

"The activities/play stations are always very nicely laid out. I like the mix between activities which are there every week and 'feature' activities that change each week. This gives a sense of consistency." — Natural Thinkers participant

Practitioners positively reported that their own increased knowledge and confidence in Natural Thinkers practices had a positive impact on children and families. Home learning environments were also considered to have improved for children who participated in Natural Thinkers.

Parents who participated in Natural Thinkers Stay and Plays rated the activities highly and reported improvements in their development (100% of 60 respondents who completed feedback). Families' average recommendation score for the service was 9.8 out of 10. ([LEAP, 2021/22](#); [LEAP, 2022/23](#)).

"All activities were child centred, and I found the practitioner allowed opportunities for my son to explore a variety of concepts at his own pace and showed excellent early years practice. As a boy, I think the physical nature of Natural Thinkers also helps as we have seen an increase in fine/gross motor skills." — Natural Thinkers Stay and Play participant

"It's a highlight of our week as we live in a flat with no outside space and she has become confident exploring this session as if it were her own garden." — Natural Thinkers Stay and Play participant

Informal observations by practitioners suggested that the intervention led to positive changes in both parental and child behaviour, with parents responding well to practitioner support and quickly learning how to support their children's learning.

Small Steps Big Changes

Small Steps Big Changes in Nottingham supported a book gifting scheme and a drop-in toy project as a front door for families to access other services. Home visiting services were made available from pregnancy until a child's fourth birthday.



Nottingham services	Dimensions of school readiness supported by each service		
	Child ready for school	School ready for the child	Families and communities ready for school
Dolly Parton's Imagination Library	✓		✓
Room to Play	✓		✓
Small Steps at Home			✓

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)

is a book gifting scheme that posts free English language, age-appropriate books (selected each year by a panel of early childhood literacy experts) to children's homes. Children registered with the scheme receive one book a month from birth until their fifth birthday. The aim of the scheme, under Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC), was to support the development of children's communication and language skills, and a deep love of reading. SSBC funded DPIL in four wards, so all children living in Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green and Arboretum, and St Ann's were entitled to receive free books.

Outcomes

The first annual report from the evaluation of Small Steps Big Changes ([Lushey et al., 2019](#)) explored the impact of DPIL registration on the behaviour of families and the reading skills of children who received books. The evaluation had several data collection

elements. A Reading Routine Questionnaire was used to compare the reading routines of DPIL participants and non-participants. It explored the number of non-DPIL books in the home, frequency of sharing books with children, frequency of songs and rhymes being shared with children and frequency of visits to the library. 269 questionnaires were completed by parents (81 DPIL participants, 188 non-DPIL participants).

A preschool language assessment was completed with 15 children who were participants of the DPIL. From this sample, 13 children took part in dialogic reading observations to explore parent and child reading behaviours. Outcomes for DPIL participants and non-participants were compared. Children who participated were read to for longer and participation in the DPIL makes it more likely that parents will talk about what is happening in the story.

The evaluation found a statistically significant association between parents asking questions to see if children understood the story and participation in the DPIL. Additionally, DPIL participants reported

visiting their local libraries more often than non-DPIL registered participants (21% visit once or twice a week versus 9% who are not registered). This was a statistically significant finding.

Further evidence was published in the final report from the evaluation of Small Steps Big Changes ([Lushey et al., 2023](#)) on the immediate and longer term impacts of participation in DPIL on communication and literacy outcomes. Positive associations were found between the length of time that families were registered with DPIL and how likely they were to report interacting with their children during shared storybook reading, how likely they were to read with their children daily, and how long they were likely to read with their children for. This indicated that there were positive changes in behaviour for parents and children in relation to books and early literacy activities. The report goes into more detail on the effects of DPIL-participation and the extent to which these effects were identified at age 12 months and 24 months (ASQ communication outcomes and on children's EYFS scores). We recommend reading the [full report](#) for a comprehensive analysis.

Room to Play

The Toy Library's [Room to Play](#) project aimed to engage children and parents in Bulwell, Nottingham, who found it difficult to access services. The Room to Play project opened in 2022, as a 'drop-in' style provision which sought to offer an alternative way of engaging with more traditional services for families who were considered underrepresented¹.

Building on the success of the established Toy Library Family Mentor service, Room to Play

acted as a 'front door' for families to access other family health care services. The project's logic model outlined the theory that, through attending Room to Play, engaging with groups and Family Mentors, families would build trusting relationships with practitioners which would lead to their engagement with wider services.

The project, run by Family Mentors, aimed to provide a safe space for children and parents which offered group activities such as singing and Story and Rhyme Time as well as free play sessions. Adults were encouraged to treat the room as a mobile phone-free area to allow an exclusive focus on children's development ([Nottingham Post, 2022](#)).

Outcomes

A mixed-methods [evaluation was conducted in 2024](#) with two phases to evaluate the impact of the service for children and families who attended. The first phase saw a paper survey distributed to all parents of children who attended the Room to Play service throughout March 2024. The survey asked about the benefits of the Room to Play service (for them and their children), additional services they attend, advice received from Family Mentors, and some demographic information. 94 responses were collected.

The second phase of the evaluation consisted of 10 semi-structured interviews with parents who were considered underrepresented. The interviews focused on their experience of attending the Room to Play service. All 10 participants described Room to Play as an accessible service.

¹ The definition of who was underrepresented in Bulwell was determined based on the population level data. Bulwell is one of the most deprived regions in England; 29.5% of children under 16 years live in low-income families in Nottingham, compared to 17.0% in England.



"There's always something going on, so even if you just need to drop in here, there's always gonna be someone there" — Parent

All participants considered Room to Play as beneficial for their child's development, and their own knowledge of how to support their child's development. They described new ideas they got from completing the range of guided and unguided play activities in the sessions. Parents also identified socialisation with other babies and children as a benefit of the service:

"Her walking, crawling, everything, she comes here ... she's watching all the kids running around and she's like, I want to do that and she just got up and done it... And she's grown so much more confident, to the point where she's not physically like that, attached to me, I can go out and leave her knowing she'll be okay." — Parent

"He benefit too, many things from here as like I said he like play with kids, other kids. He want to see other kids, he want to talk." — Parent

Some parents identified that the environment in Room to Play sessions actively promoted skills their children needed to be school ready. Their children's sense of independence and curiosity about the world were increased, therefore making the transition to nursery school easier:

"She gets to play with similar age groups while also being around babies as well. She gets to learn how to be careful and learn how to be present and just to explore other toys or sensory activities and, even though it's not told there are rules, and she gets to abide by them and experience that as well." — Parent

"We've only been to the like, baby groups, for like just babies, I've seen, as they get to start walking, they do like, a little graduation thing for them, almost like, oh, well done, you can't come to babies anymore. You've got to graduate to the next stage and I think that's really nice to show her that there's a transition." — Parent

Small Steps at Home

Small Steps at Home was a home visiting² programme delivered by Family Mentors, which started at 32 weeks of pregnancy until the child's fourth birthday. The programme offered advice, information and activities to families at home. Each visit provided tailored content relevant for the child's age. The overall aim of Small Steps at Home was to improve child development outcomes such as communication and language skills, and social and emotional development. Several of the activities centred on improving the home learning environment.

² Delivered online or via telephone during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Outcomes

Two publications from the evaluation of Small Steps Big Changes ([Lushey et al., 2019](#) and [2023](#)) explored the implementation and impact of the Small Steps at Home programme. Family Mentors and parents both reported that participating in the programme had led to positive developments in children's confidence, social skills and language and communication skills. Some parents also reported feeling more confident to read with their children as a result of the Small Steps at Home sessions:

"I know how to read a book, but it has [taught] me a different way how to read it to a child" — Parent

"It has helped me as a parent just to feel a bit more confident with reading a story and just to make it a bit more exciting as well..." — Parent

Parents spoke about the improvements they witnessed in their child's speech as well as their own communication skills, which resulted in their child's speech improving:

"I think it is really important to build their imagination and their sense of storytelling and different things, I think reading and communication is a different skill to have an imagination as a narrative, and I think that understanding fairy tales and folklore... [is]... important...culturally" — Parent

Outside of the sessions, parents continued to utilise their new skills and incorporate rhyming and singing into everyday routines:

"Small things like if I say to him in the morning 'oh let's go brush your teeth' and I start singing the song 'this is the way we brush our teeth' and he's going to start brushing..." — Parent

Story and Rhyme Time were found to have helped to strengthen the bond between parent and child as parents emphasised how reading with their child had brought them closer together, enhancing their connection, developing the relationship they have and helping the child to develop social and emotional skills:

"...if it's part of their routine, it does calm them down a little bit if they can sit down and read, I think at home..." — Parent

"Especially for her emotional development, she is happy when we can sing together... she find it relaxing, soothing, when we sing the song... after attending the session I did sing songs, every day we will sing a song..." — Parent

Other positive outcomes around children's sleep routines, healthy eating and toilet training were identified in the 2019 and 2023 evaluations.

A Better Start Southend

A Better Start Southend developed speech and language courses, resources for families to enjoy reading together and music making for children and families, providing resources for parents to use at home.

Southend services	Dimensions of school readiness supported by each service		
	Child ready for school	School ready for the child	Families and communities ready for school
Let's Talk	✓		✓
Storysacks	✓		
Talking Transitions	✓	✓	✓
Umbilical Chords	✓		✓

Let's Talk

Let's Talk offered families in A Better Start Southend (ABSS) wards a suite of courses to support language and communication development in children aged 0 to 4 years old. The service aimed to improve children's speech, language and communication skills, prevent transient speech and language delay, and improve school readiness. Providing a universal preventative speech and language pathway and offer was predicted to reduce the demand for more intensive statutory speech and language services.

Outcomes

Reductions in demand were seen in Speech, Language and Communication clinics covering ABSS areas compared to non-ABSS areas. This demonstrated that Let's Talk reduced the demand for more intensive clinical speech and language services.

Parents consistently reported that they had observed improvements in their child's speech and language:

"...he literally only spoke a couple of words, and by the end of the third week he was asking "where is it?" or "who is it?" So, he started putting two words together, and then by the end of the first session he put three words together, so he improved massively just by the activities and the videos that [practitioner] had sent me" — Parent

Following participation in the service, 75% reported enhanced knowledge of how to effectively communicate with their children. The majority of participants, 90%, agreed or strongly agreed that their understanding of the importance of gaining their child's attention before speaking had increased. Finally, 100% of respondents reported greater confidence in communicating with their child:

"It helps you as a parent to rethink how you approach speaking with your child and what could work better" — Parent

Storysacks

[Storysacks](#) provided resources for parents to use with their children aged 0 to 4 years. It aimed to promote and facilitate an enjoyment of reading as well as improve children's communication and language skills (amongst other skills).

Outcomes

Respondents identified the enjoyment their children derived from Storysacks as key motivations for engaging with the service. They also felt that Storysacks supported the development of their child's speech, language and communication skills, and appreciated the opportunity to link reading with hands-on activities and exploration of the local area:

"As a teacher, I can identify so many positive learning advantages of using the Storysacks to encourage a child's social, emotional, physical, intellectual developments. The possibilities are endless, and I look forward to borrowing another Storysack soon" — Parent

Talking Transitions

The [Talking Transitions service](#) aimed to improve how children (aged 3–4 years old) and their families in Southend experience the move from early years settings to primary school.

The project focused on four areas:

- Strengthening collaboration between early years providers and primary schools.
- Enhancing children's speech, language, and communication (SLC) through targeted

summer activities.

- Supporting children's emotional readiness for school.
- Increasing adults' understanding of their role in developing young children's SLC skills.

The project created local partnerships between schools and early years settings to share expertise, coordinate transition activities, and provide continuity of support. The model worked with Southend's Family Centres to support families' engagement over the summer holidays through tailored activities such as Stay and Play sessions, workshops, home-learning resources (like Chatter Challenge Bags), and community-based events.

While the overall aim of the Talking Transitions service was to improve families' and children's experiences of transitioning to primary school, it was also a demonstration of communities being ready for schools. One of the service's objectives was 'Being Together: To bring a community focus and work with parents'.

Outcomes

The resources provided through Talking Transitions were highly valued, with most respondents (29 of 38 practitioners) reporting that the Chatter Challenge Bags supported children's social and emotional development while even more (33 out of 38 practitioners) reporting that the Chatter Challenge Bags helped improve children's communication and language skills.

Qualitative feedback also highlighted the role of the activities in supporting emotional readiness for school and communication skills. Families valued the resources for prompting meaningful conversations, easing children's anxieties, and encouraging confidence through playful, structured engagement:

"My daughter is naturally quite anxious, and I think the book and story helped her feel school was a friendly place and some of the discussion points helped go through some things she may have worried about without it feeling like I was forcing a discussion'. Often if I try to get her to talk about her feelings she just shuts down and doesn't want to talk, she was more willing this way" — Parent

"My son loved the Chatter Bag, and it gave a wonderful opportunity for lots of talking over the summer. The whole family enjoyed it" — Parent

"...The transition events helped him to understand he would be starting somewhere new and needing to make new friends. I think that's another form of social skills, feeling confident that you can go somewhere new and make new friends. I think the transition events really helped him with his confidence..." — Parent

Umbilical Chords

The [Umbilical Chords service](#) was available for children (0–2-years old) and their families, living in A Better Start Southend (ABSS) wards. The service offered a six-week early years music group for children and their parents. Activities included singing songs and making music together to support the development of children's communication skills, musical development, and socialisation.

The project aimed to enable parents to

continue communication and language development within the home by providing parents with a musical resource to use at home.

Umbilical Chords sessions:

- encouraged communication and interaction between parents and children
- encouraged exploration between parent and child and facilitator and child through the use of props and musical instruments
- provided the opportunity for parent and child to spend quality time together and supporting the relationship between parent and child, assisting them to sing with each other and listen to one another.

Outcomes

Parents who attended Umbilical Chords sessions reported improvements in their children's developmental skills. These included observed improvements in social and emotional regulation such as being soothed and calmed by singing, and advancements in gross motor skills through playing instruments.

"Nursery rhymes now prevent her from crying. She starts to get upset; I sing nursery rhymes to her. It has been emotional connecting for me and [child's name] massively..." — Parent

"We have the radio on nearly every day, and he will use his instruments, and he'll sort of tap to a beat... He has got good motor skills from picking up instruments, and he just gets an enjoyment out of it as well..." — Parent

Parents commented on how the six-week course enabled them to participate in high quality activities, with smaller group sizes allowing for more person-centred facilitation from staff members. Some parents reported that they further supported their child's musical activities in the home by purchasing additional instruments or singing more with their children. Parents also reported increases in their knowledge of the importance of singing to and with their child and confidence in doing so:

"I've taken a lot from the sessions. And I've... been able to use a lot of that at home. And you know, confidence with nursery rhymes, singing, and how it has helped my daughter in her development also. And her skills. Connecting with the music and nursery rhymes....I didn't know until the sessions how important music and rhymes and instruments were in my children's development" — Parent

"...he literally only spoke a couple of words, and by the end of the third week he was asking "where is it?" or "who is it?" So, he started putting two words together, and then by the end of the first session he put three words together, so he improved massively just by the activities and the videos that [practitioner] had sent me" — Parent



Summary of key learning

This section summarises the learning from the ABS partnerships around what worked to enable school readiness along the three dimensions of the UNICEF framework.

What worked to enable children to be ready for school?

- Using the natural, outdoor environment was calming for children and helped their communication, social, emotional and physical development. Children expanded their vocabulary and built fine and gross motor skills (for example, through climbing, running and handling seeds). The natural world fed children's curiosity and was a satisfying place to be.
- Engaging, stimulating, free and fun indoor environments that were visible in the community helped children to enjoy play-based activities and build their own social networks with their peers as they learnt to play together developing vital social and emotional skills (such as turn taking).
- Having access to free resources, even if just on loan, (such as books, challenge cards and other props) supported children's communication, social and emotional development. Such resources helped children to develop vocabulary to name emotions for example, thereby helping both their self-expression and an understanding of their feelings.
- Balancing activity and engagement between structured activity and unstructured activities (free play) meant that sessions were flexible and accommodated differing attention spans and preferences.
- Incorporating creative activities such as music through songs and nursery rhymes helped children's emotional development as they used it to regulate their emotions and soothe themselves as well as it being a lot of fun when combined with actions.

- Linking reading and nursery rhymes with enjoyable, engaging activities connected to the local area helped to reinforce children's vocabulary and knowledge and can bring a story or rhyme 'to life' if similar things are seen in the child's neighbourhood.

What worked to enable schools to be ready for children?

- More and better communication and collaboration between early years practitioners and teachers in nursery and primary schools, especially in the area of speech, language and communication and SLC assessment information on individual children.
- Joint training for the workforce, which worked with very young children, across early years settings and schools (including childminders, day nurseries and pre-schools), which increased the knowledge, skills, confidence and practice of all concerned.
- Long-term, in-context and personalised support for early years practitioners and teachers which helped everyone to understand the community that their setting served.
- Creating locally-based peer networks that met regularly to share experiences, learning and resources.
- Using the summer before the child starts school to bridge the gap between finishing in an early years setting and starting school by the provision of resources for the children and getting to know them before they arrive at the classroom in the autumn.

What worked to enable families and communities to be ready for school?

- Practitioners created trusted, non-judgmental relationships with parents, working holistically with families.
- Practitioners took a strengths-based approach to developing families' knowledge and skills, building on existing good practice, working in small groups to provide more personalised facilitation.
- Improving the home learning environment by increasing parents' knowledge of child development, incorporating home visits, modelling behaviour towards the child to help them develop, providing resources and showing how to utilise outdoor spaces.
- Having flexibility in programmes and tailoring support to individual children's needs.
- Building parents' confidence in helping their children develop, for example by incorporating singing, talking and counting into everyday activities.
- Providing resources (such as books, musical instruments, posters, activity sheets) to families to use, especially in between group sessions and over the summer.
- Utilising existing community-based settings where early years and school staff provided input to sessions for parents (for example Family Hubs).
- Providing culturally and linguistically appropriate resources to diverse families that are in the child's first language.

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A Better Start

A Better Start was a ten-year, £215 million programme supporting communities to give their babies and young children the best start in life. It was funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest community funder in the UK.

These Insight Reports synthesise evidence generated by the five partnerships to inform future policy, practice, and systems change.



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