



Insights from Small Steps Big Changes:

# Improving Early Years Speech, Language and Communication

# About Small Steps Big Changes

**Small Steps Big Changes** (SSBC) is one of five A Better Start Partnerships. The **A Better Start Programme** is a ten-year (2015-2025), £215 million programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) and takes a test-and-learn approach to strengthening support and services for families, so that children can have the best start in life.

SSBC, hosted by Nottingham CityCare Partnership, operates in Nottingham City, with four ethnically diverse city wards as its target areas. Working with parents, SSBC has developed and delivered a programme of support and activities for families with children up to age four to promote good early childhood development.

The key child outcome areas of the SSBC programme are diet and nutrition, social and emotional development, and speech, language and communication. In addition, SSBC focuses on systems change and aims to improve the ways that local health, public services and the voluntary and community sector work together with families to achieve improved child outcomes.

The work of the SSBC programme is grounded in scientific evidence and research, with the aim of furthering the evidence base for effective early childhood interventions. In line with the programme's **test-and learn approach**, SSBC benefits from nine years of evidence and evaluation. As SSBC nears the end of its ten-year programme, the focus is on legacy building and telling the SSBC story with the goal of disseminating the learning from the approaches and principles that have contributed to the programme's success and inspiring system change.



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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1. Why Early Years Speech, Language and Communication Matters

Many children experience delays in their speech, language and communication (SLC) development and start school without the skills necessary for learning. SLC challenges impact on all aspects of a child's and their families' lives, with children more likely to have worse educational attainment, more mental health problems, less secure employment and earnings in adult life<sup>1</sup> and more offending.<sup>2</sup>

The scale of the problem has been exacerbated due to the Covid pandemic. The charity Speech and Language UK has reported a 26% increase from 2021 to 2023 in children with speech and language challenges at school. In 2023, 1 in 5 primary and secondary school-aged children were behind with talking and/or understanding words, equalling a total of 1.9 million children.<sup>3</sup>

Language development is closely linked to social inequalities, with up to 50% of children in certain disadvantaged areas beginning school without the language skills necessary for learning. Income-related language gaps are already present by 18 months and become entrenched by the age of three,<sup>4</sup> with gaps increasing as children grow older.<sup>5</sup>

Data from the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) data, collected at the end of children's first year of primary school when children generally are five or soon to turn five years of age, reveal significant inequalities in communication, language and literacy areas of learning. Data from the 2022/23 school year<sup>6</sup> show inequalities in this area of learning based on a range of sociodemographic characteristics, 75.6% of girls but only 62.3% of boys reaching the expected level of development.

Alongside ethnic inequalities, first language also correlates with differences in attainment. Whereas 71% of children identified with English as their first language reach the expected language standard, this is 63.4% for children identified as speaking a language other than English as their first language. Moreover, more than 1 in 16 children (6.2%) of all children are identified with SLCNs as their primary type of Special Education Need (SEN). Only 22.5% of these children with identified SLCNs reached a Good Level of Development at the end of reception year, compared to 67.2% of all children.

Investing in childhood development is crucial to improving SLC skills, especially for underserved children who stand to benefit most from support. However, funding across England for speech and language therapy is highly unequal. In the 2018/19 financial year, the top 25% of areas spent at least £16.35 per child on speech and language therapy, while the bottom 25% of areas spent 58p or less. The lowest CCG spend was in the Midlands and East NHS region, with local authority spend also being the lowest in the East Midlands.<sup>7</sup>

To change SLC outcomes in children, prevention and early intervention need to be prioritised. Support in early childhood will help babies and young children to build strong SLC foundations that will enable them to reach their fullest potential. This is projected to generate long-term savings by reducing the need for other services in the future.<sup>8,9</sup> Particularly, adequately supporting pre-school language skills could boost the economy by £1.2bn.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.2. Early Year Speech, Language and Communication in Nottingham

Nottingham, a city characterised by significant ethnic diversity and high levels of poverty, faces challenges in early years SLC. In 2019, Nottingham ranked the 11th most deprived district in England and more than 1 in 4 of Nottingham children were affected by income deprivation.<sup>11</sup> The 2011 and 2021 Census show that Nottingham is becoming increasingly diverse in its ethnic profile. According to the 2021 data, 65.9% of people in Nottingham identified as White and 34.1% identified with an ethnic minority background.<sup>12</sup> Many children are raised in multilingual environments, and some families have limited or no proficiency in English. For instance, 7.8 % of households in Nottingham City have no members who speak English as a main language.

Early Years Foundation Stage data shows that Nottingham has a lower percentage of children attaining the expected level of development in communication, language and literacy (64.1%) compared to England (68.8%).<sup>6</sup> Early years

speech, language and communication needs (SLCNs) are high in Nottingham. In ten of the twenty Nottingham city wards the proportion of children aged zero to four estimated to have some level of SLCNs is more than half.<sup>14</sup>

In Nottingham, efforts have been underway to develop a comprehensive Best Start Strategy alongside an Early Help Strategy that includes the work of Family hubs, and commissioners across Health and the Local Authority are working on the joint commissioning of a SLC pathway, aligning with the local ambition to improve outcomes for young children. Projects supporting this strategy have included collaborative work funded by the Department for Education's Early Outcomes Fund, with Nottingham City Council Children's Services working in partnership with Leicester and Derby City Councils and Better Communication CIC. Outputs of this project include a needs analysis in relation to Early Years SLC in Nottingham.<sup>14</sup> In 2019, Nottingham also participated in the Local Government Association's Early Years Peer Challenge programme, which focused on SLC. This initiative offered valuable insights for the creation of a SLC strategy.<sup>15</sup>



### 1.3 Early Years Speech, Language and Communication as a SSBC programme priority

SSBC, funded through The National Lottery Community Fund's 'A Better Start' programme, supports the improvement of developmental outcomes in children up to age four in Nottingham, with SLC as one of its main outcome areas. The ten-year SSBC programme (2015—2025) has meant a considerable investment (£45M) in the promotion of good early childhood development in Nottingham.

The SSBC programme has a primary focus on four Nottingham wards: Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green & Arboretum and St Ann's. These wards have clusters of high-poverty neighbourhoods.<sup>16</sup> Ward profiles show that these wards differ in their ethnicity profiles.<sup>17</sup> Aspley and Bulwell have a majority of White British residents in the area. Hyson Green and Arboretum and St Ann's are more ethnically diverse, with around half and less than half of their populations identifying as White British. Many children in these wards are raised in multilingual environments, with some families having limited or no proficiency in English.

While the SSBC programme sits in areas of deprivation and significant levels of need, this report highlights the local strengths and commitments to change, involving local parents, families, communities, healthcare, as well as statutory and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations.

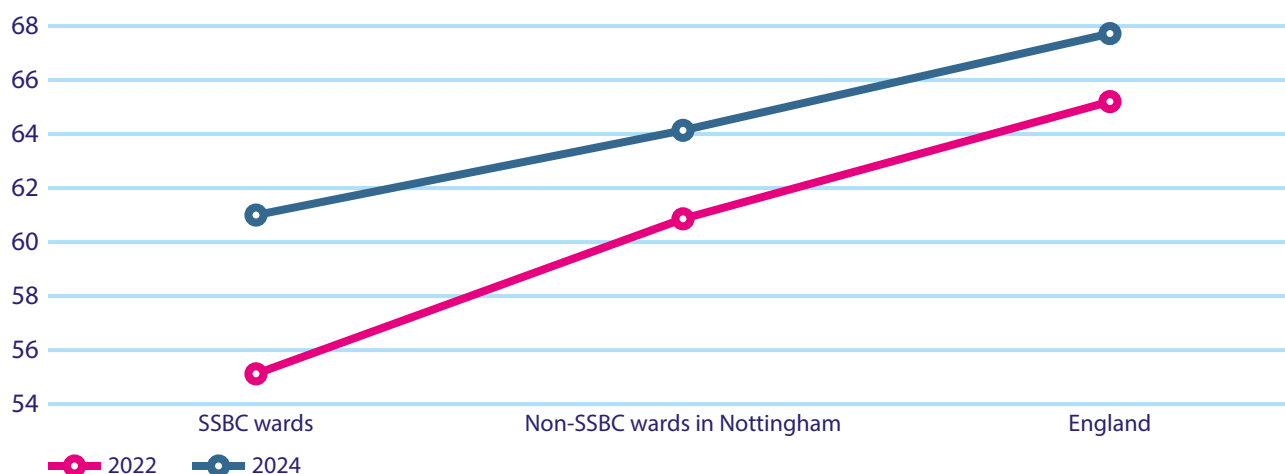
### 1.4 Indications of Progress in Early Years Foundation Stage Data

Delivery of SSBC programme elements began in 2015, supporting families with children up to age 4. The programme started in a context of persistent inequalities in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile results. Attainment of a Good Level of Development (GLD) in SSBC target wards (55.1%) was lower than the rest of Nottingham city (58.4%), which itself lagged behind national averages (63.1%).

Due to Covid, EYFS 2020 and 2022 datasets are unavailable. Moreover, due to changes in the EYFS profile, data from 2023 is not comparable to earlier datasets. Over its ten years, the programme has developed in response to local needs, offering a more expansive programme service offer in the latter years compared to its early stages.

Looking at data since the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile reforms in 2022, as illustrated in Figure 1, we see that the SSBC target wards in the city saw the largest increase in the percentage of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD), rising from 55.2% in 2022 to 61% in 2024 (+5.8 pp). Meanwhile, other areas of the city still had some access to programme elements and showed a greater increase than the national trend, improving from 60.8% to 64.2% (+3.4 pp), compared to the national increase from 65.2% to 67.7% (+2.5 pp). The faster progress in target wards highlights significant local gains, likely driven by full access to the SSBC programme in these areas.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of children reaching a Good Level of Development

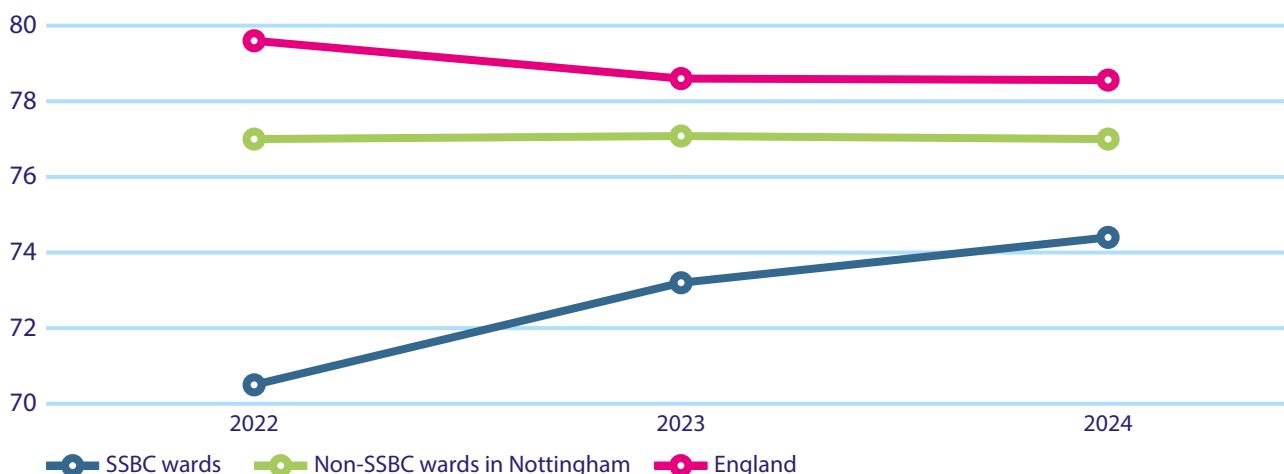


SSBC target wards have seen consistent yearly improvements in attainment from 2022 to 2024 in both literacy as well as communication and language. The improvements in these two prime areas of learning are illustrated in Figure 2 and 3.

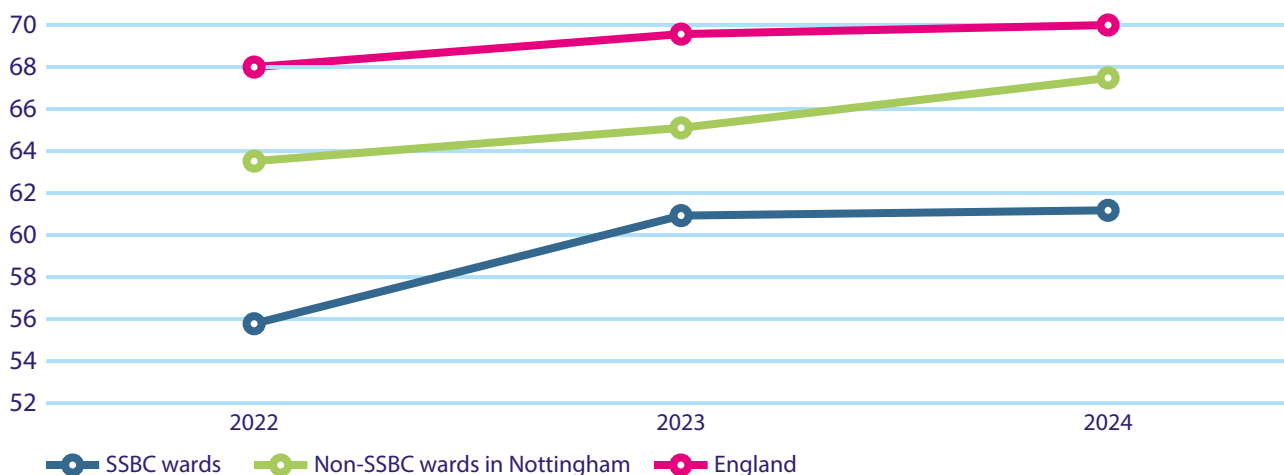
- Communication and language attainment in SSBC wards rose from 70.5% in 2022 to 74.4% in 2024 (+3.8 pp), whereas other city areas remained stable at 77.1% and nationally there was a minor decrease from 79.5% to 79.3% (-0.2%).
- Literacy attainment in SSBC wards rose from 55.9% in 2022 to 61.3% in 2024 (+5.4 pp), whereas other city areas rose from 63.7% to 67.7% (+3.9%) and England saw an increase from 68% to 70% (+2pp).

These findings highlight the emerging positive trends in early years development following the implementation of the SSBC programme's improvement initiatives. After ten years of test and learn, Early Years Foundation Stage Data suggest progress, in Good Level of Development in general, as well as outcome areas related to SLC, narrowing the gap for SSBC wards with other wards in Nottingham and England. This underscores the continued need for multiple, both universal and targeted interventions to effectively support SLC across diverse communities before primary school age, starting from birth.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of children reaching the expected level in communication and language



**Figure 3.** Percentage of children reaching the expected level in literacy



## 1.5 Outline of the Report

As a test-and-learn programme, SSBC has undertaken a range of projects aimed at supporting children and their families to improve early communication at home and in their local communities. The current report consolidates the key learning across the tapestry of SLC initiatives within the SSBC programme.

The chapters in this report discuss early years SLC in relation to six crosscutting themes and consists of the following chapters coproduction (Chapter 2), place-based partnership working (Chapter 3), the home learning environment (Chapter 4), upskilling and resourcing the early years workforce (Chapter 5) and systems change (Chapter 6), sharing key learning from a range of projects across the lifetime of the SSBC programme.

# 2 Coproduction

## 2.1 Coproduction as SSBC's Way of Working

The A Better Start Programme was built on The National Lottery Community Fund's (TNLCF) principle of 'putting people in the lead.' Co-production is at the core of SSBC's approach to develop, test and embed ways to improve children's outcomes. This is reflected in SSBC's vision **'Children at the heart, parents leading the way, supported and guided by experts.'** SSBC has explored ways of growing and sustaining parent voice, leadership and support within and beyond the organisation. Co-production is the approach used by SSBC to incorporate the voices of the community into the organisation. Co-production is a way of working that involves people who use the services in equal partnership and engages a group of people at the earliest stages of service design, development and evaluation. SSBC's cross-programme learning on coproduction is detailed in a previous Insights from SSBC series report, available on the SSBC website alongside the recording of a shared learning webinar *Getting Started with Meaningful Coproduction*.

Local parents have played an important role in shaping the SLC offer within the SSBC programme. Section 2.2 shares the learning from an award-winning coproduced service of the SSBC programme, namely the Family Mentor Service and its impact on supporting SLC outcomes. Then, Section 2.3 discusses the additional service offer of one of the Family Mentor service providers to meet local needs by means of classes for parents who speak limited or no English.

Next, section 2.4 reviews the 2020 SSBC parent consultation, an engagement activity designed at the time to review and inform priority setting for the remainder of the SSBC programme. The findings of this consultation informed the commissioning of SLC services. Two of these services are discussed in Sections 2.6 and 2.7.

Section 2.8 gives another example of SSBC's engagement activity, namely the fathers consultation, followed by Section 2.9 on a resource dedicated to fathers which was produced in response to this consultation.





## 2.2 Family Mentor Service

### Introduction

When consulted at the beginning stages of the SSBC programme, local parents requested ongoing emotional support, reassurance and expertise around parenting in the form of a non-judgmental, peer-led, home visiting service. In 2015, SSBC launched the Family Mentor Service. The delivery model, which was co-designed with parents, is unique to Nottingham. The Family Mentors are a paid peer workforce of local people with experiences of parenting. They receive on-the-job training and are employed by local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations.

Family Mentors deliver the Small Steps at Home (SS@H) manualised programme of child development and preventative health support to parents in SSBC wards through scheduled home visits, in a supportive and empathetic manner, as well as activity groups in community locations. Through service delivery and evaluation, the FM Service benefits from nine years of test-and-learn.

### Impacts of the Family Mentor Service

The Family Mentor service aims to offer universal access to its service provision. Family Mentor Service providers have attracted a diverse workforce that resembles the characteristics of the families they serve.<sup>19</sup> Family Mentors speak at least 17 different languages. Matched with families with similar cultural backgrounds, multilingual FMs can deliver SS@H in their own home language.

The diverse workforce contributes to making the Family Mentor Service an accessible service for families. At the end of the first quarter in the 2023/24 financial year, 991 children were signed up for the Family Mentor Service, which means that 41% of eligible families living in the four Small Steps Big Changes' wards engaged with the service. 73% of children were living in the 10% most deprived Local Super Output Areas at time of sign-up. Greater percentages of eligible Asian/Asian British and Black/African/Caribbean/Black British children benefitted from the service (44.2% and 49.2% respectively compared to 39.8% White British).

By mid-August 2024, Family Mentors had delivered Small Steps at Home or community groups to 6204 individual children, totalling 139,158 interactions.

External evaluations conducted by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) have evidenced positive impacts of the Family Mentor Service on children, families and the Family Mentor workforce.<sup>20</sup> As for its impact on children's SLC development, evaluations have provided both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

- Children from SSBC wards who participated in the Small Steps at Home programme for more than 18 months had the highest mean scores both for the overall 24-Month Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) scores, and four out of the five ASQ domains, namely communication, gross motor, fine motor and personal-social scores.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, there was a strong, positive association between the number of Small Steps at Home visits and 12-month communication scores. That means, an increase in the visits was linked to an increase in the 12-month communication scores.<sup>22</sup>
- Moreover, Family Mentors noted perceived developments in children's confidence, language and communication, and improved English for children whose parents first language is not English.

Non-English-speaking families in Nottingham City East Primary Care Network have also identified Family Mentors (FMs) as one of the services most easy to access.<sup>23</sup> As an accessible service, FMs are well-placed to offer timely and appropriate referrals into other services. For example, Family Mentors were the largest source of appropriate referrals to the SSBC commissioned Early Intervention Speech and Language services delivered by Nottinghamshire Healthcare Trust in 2022/23.

## Sustainability of the Family Mentor Service

The FM Service has recently successfully bid for funding through the Health Inequalities and Innovation Fund, which is made possible by the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care Board. The Health Inequalities and Innovation Fund provides resources to local projects aimed at reducing health inequalities by finding new ways of working. In line with these funding aims, the FM Service is now offered as a targeted-selective intervention across Nottingham city for families identified in collaboration with Midwifery, Children's Public Health 0-19 Nursing Service and other health practitioners and focused on the earliest stage of a baby's life from birth to twelve months.



## 2.3 English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

### Introduction

Framework Housing Association, one of the Family Mentor Service providers offers a programme consisting of two English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses delivered in collaboration with the local charity Epic Partners. This offer was developed to meet the needs of local families with children under the age of four in SSBC wards who speak limited or no English. The programme provides ESOL support in community settings to increase parents' confidence in speaking and understanding English. This would help them both with interactions with their Family Mentor and in their general everyday life.

There is a beginner course Stepping Stones and a follow-up course Small Steps for Your English, which both focus on key language learning to support families to engage with the Family Mentor Service and other early years services. The programme delivers functional language skills, in combination with health and parenting information, and is designed as a structured parent and child stay and play group. Topics covered by the ESOL programme include child development stages and terminology, home safety, access to services, being out and about in the community and general family life. While Stepping Stones requires delivery by someone with training in teaching English to adults, Small Steps for Your English is delivered by means of a standardised resource which can be delivered by Family Mentors.

### Impacts of ESOL courses

At the start of the Small Steps for Your English programme, participants predominantly came through referrals by Family Mentors. After distribution of a flyer and more word-of-mouth promotion, more people started to sign up for the courses directly.

Staff report that participants gain confidence in speaking English both within and outside of their classes, making them less reliant on others in their daily life. Some of the attendees progressed to attending ESOL courses at colleges or moved into paid employment. Through promotion of the SSBC service offer, participants also joined early years community groups which they had not attended before.

### Key Learning from ESOL courses

The diverse language backgrounds and varying proficiencies in written and spoken English of participants can create challenges in balancing course levels. To address this, staff suggested a middle group in between the current two levels as a potential improvement to the ESOL offer.

Staff estimate that attendance averages around 70%, with main barriers including children's illness and appointment conflicts. Holiday periods can also see lower attendance, either due to participants travelling themselves or accommodating visitors. Depending on the backgrounds of participants in a cohort, it is recommended that ESOL programmes consider cultural and religious dates when scheduling classes, as observances like Eid have previously affected attendance.

To reduce childcare barriers for attending an ESOL course, parents can bring children under four and their older siblings. Initially, parents supervised their own children, but as the programme continued, Family Mentor Service volunteers and Family Mentors began providing activities to engage the children and support their development. The diverse Family Mentor team has also helped participants by checking participants' understanding of class content in their native language.

## 2.4 Parent Consultation

### Introduction

In early 2020, SSBC carried out a consultation with parents who had babies and children under four years old to ask them about some specific aspects of child development including SLC.<sup>24</sup> As part of this consultation, 77 parents filled out a general survey which covered SLC.

### Findings of the Parent Consultation

When asked why children's speech and language is delayed, parents felt that the lack of parent-child interaction was the biggest reason. The second most frequent reason selected by parents was that they lacked support and knowledge on how to assist their child's language and communication at home.

When asked what would support children's SLC, respondents suggested that parents need guidance on play including how to play and what activities and games can promote speech and language. Suggested formats to support parents with this included groups, adult learner courses, home visits or handouts.

### Next Steps Following Parent Consultation

Families' needs around supporting babies and young children's SLC development were taken into consideration alongside the provision gap at the time for SLC services for the 0-4-year-old age group, resulting in the commissioning of services by the Early Intervention Speech and Language Team at Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.



## 2.5 The Early Intervention Speech and Language Team

SSBC commissioned the Early Intervention Speech and Language Team at Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust who has promoted early years SLC outcomes by means of services for families with children aged 9 months to 2.5 years in SSBC wards, as well as training for workforce who have a role to play in supporting early years SLC (see Sections 5.2 and 5.3). Two of their services aimed at families are discussed in the following sections, namely Tiny Steps to Talking (Section 2.6) and Let's Talk with Under Fives in Arabic (Section 2.7).

SSBC Parent Champions, who are local parent representatives advocating the parent voice across the SSBC programme, helped set up the Early Intervention Speech and Language Team service offer. Parent Champions sat on interview panels for roles within the team and contributed to the development of take-home resources for families.

The work of the Early Intervention Speech and Language Team has been recognised for their excellent practice as winners of both the Nursery World Awards 2023, Inclusive Practice Award and the Children and Young People Now Awards 2023, The Public Sector Children's Team Award. Moreover, the team was shortlisted for the 2024 Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Health and Care Awards in the Equity category.



## 2.6 Tiny Steps to Talking

### Introduction

As part of their service offer, the Early Intervention Speech and Language Team delivers Tiny Steps to Talking as a universal offer for families with one-year-olds (12—23 months) in SSBC wards. Tiny Steps to Talking is a locally developed parent-child language group, delivered in four to six sessions by therapy assistants working in collaboration with or supervised by a speech and language therapist. Tiny Steps To Talking aims to improve parents' skills in using communication- and language-supporting strategies and activities during their child's day to day interactions and routines to promote their child's SLC development.

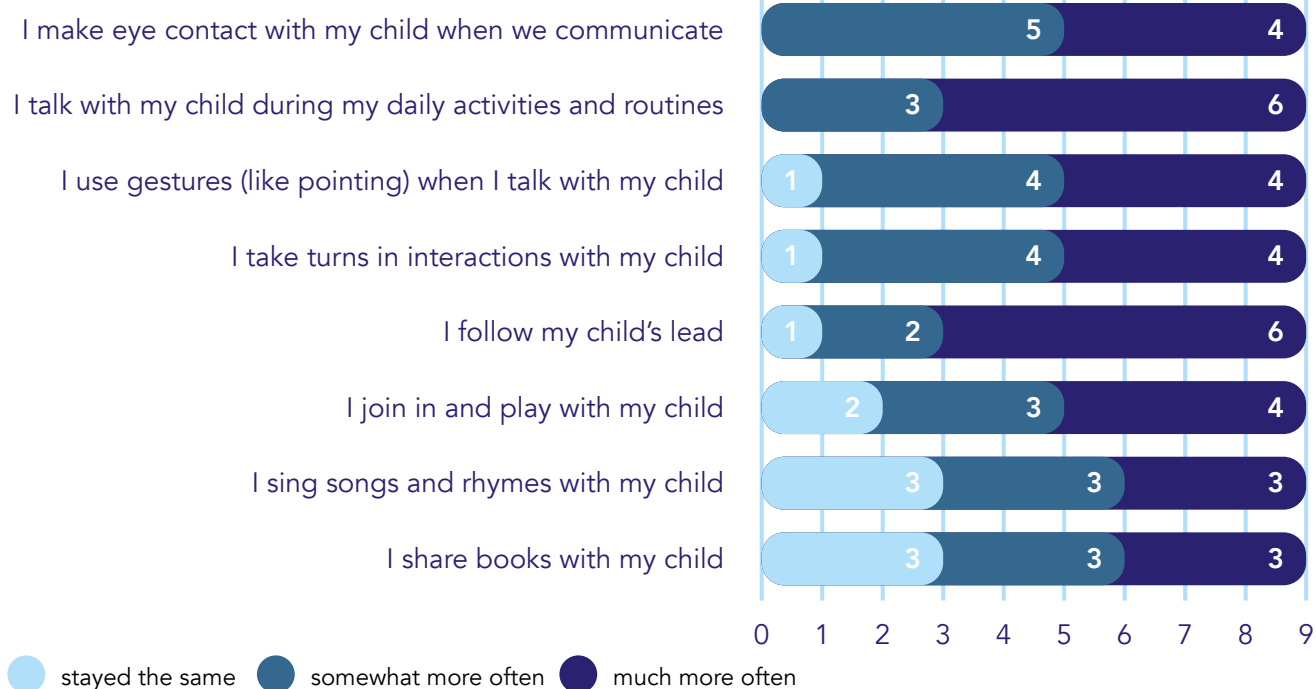
### Impacts of Tiny Steps to Talking

An evaluation was undertaken by SSBC to explore the experiences and outcomes of participating families. SSBC conducted an online parent survey among parents who attended Tiny Steps to Talking between 1st of October 2023 and 30th of June 2024. Nine participants, all women, self-selected to take part in the evaluation.

All parents reported that Tiny Steps to Talking had been either helpful or very helpful for their knowledge, skills and confidence in supporting their child's SLC. Moreover, Tiny Steps to Talking also improved parents' use of language-supporting strategies, see Figure 4.

For example, all parents reported increases in how often they made eye contact with their child when communicating and talking with their child during daily activities and routines.

# Please rate how often you now do the following things since completing Tiny Steps to Talking sessions.



**Figure 4.** Parent reported changes in the frequency of language-supporting strategies

Nearly all parents noted positive changes in their child's SLC, such as increased verbal and nonverbal expressions and more positive engagement in communication. Parents linked their increased skills in supporting SLC development to these improvements. For example, one parent shared:

*"The importance of facing your child when you talk to them and repeating words, this has helped a lot with her using new words."*

The two parents of bilingual children rated the intervention equally positively on helpfulness for both English and the other language. While Tiny Steps to Talking met all parents' expectations, most were considering further SLC support for their child, partly due to identified or suspected additional needs. All parents would recommend Tiny Steps To Talking to eligible families in similar situations.

## Key Learning from Tiny Steps to Talking

The delivery model worked well for parents, including the small group format, venue locations within the community, handout resources and delivery by the staff. Most parents agreed with the intervention dosage but there was a suggestion of more sessions by parents who had less than six sessions.

Tiny Steps to Talking attracts parents wanting to learn how to support their child's SLC. Despite being a universal offer in SSBC wards, most parents who attend Tiny Steps to Talking have concerns about their child's SLC and some suspect that their child has special educational needs or a disability. Strong referral pathways are needed to ensure that parents do not feel lost within the system when they still have concerns around their child's development. The Early Intervention Speech and Language team can refer parents into other services which are part of their SLC offer, as well as into speech and language therapy.

## 2.7 Let's Talk with Under Fives in Arabic

### Introduction

The Early Intervention Speech and Language Team has also delivered the Elklan's adult learners' course Let's Talk with Under Fives to families with 0-4-year-olds in SSBC wards. A qualified Speech & Language Therapist delivers the course in six weekly sessions of two hours. Each session teaches strategies and activities that support children's SLC. Parents are encouraged to share ideas, take home a play activity each week and work towards a target for their child's communication skills during the course. Participants can obtain a Level 1 qualification by completing the course, the workbook and homework tasks.

Several parents/caregivers were interested in the Elklan course 'Let's Talk with Under Fives' and spoke Arabic as their first language. To meet their language needs, the team delivered the course with the support of an interpreter, which was the first delivery of this course in a language other than English.

### Impacts of Let's Talk with Under Fives in Arabic

All participants of the Arabic cohort reported increased skills and confidence to help improve their child's SLC, as well as an increase in home learning and changes at home to support their child's development. All parents reported positive changes in their child's SLC development, such as their child saying more words. In one parent's words:

*It's a really good course. It's really helpful for my daughter. I can feel the difference between when I start and now."*

### Key Learning from Let's Talk with Under Fives in Arabic

Collaboration with interpreters and bilingual co-workers helps ensure equitable access and experiences to the Early Intervention Speech and Language Team services. Additional home visits by a team member and the interpreter supported participants to complete the workbook before it went for external moderation for the Level One qualification.

Moreover, the timing of sessions was an important factor in making the course accessible and the team delivered evening sessions to accommodate parents working office hours.

## 2.8 Consultation with Fathers

### Introduction

Research has shown that children have better outcomes when they have a positive male role model in their lives.<sup>25</sup> For example, father's playful interactions in the early years, often in the form of physical play such as "rough and tumble", can positively contribute to children's social, emotional and cognitive outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

Father inclusivity is one of the SSBC programme's main system change ambitions, with the vision to embed the inclusion of fathers and male caregivers as the norm across services for families. To inform the SSBC Father-Inclusivity Strategy and within the interests of our core principle of co-production with parents, a consultation with fathers was commissioned. The aim was to obtain insight into the lived experience of Nottingham's fathers and to better understand their expectations of services. The consultation, consisting of semi-structured interviews, a survey and focus groups, were completed between June and November 2020, engaging a total of 93 individuals.

## Findings of the Fathers Consultation

While fathers reported high satisfaction with local services, though they also highlighted areas for improvement. Many fathers wanted to be recognised as an active, if not equal, parent when engaging with services. Several felt that services seemed primarily focused on mothers, leaving fathers' specific needs under-addressed. A common barrier to participation was the scheduling of these services, which often didn't align well with fathers' availability. Another common barrier raised by fathers was that many felt unsure where to find reliable information and were sceptical about the credibility of online sources. In focus groups, most fathers agreed that having a single, trustworthy source would be helpful. Fathers indicated that they were most proactively seeking support and information in the weeks and months immediately before and after the birth of their child.

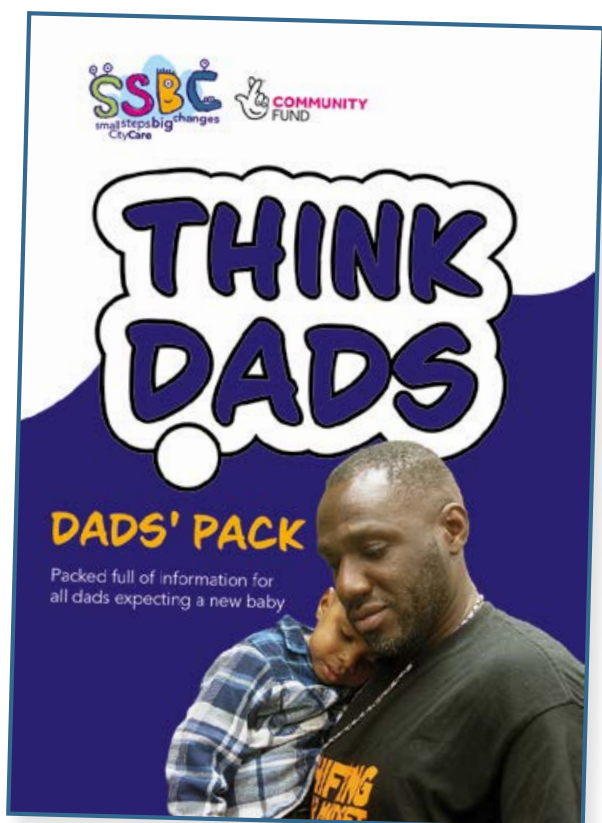
## Next Steps Following the Fathers Consultation

A report on the consultation with fathers has been made publicly available on the SSBC website, alongside a shared learning webinar aimed at the workforce and partners to share the findings of the consultation. The learning from the consultation with fathers has informed SSBC's Father-Inclusive Strategy and Operational Plan. Consultation findings have been shared amongst the SSBC Partnership and informed the work of the multi-agency Father Inclusive Practice Group and the establishment of a Father's Advisory Group.

To better meet the needs of fathers and male caregivers, SSBC developed a father specific 'one stop' information zone on the SSBC website. SSBC also developed a resource for new and expectant fathers and male caregivers to support their parenting role and the emotional wellbeing of the entire family, An Information Pack for New Fathers (Section 2.9).



## 2.9 An Information Pack for New Fathers



### Introduction

Fathers' involvement in their children's upbringing can bring benefits to their children in terms of their developmental outcomes. Children that experience more father-child time, have slightly higher levels of cognitive development, with greater gains in children's outcomes when fathers' involvement is directed at educational activities.<sup>28</sup> Research has shown a lack of resources that are tailored to fathers, despite fathers wanting more support.<sup>29</sup> The consultation with fathers in Nottingham (Section 2.7) revealed that they would value a single, reliable source of parenting information, especially during the weeks and months surrounding their child's birth.

In response to this need, SSBC developed and produced An Information Pack for New Fathers.<sup>30</sup> This resource has been translated into the six most common minority languages in Nottingham: Arabic, Kurdish, Polish, Romanian, Tigrinya and Urdu. Alongside downloadable versions, hardcopies have been distributed to local partners.

The resource has been embedded and promoted across SSBC-commissioned services, such as the Family Mentor Service and the Maternity Support Workers Pathway.

As for promoting SLC outcomes in children, An Information Pack for New Fathers touches upon bonding and play and their importance for baby's development. The resource includes suggested activities such as singing a song to bump during pregnancy and talking and sharing stories with baby to support baby's development and inspire an early interest in books.

Early education can have positive effects on children's cognitive development and contribute towards closing socio-economic inequality gaps in children's outcomes.<sup>31</sup> An Information Pack for New Fathers includes information around arranging childcare and nursery school places and financial benefits available to support with the cost of these.

### Impacts of An Information Pack for New Fathers

An independent evaluation of the resource by NTU<sup>32</sup> showed that fathers, including those who were not first-time fathers, as well as practitioners found the resource a useful source of first reference, especially as it is a comprehensive single document from a trusted source. They also felt that the English version of the pack was understandable to those with basic English reading skills. Professionals saw the pack as a way to engage underserved fathers and recommended including its distribution in antenatal care, while fathers suggested making it available to parents throughout the UK.

As for the promotion of children's SLC outcomes, fathers learned valuable information about bonding with their baby during pregnancy. This included how to communicate with their unborn child, which was something fathers hadn't realised was possible until reading the booklet.

## Key Learning of An Information Pack for New Fathers

An Information Pack for New Fathers has shown the benefits of coproduction with fathers to develop resources that meets their needs in a context where fathers are often not engaging with other child and family services.

The NTU evaluation emphasised the importance of both online PDFs and hardcopies for accessibility. Translated versions have improved access for those with limited English.

A key takeaway has been to label translated booklets with the specific language, so staff know which versions are available for distribution.



## Sustainability of An Information Pack for New Fathers

The resource relies on dissemination through universal services, primarily midwifery and health visiting. Ensuring sustainability beyond the SSBC programme has been a key goal. Local fathers have asked for the resource to be available more widely, prompting a redesign to incorporate feedback. The pack will remain available for download and will be translated into the most common languages in key wards within Nottingham City. Physical copies will be provided to Nottingham health visiting and midwifery services for a year after SSBC ends, ensuring continuity for residents.

SSBC is gifting intellectual property to The Centre for Innovation in Fatherhood and Family Research at Lincoln University, to continue to promote and make the pack available to a wider audience. SSBC aims to ensure there is a not-for-profit agreement in place for those organisations that want to purchase physical copies of the pack at cost.



# 3 Place-Based Partnership Working

## 3.1 Building a System of Early Years SLC Support

Place-based partnership working refers to collaborative efforts between a range of organisations and services within an area to address local needs and improve outcomes for the community. SSBC's programme of activities is mainly delivered by commissioned providers, including healthcare providers, community, voluntary and charitable organisations. These commissioned services have created a network of support for families, enhancing their children's speech and language development, leveraging the strengths and resources of each service provider to create a more integrated, accessible, and effective service delivery model.

In this chapter, we highlight the work of The National Literacy Trust in Nottingham (Sections 3.2—3.4) as well as projects supported by SSBC's small grants programme called the Ideas Fund (Sections 3.5--3.10).

## 3.2 National Literacy Trust in Nottingham

The National Literacy Trust aims to empower children, young people, and adults with the literacy skills necessary for success and social mobility. The National Literacy Trust takes a place-based working approach by means of a Hubs model. The Hubs represent a long-term commitment to tailored approaches to address the unique local needs in an area by means of partnership working with local communities and organisations. Each Hub delivers a range of interconnected projects, interventions, volunteer opportunities, media campaigns, and behaviour change initiatives to meet the specific needs of local communities. The following sections highlight two aspects of the programme: the community volunteering model of Literacy Champions (Section 3.3) and a parent-child group aimed at improving SLC outcomes.



### 3.3 Literacy Champions

#### Introduction

Literacy Champions, a National Literacy Trust community volunteering programme, recruits local volunteers to raise awareness of the importance of literacy in underserved communities. Volunteers receive training to better understand the local literacy challenges and how to deliver informal activities to tackle these. Literacy Champions support existing literacy projects or can establish their own, engaging in tasks such as distributing books, organising community libraries and book-swaps and hosting literacy events and activities or book groups.

#### Impacts of Literacy Champions

The socio-economic background of Literacy Champions reflects the communities they support, increasing the likelihood of them being able to act as trusted messengers. Many volunteers also have positions within their local community that help with their credibility. 11% of Literacy Champions work in schools and 42% work or volunteer in community settings such as community centres, temporary housing accommodation for those experiencing homelessness, food banks and places of worship.<sup>33</sup>

*"When I'm at an event, and I've got the books available, I always make sure that there's something available and passing that message along. So, as I'm community based, I guess I get all these relationships and I'm giving these books and sending that message in that way."*<sup>34</sup>

The Literacy Champion training is well received, with 83% rating the training as excellent and the remaining 17% rating it as good.<sup>33</sup>

Volunteering brings benefits for both Literacy Champions and their communities. After three months of volunteering, 89% had an increased understanding of literacy's importance, 92% better understood local literacy challenges, and 83% felt more confident delivering informal literacy support. Literacy Volunteers also reported having an influence on their communities by encouraging others to engage with literacy (97%), positively impacting literacy in their community (94%), and supporting reading by increasing access to resources and sharing content about reading (89%).<sup>33</sup>

#### Key Learning from Literacy Champions

Interviews with 11 Literacy Champions in 2021 have given insight into the factors that contribute to the high level of engagement of Literacy Champions.<sup>34</sup>

Firstly, the Literacy Champions Project Manager plays a crucial role in supporting volunteers. Building personal relationships, being passionate about the programme, and having good communication skills are essential for harnessing volunteers' skills effectively and developing these further. The Literacy Champions' Project Manager also fosters interactions between volunteers, which is essential for creating a community feel and building a strong community of volunteer and professional networks.

Another learning point is the importance of maintaining flexible volunteering options to accommodate personal circumstances and emphasise that small contributions can have a meaningful impact in local communities.

#### Sustainability of Literacy Champions

The Literacy Champions' community volunteering programme will continue beyond the lifetime of the SSBC programme supported by funding from The National Literacy Trust, who have made a 10 year commitment to the Nottingham Hub through till at least 2028.

### 3.4 Talking Tots and Babies

#### Introduction

Talking Tots and Babies is a new initiative developed by the National Literacy Trust Hub in Nottingham. It is an evidence-informed programme for parents and carers and their babies and young children up to age four aimed at improving SLC development. The free, universally offered programme consists of six weekly sessions delivered by National Literacy Trust Nottingham staff. Each weekly session has a specific focus. Topics include talking together, singing songs and rhymes, sharing stories and books, physical play for communication, using everyday activities to develop children's language and creating music and sounds for songs and stories.

#### Impact of Talking Tots and Babies

The first two cycles exceeded expectations, with 53 adults and 48 children from diverse ethnic backgrounds attending the programme.

A pre- and post-programme parent/carer survey evaluated changes in children's engagement with language activities, showing that most children had positive improvements in sharing books, asking to look at and read stories at home, having the confidence to join in group activities with other children and enjoying singing songs and rhymes.

Parents noted benefits including new activity ideas, responding better to children, seeing children's interactions improve, and social opportunities both for themselves and their children. Feedback highlighted their positive experiences.

*"These sessions are perfect for drip feeding information and demonstrating simple tasks that are so significant and make a big difference to a young child."*

*"My daughter was a covid baby and wouldn't interact. Now she socially interacts."*

#### Key Learning from Talking Tots and Babies

Sessions were planned in SSBC wards with high numbers of children, choosing locations with good accessibility by walking or public transport, and scheduling on days without other free-access SLC events to maximise reach and attendance.

WhatsApp was an effective tool for engaging families, facilitating session bookings, sending reminders, sharing content and activities, and providing information about future events. It also helped maintain family engagement by sharing updates on events and activities after the Talking Tots and Babies programme ended.

Parent feedback highlighted the value of opening sessions early and staying afterward for free play, chat, and advice. For the second cohort, sessions are opened 30 minutes before and after the programme session. To better meet the needs of the large number of attendees groups, sessions will be split by age into a younger and older group.

#### Sustainability of Talking Tots and Babies

The Talking Tots and Babies programme has continued delivery in SSBC wards, with additional cohorts being delivered in partnership with Nottingham City Council through the Family Hubs funding.

### 3.5 Ideas Fund

SSBC promotes and adopts community-based commissioning through funding opportunities for grassroots initiatives, which ranged in value from £3000 for one year up to £10,000 for three years. Launched in 2016, the Ideas Fund, previously called Innovation Fund, provides small amounts of funding that enable local organisations to develop and implement initiatives that they think will help local families, as well as support a small-scale test-and-learn approach to influence future practice. Through the Ideas Fund, SSBC has funded, annually, a range of projects that engage families with the aim to improve child development outcomes in the areas of diet and nutrition, social and emotional development, and language and communication.

The Ideas Fund has given the opportunity for well-established local community and voluntary sector (CVS) organisations, as well as new and emerging community groups to put forward what they can or could do with the right support. This has allowed for more responsive and flexible service delivery, aiming to reduce inequalities and better meet the needs of the population within their area. Projects have been allowed to secure funding in multiple funding cycles. With a focus on long lasting impact and organisational stability, beyond the term of the SSBC programme, the Ideas Fund extended the funding term from one to three years in 2021.

Ideas Fund projects with a focus on SLC development have been delivered in various community-based settings. Section 3.6 focuses on Learning to Love Books, which delivers sessions in Nottingham libraries. Sections 3.7--3.9 discuss projects that have been implemented within nurseries. Finally, Section 3.10 introduces various projects focused on outdoor activities.



## 3.6 Learning to Love Books

### Introduction

Since 2016, Learning to Love Books delivered by the Nottingham charity Literacy Volunteers has received recurrent Ideas Fund funding. The project provides sessions for children up to age four. Sessions aim to promote early literacy and vocabulary, to develop positive family relationships by sharing books for fun and to suggest learning activities for at home. Sessions are currently hosted in libraries in Hyson Green and Arboretum and St Ann's. These Nottingham wards have a high proportion of families with limited or no English and a diverse ethnicity profile.

The project has also supplied story boxes to families in SSBC wards to encourage book-sharing at home. Story boxes include a book, story-related activities, and craft items. These were posted out to families during Covid restrictions and are distributed during sessions as an incentive for attendance.

### Impacts of Learning to Love Books

Learning to Love Books is reaching many families who do not attend any other group with their child and families with a higher level of need such those living in supported housing. In 2023/24 75% of families engaged in the project spoke English as an additional language. Alongside direct engagement with families, Learning to Love Books is signposting families who need additional support to other services.

Parents report benefits of the sessions, including families adopting the model of storytelling and songs at home, children being more prepared to start nursery, children having increased vocabulary and confidence, as well as having learned the actions to songs, and families having the opportunity to make friends.

*"My children have developed lots since coming to the group They really enjoy the variety, e.g., singing, story time, playtime and craft, etc."*

The Learning to Love Books project has promoted library membership and enhanced book ownership for children in Nottingham. From 2021 to 2024, over 1500 story boxes were gifted to families.

### Key Learning from Learning to Love Books

While initially sessions were delivered in all four SSBC wards, the project moved to the delivery of longer session cycles at two locations: St Ann's Library and Hyson Green Library. This allowed more time to build relationships with families, which enabled signposting to further SLC support when needed, and gave more opportunities for repeat attendance at sessions to promote lasting impacts on children's SLC.

The project uses books by diverse authors, featuring diverse characters and stories from various world regions, to reflect the diversity of attending families.

The convenient library locations allowed library staff to direct families to sessions and enabled drop-ins during visits to the community spaces for other reasons, like health appointments, with many returning for more sessions.

Partnership working enabled promotion of the Learning to Love books sessions and increased access for families to other services. For example, a Hyson Green community engagement officer was able to promote oral health with free samples of toothbrushes and accompanying leaflets.

### Sustainability of Learning to Love Books

Literacy Volunteers is intending to continue their work with families with babies and young children and working on attracting funding through strengthening their evaluation to robustly evidence impacts and the benefits of early intervention and prevention. The Learning to Love Books project was chosen as one of the Nottinghamshire Grand Lodge Freemason's charities to support in 2023 with a donation that covered the cost of 200 story boxes.

## 3.7 Curious Tots

### Introduction

Ignite, a Nottingham-based charity, has received recurrent funding from the Ideas Fund since 2018. From 2021-2024 the Ideas Fund grant funded the delivery of their Curious Tots project at Crabtree Farm Primary School Nursery, a school nursery setting in Bulwell. Curious Tots aims to support 3-4-year-olds' language and communication skills through weekly curiosity-led sessions delivered by a creative practitioner. The project also delivered stay and play sessions for families, community-based sessions at supported accommodation and as part of local festivals, as well as continuous professional development training to early years' professionals.

### Impacts of Curious Tots

Delivery of Curious Tots as an enhanced offer within the nursery setting has resulted in high repeat engagement with the programme. In 2023/24 an average of 61% of the children participated in over 90% of the sessions each term and every child participated in more than one session. Nursery staff observe that the programme helped children to be more able to ask questions, engage in conversations and use curriculum-related words.

Curious Tots provided the school with extra capacity, allowing staff more time to complete observations on children during facilitated sessions, which feed into their assessment and children's next steps.

Training for early years professionals received positive feedback, with participants planning to apply ideas in their own practice.

*"It was really interesting to learn about how young children engage in these activities and how it can help all areas of development especially speech and language."*

### Key Learning from Curious Tots

Embedding the project in a nursery setting allowed more time to be focused on delivering high-quality sessions instead of time being focused on the recruitment of families to public settings. It also fostered close working relations with the setting's early years practitioners to form, enabling the extension of the creative learning approach across the school.

A key learning point is that working in a nursery setting will enable the use of publicly available EYFS data to evaluate the programme's impact, showing how it influences the percentage of children meeting expected levels across all Early Learning Goals.

### Sustainability of Curious Tots

Learning from the Curious Tots project, specifically the importance of creating reliable, consistent programmes that schools can grow to trust and appreciate, have influenced ambitions of the programme with a focus on securing longer-term funding. With the support of a SSBC Ideas Fund legacy grant and £140,000 funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Curious Tots will be expanding from January 2025 to four new pre-school settings across Nottingham, delivering weekly arts-based sessions designed to nurture children's creativity and curiosity and support the early learning goals within the pre-school environment.



### 3.8 Let's Talk – Speaking Programme

Berridge Primary and Nursery School, located in the Hyson Green and Arboretum ward in Nottingham, received one-year funding from the Ideas Fund in March 2018. The nursery services a diverse population and the majority of the 51 children who benefitted from the resources from September 2019 to July 2019 were from ethnic minority backgrounds, with some speaking limited or no English. The grant supported funding of their Let's Talk – Speaking Programme for 3-year-olds, providing indoor and outdoor play resources so children can have genuine interactions with real objects instead of just pictures for the vocabulary they are learning.

The Let's Talk – Speaking Programme cohort showed higher percentages of children achieving age-related scores at the end of nursery compared to the previous year's cohort, with Listening and Attention increasing from 35% to 49%, Understanding increasing from 30% to 37% and Speaking increasing from 26% to 36%. These improvements highlight the positive impact that small grants funding can have on early language development.

### 3.9 Lily & Co Communication Hubs

#### Introduction

Lily & Co received 2023 Ideas Fund's cost of living crisis funding to set up Communication Hubs in their My Start nursery. Lily & Co reported that at least 50% of children within their nursery setting were underachieving within language and communication. The Ideas Fund grant provided the nursery with resources and dedicated staff time for communication leads to deliver Communication Hub activities.

Communication Hubs have offered intensive support for children with greater speech and language needs through small-group, language-focused activities. In addition, alongside language and communication focused stay and play sessions for children and their parents/carers, the Communication Hubs provided home learning activities and resources in the form of story sacks and free book giveaways. Moreover, families could freely access the resources within the Communication Hub areas.

#### Impacts of Lily & Co Communication Hubs

Lily & Co have seen significant progress in confidence and communication skills among children that have participated in the Communication Hubs. The project enabled the implementation of language-supporting strategies and activities, which has led to children with referrals into speech and language therapy to no longer need this support. Individual children benefitted from the focused Communication Hub sessions, such as a child with a non-English home language beginning to use English words and join in signing while they had never spoken before at nursery, and another child under speech and language therapy confidently starting to put two words together. The small group size of sessions enabled some children to thrive despite having low confidence and communication skills when in a big group.

Parents and carers' feedback indicated the home resources were most useful for them. Families learned new ways to support SLC development at home, enjoying activities such as using puppets when singing with their child. Families valued having the Communication Hubs to access at their own choosing to sit and read with their children.

### Key Learning from Lily & Co Communication Hubs

A learning point was that consistent attendance from parents and carers in the Communication Hubs was a challenge, as it took time to build their confidence to participate in the focused sessions.

Communication Hub home resources were well-used by families, though they were not always returned for redistribution. To maintain free access to at-home resources, Lily & Co strengthened links with the National Literacy Trust Nottingham, which provides free books for families, and with local libraries, where they were able to attend and encourage families to join and visit with their children.

### Sustainability of Lily & Co Communication Hubs

With trained staff and resources now in place, Communication Hubs are now embedded within the nursery with activities ongoing.



## 3.10 Outdoor Activities

Through the Ideas Fund a range of community groups have received funding to deliver outdoor activities, such as New Shoots at St Ann's Allotments, outdoor fun for under fours at Windmill Community Gardens and Twigglets at Bulwell Barkers Wood. Together, these projects have expanded free access to nature-based activities to children in the early years by organisations that previously had only worked with school aged children. These projects offer sessions at various locations and times including Saturdays to attract more working parents and particularly fathers. The outdoor activities support children's SLC development by providing opportunities for conversations about new experiences and interactions with different materials in the outdoors, alongside providing settings for families to engage in physical activity which will also benefit their physical, social and emotional health.

# 4 Home Learning Environment

## 4.1 The Importance of the Home Learning Environment

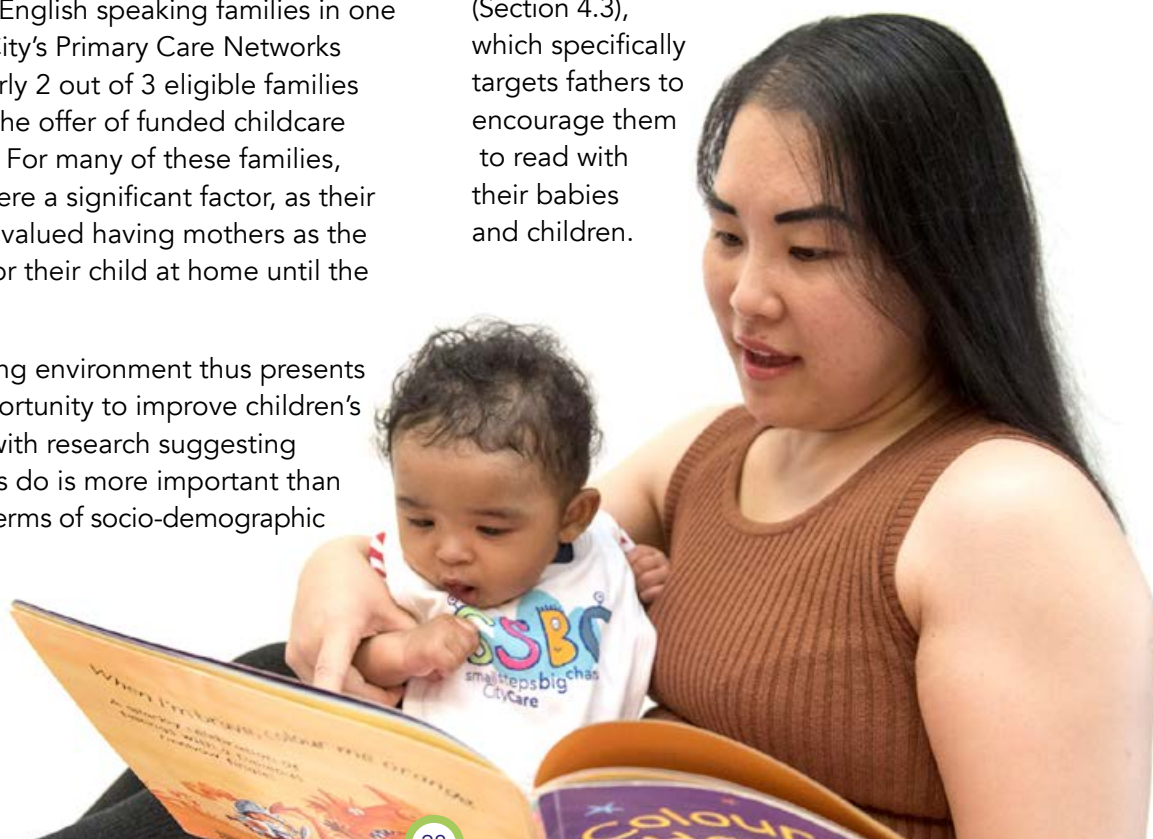
The most important factors influencing a child's development are the nurturing characteristics of the environments in which they are raised. Good quality formal childcare and a positive home learning environment are beneficial in improving outcomes for children.

Families may choose not to make use of formal childcare and early education before their child starts school. Research shows that key beneficiaries of free early education in England often miss out on fully accessing government-funded childcare.<sup>35</sup> This includes lower uptake among children who later qualify for free school meals, children from ethnic minority backgrounds, and those who speak English as an additional language. Locally, SSBC engagement work by means of a survey among 100 non-English speaking families in one of Nottingham City's Primary Care Networks showed that nearly 2 out of 3 eligible families did not take up the offer of funded childcare for 2-year-olds.<sup>36</sup> For many of these families, cultural norms were a significant factor, as their culture and faith valued having mothers as the main caregiver for their child at home until the start school.

The home learning environment thus presents a significant opportunity to improve children's SLC outcomes, with research suggesting that what parents do is more important than who they are in terms of socio-demographic characteristics.<sup>37</sup>

The home learning environment includes the physical spaces a child has access to and everything that parents and children do that affects children's development and learning. Parenting practices and activities can enhance children's developmental outcomes.<sup>38,39</sup> However, parents, caregivers and communities can often benefit from support and guidance to provide rich home learning environments.<sup>40</sup>

The SSBC programme aims to promote parents' confidence, skills, and knowledge to support their child's SLC, while also providing resources for at home. Most projects discussed in this report focus on encouraging effective parenting practices at home. This chapter highlights a few specific projects: Dolly Parton Imagination Library Books (Section 4.2) and Idea Sheets (Section 4.2), which bring free resources and guidance into the home learning environment, as well Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED) (Section 4.3), which specifically targets fathers to encourage them to read with their babies and children.



## 4.2 Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) Books



### Introduction

Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) has a growing evidence base as an effective intervention. Book ownership has a consistently strong relation to reading attitudes and abilities in school age children.<sup>41</sup> Previous research on Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in North-Lincolnshire has shown that children who participated in the programme for more than a year were more than 5.7% more likely to achieve a Good Level of Development and 6.7% more likely to achieve their reading Early Reading Goal at the end of reception.<sup>42</sup>

SSBC has run DPIL in its four target council wards in Nottingham City since 2015. DPIL is a book gifting programme that posts free, high-quality books to children from birth to age five. SSBC contacted every eligible family that is expecting a baby to inform them about DPIL via phone. Families were also able to sign-up via their Health Visitor or by contacting SSBC directly. Registered children receive one age-appropriate book a month, every month, until the child turns five years old. Siblings of different ages receive different books.

### Impacts of DPIL Books

In 2022, registrations for DPIL reached a high, with 66% of all eligible children living in SSBC wards receiving DPIL books. By the time SSBC's DPIL project ends in August 2025, the project will have delivered over 341,000 books to children in SSBC wards.

DPIL in SSBC wards not only enhanced home learning environments by bringing resources into the home, but also contributed new evidence to the intervention's effectiveness. This was achieved through a SSBC-commissioned evaluation of DPIL conducted by NTU, which was made up of a between-group design, comparing DPIL-registered families with non-registered families.<sup>43</sup>

Socio-demographic characteristics suggest that non-DPIL families were more affluent. This was reflected in book ownership, as non-DPIL had significantly more books at home than DPIL-registered families. DPIL registration helped close gaps in reading-related behaviours. Non-DPIL children were more likely to initiate reading, and their parents read and sang to them more often compared to families who had been in the DPIL programme for less than a year. However, DPIL families registered for a year or more showed no significant differences from non-DPIL families. This suggests extended involvement in DPIL closed the gap in book sharing behaviours.

Significant improvements were found in reading length, daily reading frequency, and interactions during book sharing. Children registered with DPIL for over two years had longer reading sessions than those enrolled for less than a year. Parents with at least a year of DPIL participation were more likely to read daily than those enrolled for 11 months or less. Increased duration of DPIL registration was linked to higher frequency of interactions during shared book reading. Parents of non-DPIL children reported interacting with their children significantly less than parents whose children received DPIL books for more than a year.

These changes in early book-sharing behaviours, including extra-textual talk<sup>44,45,46</sup> and reading frequency,<sup>47,48</sup> are well-known to significantly benefit children's language and literacy skills.

## Key learning from DPIL Books

The evaluation of DPIL has implications for the implementation of book gifting programmes, suggesting that these need to be long-term to significantly influence families' book sharing behaviours in the home environment.

## Sustainability of DPIL Books

The DPIL scheme was running in Nottingham pre SSBC and will continue post programme through the establishment of an independent charity with strategic direction set by the Local Authority. SSBC has helped support the charity in commissioning a fund-raising strategy expert to support their efforts in securing funds to continue the scheme, and the charity has already secured £10,000 from one funder.

### 4.3 DPIL Ideas Sheets

During a consultation with SSBC, parents asked for guidance around developmental play and ideas for activities that promote speech and language. To answer this need, SSBC worked with partners to develop DPIL Ideas Sheets. These provide parents with activity ideas around their child's book of the month and focus on literacy beliefs and behaviours that benefit children's development:



### • Reading from birth

Cognitive gains have been linked to reading with children from 8 months upwards and an earlier start to reading may help to establish reading habits.<sup>49</sup> However, a study commissioned by the charity Bookstart reported that nearly half of the fathers and around one third of mothers had never read with their children in the first year of life.<sup>50</sup> DPIL books act as a reminder for parents to read. DPIL Idea sheets may provide further encouragement to start reading from birth.

### • Improving the quality of reading sessions

Extra-textual talk is when parents engage children in conversations around books rather than solely reading the text. Although this benefits children's learning<sup>52,53,54</sup> it is an occasional rather than frequent reading behaviour for most families.<sup>51,55</sup> Also, research has shown that the security of attachment between mothers and their child correlates with the quality of reading sessions, which suggests that securely attached children gain more from reading sessions than insecurely attached children.<sup>56,57</sup> DPIL Ideas sheets can potentially close this gap in quality of reading sessions by providing suggestions on how to share books beyond reading the story.

### • Enriching the home learning environment

0-4 year-olds are not exposed to the same learning opportunities in and around the home. 7% do not learn songs, poems or nursery rhymes, 13% do not learn number or count and 16% do not learn the alphabet or to recognise words with someone at home.<sup>58</sup> DPIL Ideas sheets share resources around these activities, such as links to videos of nursery rhymes.

In conclusion, DPIL Ideas sheets offer evidence-informed support to improve children's language and literacy outcomes. Their impact on the home learning environment is yet to be evaluated. Any potential roll out of initiatives like DPIL sheets may benefit from undertaking an evaluation of their impacts on families' shared book reading behaviours and children's outcomes.



## 4.4 Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED)

### Introduction

SSBC recognises and promotes the unique contribution of fathers and father figures to children's development. In 2017, SSBC committed to FRED and identified Family Mentors as key to its delivery. FRED is a Fatherhood Institute intervention designed to encourage fathers to build a daily reading habit with their children. The programme begins with a launch event, where fathers pledge to read daily for four weeks and are provided with a reading log to track their sessions. For the first two weeks, fathers read for 5 minutes a day, increasing to 10 minutes for the final two weeks. Success is celebrated at the end of the programme, with encouragement to continue fostering long-term involvement in their child's educational development.

### Impacts of FRED

To understand the impacts of FRED, an external evaluation of the intervention was conducted by NTU.<sup>59</sup> Pre and post-intervention questionnaires were completed by 70 fathers who participated in FRED. These showed a statistically significant increase in fathers reading daily with their child after the intervention.

Across the 70 FRED participants, there was no statistically significant increase in fathers' confidence in reading, the father-child relationship, involvement in their child's development, or use of the local library. However, the majority of fathers indicated that FRED had helped them to:

- get to know their child better (67.1%)
- read to their child every day (64.3%)
- increase the time they spent with their child (68.6%)
- improve quality time spent with their child (81.4%)
- make them more involved in their child's learning and development (75.3%)
- increase their satisfaction as a parent (67.1%).

Moreover, 55.7% of fathers reported an increase in the number of words their child could say.

In the words of one of the fathers:

*"It has made a big difference. [Child's name] has started waving books at me to let me know when it's our time to sit and read together. I have enjoyed it because I have felt that for at least 5 minutes out of my day, when I am not working or doing the house up, I sit and spend quality time with my son."*

## Key Learning from FRED

The Fatherhood Institute provide training and necessary resources for the FRED programme to be delivered. SSBC adopted a 'train the trainer' model, meaning a small cohort of Family Mentors were initially trained to deliver FRED and learning from the training could subsequently be cascaded to remaining staff.

Alongside increasing the number of Family Mentors trained to deliver FRED, the mode of delivery shifted from community group settings to one-on-one so that greater flexibility could be offered for working fathers and to accommodate fathers uncomfortable attending groups.

# FRED



## Fathers Reading Every Day

FRED can help build fathers' confidence in their reading skills and help ensure that all parents can effectively engage in their child's reading development, regardless of their own literacy levels.

One father shared:

*"I would definitely encourage more fathers to take part in FRED. I can't read very well, and I don't normally look at books but looking at the books with [child's name] has definitely helped me and I feel more confident to pick a book up with them now."*



# 5 Upskilling and Resourcing the Early Years Workforce

The interactions that the early years workforce have with babies, young children and their families provide an excellent opportunity to promote children's SLC development. A national survey conducted by the Communication Trust in 2016 investigated professional development in SLC.<sup>60</sup> This survey identified workforce training as a gap. 49% of early years education staff and 44% of Health Visitors indicated that they had received little or no training about typical SLC development in their initial training, rising to 56% and 46% respectively in learning about identifying and supporting children with SLCN. This is concerning considering the national context in which 82% of Health Visitors reported an increase in the number of children with SLC in 2024.<sup>61</sup>

SSBC has commissioned a range of projects that aim to contribute to the resources, knowledge and skills of the early years workforce to effectively support children's SLC development. Section 5.1 and 5.2 cover two projects focused on early education and childcare settings: Early Words Together at Two and the Language Leads Approach. Section 5.3 explores SLC training for the wider early years workforce, while section 5.4 focuses on a SSBC-developed resource to support workforce in their work with families who speak English as an additional language.



## 5.1 Early Words Together at Two

### Introduction

Early Words Together at Two aims to improve the home learning environments of families of two-year-olds. It is a practitioner-led programme by the National Literacy Trust and designed for private and school nurseries and children's centres, who serve low-income families, or any family who may be looking for ways to support their child's language development. In 2017-2018, the programme received funding from the Department for Education. Evaluation of the programme in 20 settings in Leicester and Bradford showed that Early Words Together at Two had a statistically significant positive impact on children, parents and practitioners.<sup>62</sup>

With funding from SSBC, the National Literacy Trust in Nottingham delivered an Early Words Together at Two pilot in SSBC wards from June 2018 to December 2019. Following training, practitioners were supported to recruit families and deliver cycles of a five-week family learning course. Each course included five 45-minute activity sessions. These sessions aim to build parents' confidence and skills as their child's first educator and to help them understand why they, and the home learning environment, are so important to their child's development. Settings were supported through visits by the National Literacy Trust Early Years' Project Manager and the National Literacy Trust Hub Manager. The programme also brought resources into the settings, with a total of 208 books supplied through the initial training and site visits.

## The impacts of Early Words Together at Two in Nottingham

The pilot in Nottingham attracted 13 settings at the initial training days in September 2018. Ten of these settings went on to successfully engage parents in family sessions, with a total of 104 families reached.

Evaluation of the Early Words Together at Two pilot in Nottingham was planned in collaboration with SSBC and NTU. Positive impacts were found for practitioners, parents and children.

- **Early Words Together at Two improved practitioner's knowledge and confidence.**

After the programme, all practitioners (100%) felt able to identify key milestones in children's speech, language and literacy development and knew what to do if a child needs additional language support, compared to 84% at the start of the programme. There was a decrease from 33% to 11% in the number of practitioners reporting feeling not confident in supporting parents to enhance their child's home learning environment.

- **Early Words Together at Two impacted positively on early years practitioners' engagement with parents.**

At the start of the programme 28% of practitioners indicated there were some parents they almost never interacted with, reducing more than half to 13% after the programme. Nearly three in five (56%) practitioners encouraged parents to play with their child regularly before the programme, increasing to all of them (100%) after the programme.

- **Early Words Together at Two improved the home learning environment for two-year-olds.**

The programme resulted in 64% of parents feeling more confident sharing books and stories with their child and 66% feeling more aware of how important it is for them to talk with their child. These changes in attitudes were reflected in behaviour change in the home learning environment. More parents reported engaging with language-supporting behaviours on most days, such as extending their child's talk (41% increase) singing songs and rhymes (32% increase) and sharing books and stories (30% increase). 64% of parents reported they talked to their child about something they are interested in more than before. Also, 55% of parents reported their child engaged in mark making more frequently than before.

- **Early Words Together at Two improves children's outcomes.**

Parents completed a Communicative Development Inventory (CDI) for their child, with both pre- and post-programme data obtained for 30 children. The CDI measures vocabulary size by asking parents how many words their child can say or repeat from a list of 100 words. During the two months of the programme, the median increase in children's vocabulary range was 14 words, with some children doubling the number of words in their vocabulary.



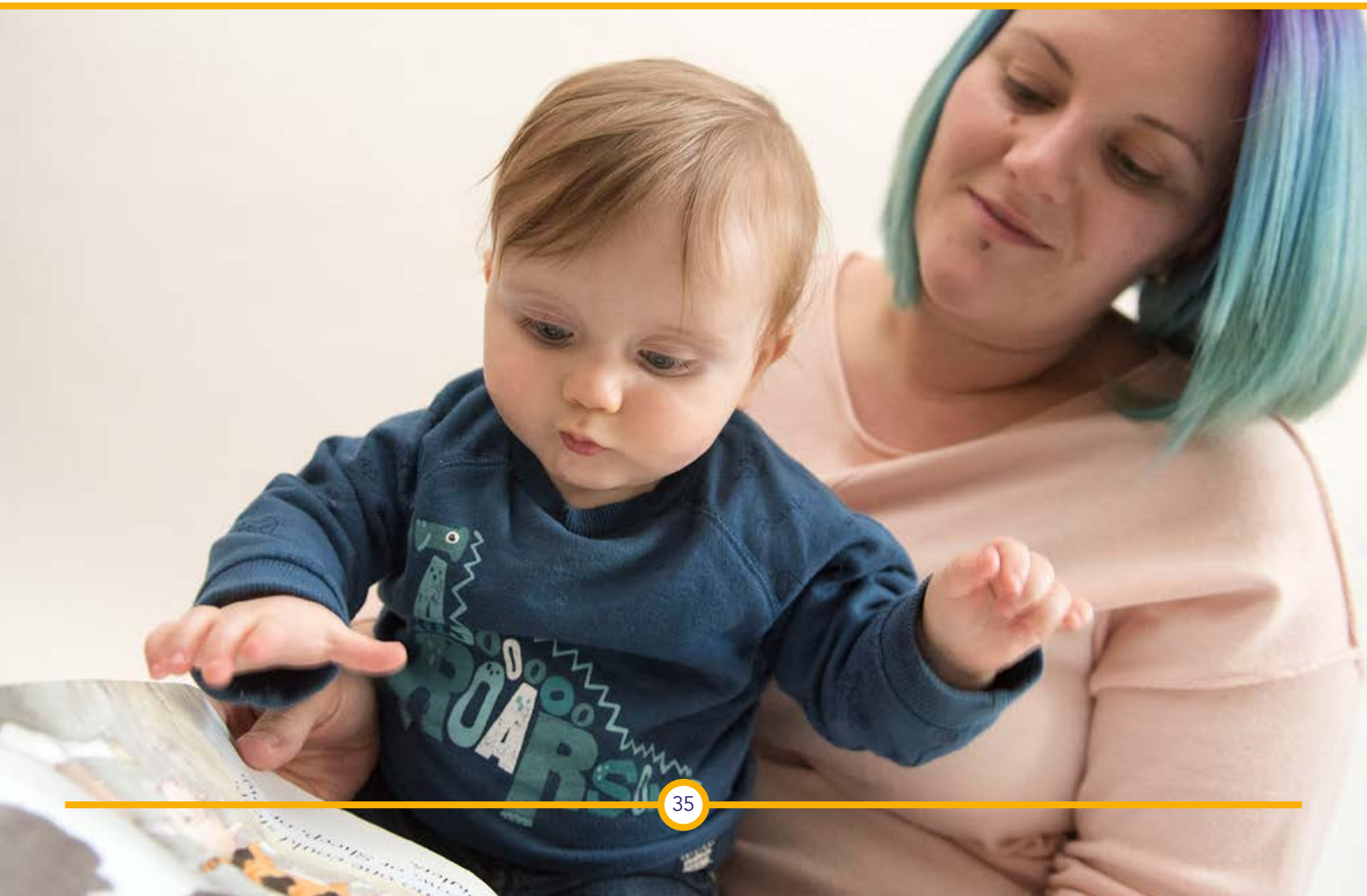
## Key learning from Early Words Together at Two in Nottingham

While the evaluation of Early Words Together at Two showed positive impacts for children, families and practitioners, the implementation of the programme in Nottingham private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings encountered various challenges.

Firstly, recruiting and retaining families for the programme was challenging for many settings, with two settings unable to deliver any family sessions. Reasons included low response to flyers and invitations being sent home, working parents' limited availability and parents only attending one session. Rather than weekly sessions, some settings opted for one-off workshops, sometimes at different times, to start engaging parents. Suggestions for building engagement include promotion of the programme through conversations with families and advertisements at the setting, offering free books as incentives, and continuing sessions with limited sign-ups to establish them as a regular component of the nursery provision.

Practitioners reported that the CDI tool may have discouraged participation, as it was challenging for multilingual families and didn't align with the first 100 words. It is thus important to balance the value of pre- and post-programme assessment with the risk that families may view participation as burdensome.

The delivery of Early Words Together at Two encountered issues with staffing. Some settings were unable to release staff due to staff-to-child ratio requirements. Staff absence and turnover meant that staff members trained in Early Words Together at Two were unable to cascade training and responsibilities for the programme to another member of staff. An additional training in September 2019 helped remedy this challenge and offered the opportunity for the training of new staff members and for refresher training for practitioners who had not delivered sessions yet.



## 5.2 The Language Leads Approach Pilot in Nottingham

### Introduction

Many children in Nottingham attend an early education and childcare setting, and the expansion of childcare entitlements is likely to increase demand for these places. Staff in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) early education and childcare settings play an important role in promoting children's SLC development. Strengthening SLC support in these settings offers a chance for early intervention, benefitting both children with SLC needs and those developing typically. The Language Leads Approach provides training and coaching to a dedicated member of staff, the Language Lead, for their early years setting to develop and promote a supportive environment which facilitates children's SLC development. Additional, ongoing, and regular networks aim to ensure sustained continuing professional development. This ensures that Language Leads Approach settings will benefit from a systemic approach to SLC that includes developing staff and the setting environment, identifying need, supporting SLC development in children, and working with parents and specialist services.

SSBC funded participation for 10 PVI early years settings in a cross-sector Language Leads Approach pilot in 2021/22. This cross-sector pilot, which also included 10 schools from the Nottingham Schools Trust who self-funded their Language Leads Approach places, ensured equality of access and to demonstrate efficacy across the range of settings comprising the early years landscape in Nottingham. The pilot was led by the Early Intervention Speech and Language Team of Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and delivered in partnership with Nottingham City Council, who supported the project through traded services (Education Psychologist) and non-traded services (Early Years Specialist SEND teacher). This pilot built on previous learning from the Language Leads approach in Nottinghamshire County.<sup>63,64</sup> Due to the Covid pandemic, a

blended approach was used, with some sessions switching to online at short notice in response to changing restrictions.

### Impacts of the Language Leads Approach pilot

The Language Leads approach pilot successfully trained 13 practitioners, including teaching assistants, early years leads, a preschool manager, SENCO and nursery room leads. Evaluation of the Language Leads approach pilot in Nottingham included pre and post training feedback, professional reflections by Language Leads on implementation successes, case studies of the Language Leads journey as well as anonymous language profiles of children selected by Language Leads and feedback from PVI managers. The main findings are as follows:

- Practitioner confidence increased across all competence and knowledge measures following full training. The highest gains in confidence scores were in monitoring children's progress, describing a child's SLC stage of development and identifying next steps in support.
- All Language Leads submitting their Language Lead journeys felt that the training had a positive impact on SLC development for the children within the setting and most of them reported implementing specific training strategies. One Language Lead noted:

*'[Child's name] made progress in all areas of her learning. As practitioners we could see the massive positive impact the strategies from the Language Lead project can have.'*

- Language Leads valued the opportunity to reflect on practice, with several Language Leads highlighting the efficacy of using videos. One PVI Language Lead introduced video feedback in her setting to encourage reflective practice and as a coaching tool. Another Language Lead shared:

*'It really helped to notice things I was doing, like I didn't realise how many questions I asked.'*

- Two participants specifically mentioned the move away from focused interventions towards more high-quality interactions within the provision, which is one of the main objectives of the Language Leads Approach.
- Feedback highlighted the training's contribution to continuous professional development:

*"Very supportive and accommodating the individual needs. Thank you for helping me with new strategies and giving me a chance to improve myself."*

*"I have come on a great journey through this process, it's nice that staff on the course and managers back at my setting have noticed this as well. I have learnt a lot to feedback to my team."*

## Key learning from the Language Leads Pilot

All Nottingham Schools Trust participants completed the training. Three PVI settings fully completed the training, two partially completed it and five dropped out. Gaps remained despite offering catch-up opportunities via additional sessions and attendance at other planned training events.

Barriers to completion were tied to the Covid pandemic, including staffing issues and reluctance to attend in-person sessions. Although funding was offered to PVI settings to release staff, only one setting utilised this.

One organisation with three pilot settings reported many children needing one-on-one support due to undiagnosed behavioural concerns. These children did not receive funding for this one-to-one support. Without resources to find suitable staff cover, these settings had been unable to release staff to attend the Language Leads training.

Best efforts must be made to address these barriers, with the following recommendations:

- Pre-booking supply cover before training.
- Updated resources that promote managerial support for Language Leads Approach within the Early Years setting.
- Flexible approaches to training such as INSET training.
- Sharing the Language Leads role between two early years settings.

## Sustainability of the Language Leads Approach

The Early Years SEND Team Teacher continues to facilitate termly Language Lead network meetings to share learning and promote support strategies for all children's SLC. While support by the Early Intervention Speech and Language team concluded on completion of the Language Leads Approach pilot, an established network of Language Leads supporting children, parents and peer workforce in SSBC wards and the wider city has been maintained.

Following the conclusions drawn from this pilot, project leads have secured commitment from specialist professionals (including Early Years Educational Psychologists, an Early Years Advisor and the service lead from Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Children and Young People Speech and Language Therapy Service) to invest in bespoke training development. This will address the lessons learned during the pilot with a view to eliminating identified gaps, dovetail training more coherently with changes to the EYFS framework and closer alignment with current EYFS strategies and programmes (such as the Early Maths programme). Funding has been secured from the Early Endowment Foundation to progress these plans.

## 5.3 Training for Early Years Professionals

SSBC has commissioned the Early Intervention Speech and Language Team to develop and deliver workforce training for early years professionals. The training covers typical SLC development in babies and children under the age of four, it focuses on dispelling the myths around multilingualism and English as an additional language in terms of children's language development and increases awareness of the available local offer of early years speech and language services, the referral process and useful workforce resources such as the Nottingham Balanced System® SLC framework.<sup>65</sup>

Training sessions have been delivered to a range of early years professionals, including Nottingham City Council Early Help and Early Years teams, childminders, PVI providers and primary school staff, SSBC Family Mentors, and the Children's 0-19 Public Health Nursing team.

Evaluation of workforce training conducted in 2021/22 showed that a high percentage of practitioners reported they learnt a lot, particularly about services and resources to help children's language development (70%) and bilingual language development (78%).

Alongside continued promotion of the SLC service offer, it appears that the workforce training has improved both the number and source of appropriate referrals to SLC services for families. Initially, SSBC Family Mentors were the primary source of referrals. However, with further training targeted at the Children's 0-19 Public Health Nursing team, most referrals now come from them, highlighting the importance of workforce training for effective referral pathways.

## 5.4 Best Practice Tips for Working with Families Where English is an Additional Language



SSBC has also developed a resource that supports the workforce to engage effectively with families who do not speak English at home as their main language to improve health and education. The resource "Best Practice Tips for Working with Families Where English is an Additional Language" consists of five tip sheets which cover the following topics:

- Effective communication with parents and families
- Working with professional interpreters
- Translating written materials
- Working with children where English is an Additional Language (EAL)
- Supporting English learning for children with limited English

The tip sheets act as a support tool to raise the importance of the topics and give practical advice on how to improve the access, experience and outcomes of services for families who speak little or no English to empower families and improve equity and equality of need.

# 6 Systems Change

One of the main objectives of the A Better Start programme and SSBC is to bring about systems change. That is, to improve collaboration among local health services, public services, and the voluntary and community sector, working alongside parents to achieve better outcomes for children and families. The following sections summarise national evidence submissions through which SSBC has contributed to calls for evidence to inform and support the development of national policy.

## 6.1 Support for Childcare and the Early Years

In January 2023, SSBC submitted an evidence report to the inquiry launched by the Education Committee into support for childcare and the early years. Evidence by SSBC focused on the early years provision and principally addressed two areas under examination by the Education Committee.

- The extent to which the early years' system adequately prepares young children for their transition into primary education, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The extent to which the reduction of Sure Start Children's Centres has affected children and families, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the role of Family Hubs.

The SSBC programme acknowledges that parents are a child's first and most important teachers, and their involvement in their child's learning and development is critical for the child's overall well-being and future success. The SSBC programme received £45m of funding over a ten-year period from The National Lottery Community Fund and is therefore well placed to provide evidence of the impact that well-resourced early years' support can have on children's outcomes. Particularly, the effect of interventions on young children's speech, language, and communication helps to adequately support all young children, including those from less advantaged backgrounds, to be school ready.

In summary, the SSBC submission highlighted the need:

- To recognise the value and place in the system of early intervention and prevention measures for babies and very young children, when considering the support for childcare and the early years, and the importance of parents as a child's first and most important teacher.
- To recognise the need for increased funding to address the strain that the system of support for babies and younger children is under, to avoid worsening the attainment gap and to achieve the government's mission of levelling up.

## 6.2 Early Years Literacy

In August 2023, SSBC collaborated with academics at Nottingham Trent University to jointly submit evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy, hosted by the National Literacy Trust, in response to their call for evidence around early years' literacy.<sup>66</sup> The early years' literacy consultation report cited SSBC's evidence three times, highlighting key elements including:

- co-producing services with local families
- starting support for SLC from birth
- implementing a locally coordinated speech and language pathway

## 6.3 Screen Time: Impacts on Education and Wellbeing

In October 2024, SSBC, together with colleagues from the SSBC commissioned Early Intervention Speech and Language Team submitted evidence to the Education Committee in response to their call for evidence around screen time and its impacts on education and wellbeing.<sup>68</sup>

In summary, SSBC's evidence report highlighted the following:

- Digital resources provide a potential pathway to reach families with babies and young children and support and promote positive parent-child interactions. More research is needed to understand how this can be done in the most positively impactful way.
- It is important to advise and support families in protecting their children from potential adverse effects of screen time.
- SSBC recommends that guidance around screen time is evidence-based, non-judgmental and formulated in a supportive, realistic way so that parents do not feel successful management of children's screen time is an 'all-or-nothing' matter.

The subsequent report by the Education Committee<sup>69</sup> referenced the SSBC evidence submission in relation to the often sedentary behaviour of children when they are engaged with screens, reducing their physical activity which was known to have benefits for their motor skills development.



# 7 Conclusion

As part of the A Better Start programme (2015-2025) set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, Small Steps Big Changes in Nottingham had developed and tested ways to improve children's SLC outcomes as one of its target developmental areas, with a focus on sharing the learning of the test-and-learn programme to enable systems change. Early Years Foundation Stage data indicate emerging positive trends in Good Level of Development and outcomes areas related to SLC, narrowing the gap between SSBC wards and other areas in Nottingham and England. These findings highlight the effectiveness and ongoing need for a tapestry of universal and targeted SLC support services in the early years.

## SLC support at the earliest opportunity

Many children face delays in their SLC development, impacting on their education, mental health and future employment and life chances. Alongside the already existing social inequalities which exacerbate attainment gaps, the Covid pandemic worsened this issue, with children from disadvantaged groups disproportionately starting primary school without the language skills to fully engage in learning. Early intervention and prevention in SLC services can enhance children's outcomes and prevent the escalation of challenges that could require more intensive and costly intervention later on. The SSBC programme of activities starts SLC support from birth through a combination of universal interventions which have been offered to local families, such as the FM Service, and targeted interventions, such as ESOL classes to improve parent's English skills. This allows families to access SLC support that meets their needs and promote their babies and children's SLC development to achieve positive outcomes.



## Coproduction of SLC Services

What good early years SLC support looks like will depend on the local context and should embed parents' voices, including those of fathers who are often underserved by early years services. Engaging families ensures services are acceptable to them, meet the needs of their family, and effectively support children's speech, language, and communication development.

## Place-Based Partnership Working

The SSBC programme has leveraged local strengths and partnership working to enhance children's speech and language outcomes. By engaging families, communities, VCS organisations, and local health services, the programme offers a tapestry of early SLC support. Alongside working with well-established service providers, the community-based commissioning of grassroots organisations has enabled a test-and-learn approach to small-scale projects tailored to local families' needs. Working closely with local partners, whose understanding of the local communities enables them to build trust and engage families effectively, has been key to improving access to SLC services and strengthening community capacity to support children's SLC development.

## Upskilling and Resourcing the Early Years Workforce

The early years workforce are key agents of change when it comes to improving SLC outcomes through their direct interactions with children, modelling of language-supporting strategies to parents and carers, and signposting children to appropriate SLC support services. Workforce training around early years SLC development, including multilingual development which is particularly important in a diverse city like Nottingham, presents a significant opportunity to improve knowledge and skills among the early years workforce to better support children's SLC.

SSBC workforce training initiatives around SLC have highlighted the need for careful consideration of the delivery of workforce training in a context of staffing shortages.

## Home Learning Environment

The home learning environment plays a crucial role in improving children's SLC outcomes. However, parents, caregivers and communities can often benefit from effective ways to support children's SLC. Book gifting programmes can help by bringing books into the home environment. The SSBC commissioned Dolly Parton Imagination Library has been shown to influence family literacy activities, with positive changes in families' book-sharing behaviours that are known to improve children's SLC.

## Systems Change

SSBC has aimed to embed a culture of systems change thinking within the wider local partnership and disseminate the programme's learning at a local and national level. For example, SSBC has supported the local system-wide ambition to collaboratively develop an early years' SLC strategy for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. Moreover, SSBC has advocated for early prevention and intervention to promote children's SLC outcomes through evidence reports to national policy informing committees and groups, highlighting the need to start SLC support from birth and coproducing services with local families so that these meet their needs and are acceptable to them.

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