



Case Study

Chelsey Taylor, Preschool Manager,
Little Butterflies

Sustained Shared Thinking In Practice: A Journey of High-Quality Interactions at Little Butterflies PreSchool

With over 15 years' experience across early years—from apprentice to room leader, deputy, and manager—Chelsey has always been driven by the belief that theory must live in practice. “The whole theory, pedagogy, curriculum side of things really interests me... it motivates me to find out more and actually put theory and pedagogy and different ways of working into action, rather than just reading about it and leaving it to one side.”

Two years ago, Little Butterflies Preschool began a journey centred on high-quality interactions and sustained shared thinking (SST)—a shift rooted in research from the EEF on improving communication and language outcomes.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/communication-and-language>.

The transformation since then has been remarkable.

WHY SUSTAINED SHARED THINKING?

Chelsey and her team at Little Butterflies noticed ongoing speech and language delays post COVID-.

Many children were also living in flats with limited access to outdoor experiences, reducing opportunities for rich talk.



Chelsey Taylor, Little Butterflies

EEF evidence emphasises that a combination of communication and language approaches, including modelling language, back and forth conversation, and high quality adult child interactions — have strong positive impacts on early learning. Chelsey's aim was to embed these principles throughout practice, making SST a natural, everyday part of pedagogy. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/communication-and-language>

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS: TRAINING, MODELLING & REFLECTION

From the outset, the team at Little Butterflies structured their approach around whole -setting development. “We have INSET days throughout the year... and those whole days are our full training days, each one slowly building up a layer of training,” Chelsey reflects.

Training at Little Butterflies covered:

- Open vs closed questions
- The “hand rule” - “one question for every 4 comments”
- Slowing down interactions
- Resisting the urge to fill silence
- Strategies from the Communication & Language Approaches within the EEF Evidence Store
- (<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/communication-and-language>)



Chelsey used scenarios, role play, paired observations and video reflections. Staff observed Chelsey and the Deputy modelling SST in real time. “They can pick me up, give me feedback, and I can really model what it is that I’m asking them to do,” says Chelsey.

GROWING STAFF CONFIDENCE: A REAL SUCCESS STORY

Chelsey reflects that one team member’s journey stood out. “When I arrived, she really lacked confidence... communication looked very much like ‘Is that a red dog?’ She was almost directing all the play.”

Through coaching, modelling, supervision & feedback, Chelsey saw a transformation:

- “She has become really confident now.”
- The owner observed and noted that staff were asking, “Why might that happen?” instead of leading play.
- The practitioner herself shared that she now slows down, steps back, and becomes more aware of conversations rather than simply labelling.

Chelsey feels that these everyday changes — listening more, talking less, and giving children space to think — have had a visible impact.



IMPACT ON CHILDREN: CURIOSITY, FOCUS & DEEP THINKING

Chelsey describes the shift in children’s independence, curiosity and thinking as powerful.

During a colour-mixing- activity, one little girl explained how adding different paints caused the colour to change—lovely evidence of deeper reasoning and exploration.

Group play also became richer. While building a dinosaur “cave,” children collaborated, solved problems, and made decisions about materials. These moments reflect what the EEF Evidence Store identifies as back--and--forth conversation which, alongside other strategies, can extend thinking and language.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/high-quality-interactions/enhancing-back-and-forth-conversations>



Chelsey was delighted when parents, health visitors and even Ofsted noticed the transformation.

SLOWING DOWN: THE POWER OF LESS IS MORE

A key part of the journey at Little Butterflies has been embracing slow pedagogy.

As a team, they “completely pulled apart the routine... let’s think about why we’re doing it.”

This helped reduce rushing, increase responsiveness, and create real space for dialogue.

When addressing communication and language needs, the team recognised that implementing multiple approaches would support children to develop in different areas. EEF guidance reinforces that a combination of high-quality-interactions drives communication. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/communication-and-language>

And when it comes to resources?

“Less is more... the language you get, the mathematical concepts... will be so much richer with a focus on interactions rather than elaborate resources.”

EMBEDDING SST INTO THE FUTURE

As Little Butterflies expands to include under twos, SST will continue shaping their curriculum. The staff member who grew so much is now leading the new room—a testament to the culture they’ve built.

They are redesigning their induction process so that they don’t just expect new staff to know about sustained shared thinking; instead, they assess their starting point and train them from there.

Next steps include vocabulary planning using their tiered language approach and developing parent sessions to support talk at home.

Chelsey firmly believes that relationships and high--quality interactions sit at the heart of everything.

REFERENCES

Physical Development

Approaches and practices to support physical development in the early years.



Self-Regulation and Executive Function

Approaches and practices to support self-regulation and executive function in the early years.



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