



Parent-delivered teaching supports children's early language development

By Dr Kelly Burgoyne, University of Manchester

This article is a summary of the paper 'An evaluation of a parent-delivered early language enrichment programme: evidence from a randomised controlled trial' by Burgoyne et al. (2018), published in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry.

In the UK, children start school at the beginning of the school year in which they turn 5 years of age. By this time, children are expected to have well-developed language skills: we expect them to be able to listen to other people and understand what they are saying, to follow instructions, and to use language to express their own ideas, thoughts, wishes, and needs clearly. Children who start school without these language skills may not be able to meet the academic and social demands of the classroom and, consequently, may be at risk of poorer academic progress and difficulties with behaviour. Supporting early language development in the pre-school years therefore has the potential to make a considerable difference to later outcomes.

Parents are their child's first teachers and they are well-placed to support early language development. Providing parents with the tools to promote their child's language development has long been regarded as a potentially effective strategy for boosting early language skills in the pre-school years, but there has been little robust evidence to support this idea. To explore this further, we received funding from the Nuffield Foundation to develop and evaluate a language teaching programme designed for

parents to use with their pre-school child at home. We called this programme Parents and Children Together (PACT).

The PACT programme aims to support children's early language skills using three key strategies: interactive reading, vocabulary teaching, and narrative (storytelling) activities. During interactive reading, parents and children read a storybook together and talk to each other about the story. Parents encourage and support their child to play an active role during shared reading by, for example, commenting on the pictures, asking questions, and pointing out ways that the story relates to the child's life. Vocabulary teaching focuses on learning a set of words that are related to the story. Teaching activities and visual resources are provided to support learning the meaning of the words in different contexts. Narrative and extended language skills are developed through sequencing activities, summarising pictures from the story, and telling and retelling stories.

Parents and children use the PACT programme every day (5 days a week) for about 20-minutes. The daily teaching activities follow a consistent structure and routine (see Box 1). Families are provided with everything they need to deliver the programme over 30-weeks of teaching (i.e. 150 teaching sessions in total), including storybooks, scripted teaching sessions, and visual materials to support the teaching activities.

We conducted a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) to evaluate the effect of the PACT programme on children's early language skills. To do this, we worked with 22 Children's Centres in 3 Local Authorities in the North-West (Blackpool) and Greater London (Bexley and Lambeth). Children's Centre staff helped us to recruit 208 pre-school children (aged between 2 years, 7 months and 3 years, 6 months at the start of the study) and their families to take part in the project. Families were randomly assigned to one of two groups: one group received the language programme, and the other group received an active treatment control programme (developed by the research team for the project) which targeted early movement and self-care skills. This programme was delivered in the same way as the language programme which meant that we could be confident that any effect of the language programme was due to the nature of the teaching involved rather than the extra attention parents were giving to their child.

We measured children's language and narrative skills three times over the course of the project: at the beginning, after 30-weeks of working on the PACT programme, and 6-months after teaching at which time children were in the first few months of school. There were no differences between the two groups of children at the start of the project. Immediately after teaching, children who had received the language programme had made more progress in their language and narrative skills than children who had received the motor skills programme. Importantly, these children still showed stronger language skills when we assessed them again 6-months later. We also assessed their emerging literacy skills at this time and found that children who had received the language programme could read more (regular) words and knew more letter sounds than children in the motor skills group.

This study showed that the PACT language teaching programme can help parents to effectively support their child's language skills in the year before they start school. The results also suggest that this might help to support children in the early stages of learning to read. Parents were generally very positive about the programme, reporting that they and their child enjoyed it and they believed it made a difference to their child's development. There are some limitations to our study which are worth bearing in mind when considering these findings. For example, parents need to have a basic level of literacy to be able to deliver the programme which means it may not be suitable for those with severe reading difficulties. The programme is also relatively intensive and some families may find it difficult to deliver the programme consistently.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings from this study are encouraging and suggest that parent-delivered teaching can make a significant difference to children's learning and development. It is worth noting that the form of that teaching appears to be critical: we found no effect of the motor skills programme on children's motor skills. Further work is needed to evaluate parent-delivered teaching programmes and identify those that are most effective.

We are continuing to develop the PACT language programme. We are working with Book Trust, the UK's largest children's reading charity, to revise the programme materials and produce them to a professional standard. We are also working with The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) who are funding a new RCT to evaluate the revised programme with a large number of children and their parents in the UK. The project will start in September 2018.

For more information about the PACT language teaching programme or the EEF-funded trial, please contact Dr Kelly Burgoyne, email: Kelly.Burgoyne@manchester.ac.uk

Box 1: Overview of language teaching programme

PACT Language Teaching Session (20 minutes)		
Introduction	Settling the child into the session	2 minutes
Interactive reading	Sharing books together - exploring, talking and having conversations linked to books and stories	5 minutes
Vocabulary	Exploring new words and talking about what they mean	5 minutes
Narrative	Activities designed to support narrative and extended language skills including sequencing, summarising, and retelling stories	5 minutes
Plenary	Review of session and sticker reward	3 minutes



Author Bio:

Dr Kelly Burgoyne: Kelly is a lecturer in language disorders in the Division of Human Communication, Development and Hearing at the University of Manchester. Kelly's research focuses on understanding children's cognitive development and the nature and causes of children's learning difficulties. She is particularly passionate about the development and evaluation of resources to support parents, schools and professionals to support children's development effectively.