

Early Language Development – are boys and girls different?

Here are some thoughts about what we know is happening in England and why it's important to think about what is going on in your setting.

Louise Griffiths is Assistant Headteacher at Victoria Park Nursery School in Newbury, a maintained nursery school run by West Berkshire Council. On behalf of West Berkshire she also runs the "Every Child a Talker" programme and is currently developing an EEF research pilot which will support staff to develop the communication skills of children with severe communication delays.

Boys are underachieving in early years. Latest data from the EYFSP 2022/23 (1) shows that 74.2% of girls reach a good level of development and only 60.6% of boys. This continues across most educational indicators throughout their school years. There is a normal range within which children acquire certain language milestones. There is no doubt that, in general, girls tend to be on the earlier end and boys on the later end of this range and we know from West Berkshire Ecot (Every Child a Talker) data that twice as many boys as girls are assessed as being at risk of delay. The nature versus nurture debate is complicated, and it's easy to make generalisations or to accept "it's always like this" in terms of attainment.

Do boys achieve less well in your setting? Here are some things you can reflect on in terms of your provision, practice and assessment.

- How do you do your assessments for speech and language?
- Where do you assess listening and attention?
- What sort of play do you value? Is this the same for all staff in your setting? Do you need to get everyone on the "same page"?
- Where are your boys most comfortable in their play and most involved? How do you know?
- Is the most made of the outdoors in your setting?
- Do the adults respond to the interests of boys?
- How do adults respond to boys' role play specifically?
- In a largely female workforce, what kinds of bias do staff bring into the setting?

It's also a good idea to look carefully at what your staff assessments are telling you. It is likely that boys will be achieving less well if your setting is in line with outcomes for England. Of course, it won't be all boys. Look at the boys you are concerned about. Is it particular groups of boys? Is there a pattern over time? What happens if you take out the boys with complex SEND from cohort assessments? You may find by looking carefully at your data that you can make adjustments to your

practice – maybe by working with a particular group of parents, or by developing your environment or resources.

The key is to review regularly. Outcomes change and your practice needs to be responsive to every new cohort that comes into your early years setting.

References and Links

If there are gaps in attainment, then you are encouraged to use evidence-based approaches to support the children's learning. This link will take you to the Education Endowment Foundation's Early Years Evidence Store.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/support-for-schools/evidence-for-the-early-years/early-years-evidence-store>

Here you will find research-based best practice ideas to help you to develop practice in your Early Years setting.

References;

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results-2022-to-2023>