

Communication Friendly Setting – A Journey of Discovery

This blog was written by Martin Cumming of St Paul's Nursery School, York.



Martin has worked at St Paul's Nursery School in York for almost five years and has been teaching for almost 18 years. He is a trained teacher, SENCO, Lead Communication Practitioner and Assistant Head Teacher. Martin is passionate about creating neuro affirming practice within settings and has a real interest in neuro diversity and speech, language and communication development.

Part One – Intent

We have come a long way in our Communication Friendly Setting journey in the past three years. But in the words of Ronan Keating, and I do not use his lyrics in everything I write, 'Life is a rollercoaster, just gotta ride it!' Funny when 'gotta' is not really the language that we should be modelling! This is the first of three blogs about our Communication Friendly Setting Journey, how we found ELKLAN, how ELKLAN found us and the impact that it has had on our children's development and staff practice. The first part of our journey looks at the *intent*.

Setting the scene

Can you imagine if in January 2020, someone had come up to you and said that in three months time you would be fighting over toilet rolls in the supermarket, stockpiling them and still using up your supply almost four years later! Waiting up until midnight to try to book a delivery or click and collect slot for a fortnights time. Staying at home and only leaving for your one hour of daily exercise. It is madness, yet it was real life for months.

As Early Years Practitioners we are still feeling the impact of the pandemic. We have a cohort of 'Covid Babies' currently in settings, who in their early months of life couldn't go to playgroups, parent and toddler groups or even to see their grandparents. Settings closed, only open to those who were identified as vulnerable or the children of key workers.

I don't in anyway mean to sound glum or disenchanted with life, I just want to set the scene for a journey, a journey of discovery, one of impact on the lives and language development of the children in our care. One that was to change the course of how our setting approached speech, language and communication.

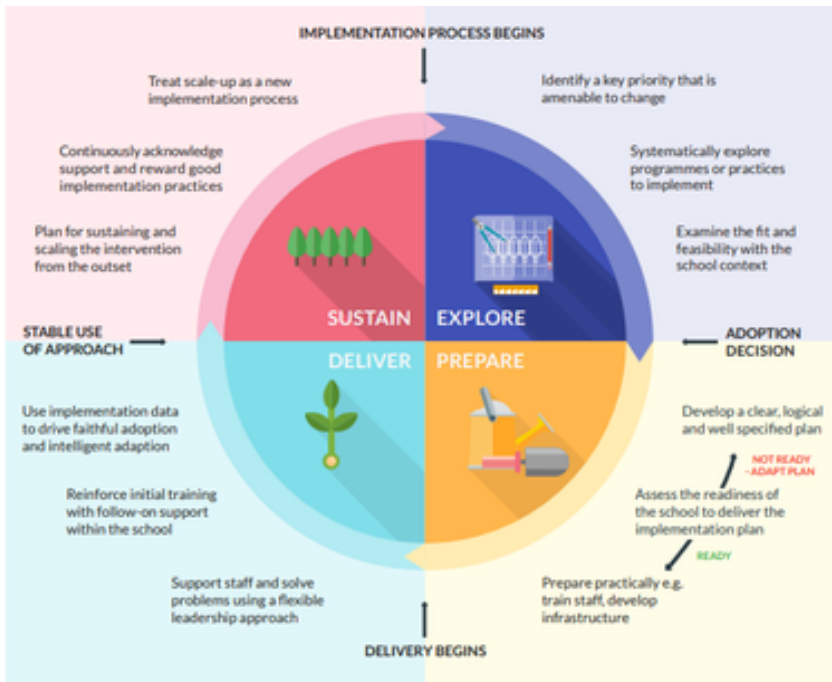
In the Education Endowment Foundation's ['Preparing for Literacy – A guidance Report'](#) the number one recommendation is to prioritise the development of communication and language. Thinking about how to engage children in high quality interactions that develop not only the understanding of language but also their use of language. We as practitioners have a pivotal role to play in this.



Throughout lockdown and the pandemic, access to services such as speech and language therapy was severely limited so we had to draw on the experience and skills of the staff in our setting, with waiting lists in York at around two years. We already had two practitioners who were ELKLAN level three trained and who also had experience of language interventions such as Early Talk Boost. We utilised these skills in helping children who we had identified with speech, language and communication difficulties and saw great impact on their language development. However, the real impact of Covid was still to be felt.

We have identified that on average, over the past two years, at least 52% of children starting at our setting were below where they should be when base lining them using the Wellcomm Speech and Language Assessment toolkit. Some of whom were significantly behind. We therefore needed to look at how communication and language, a prime area of learning, was being taught within our setting.

The EEF's guide to Implementation, which we will look more closely at in the second part of this series, suggests that there is a cycle to implementation, starting with the explore phase where we identify the problem. When the problem was identified, in our case Communication and Language, we then needed to think of the best solution. As you can see from the diagram below (taken from 'Putting Evidence to Work: A school's guide to implementation' 2019) we were working in the explore part of the cycle.

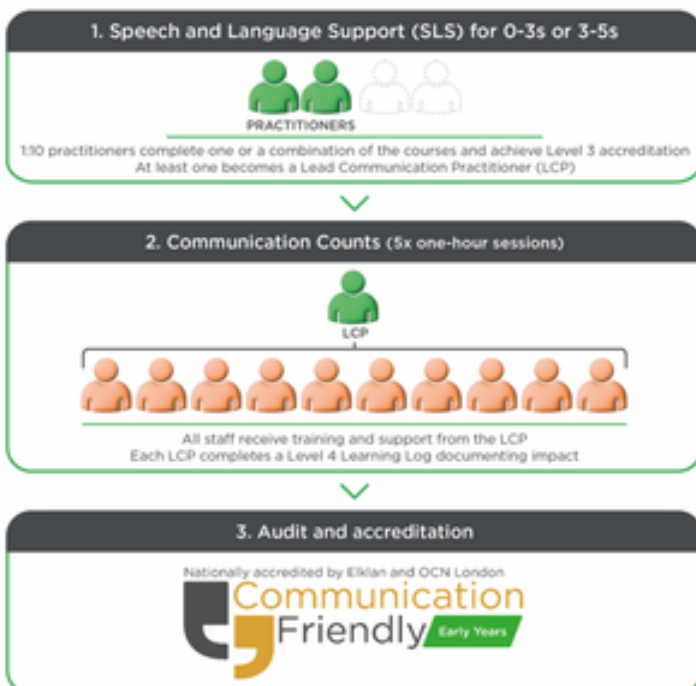


It had been suggested to us that ELKLAN's Communication Friendly Setting was an excellent approach to use to develop communication and language not only for the individual but for the setting as a whole. Looking at this approach we decided that this was the best option for our setting.

How we started

We already had two Level 3 practitioners trained in ELKLAN but needed one more as the ratio of L3 to staff needed to be 1:10. I am a trained teacher and SENCO so did the light touch level three training and then took on the roll of Lead Communication Practitioner (LCP) alongside one of my colleagues. We then joined a cohort of other settings to start our course led by Gill Clarke, a Speech and Language therapist in York.

Communication Friendly Schools Whole Staff Training (Early Years)



We had an hour-long training session before each module that we delivered to staff during our staff meeting. (Little tip – make sure you have plenty of tea and biscuits!) Great CPD for all staff. Between each module we set a task for the staff to do in the setting. These tasks ranged from observing others working with children to looking at the language that we had on display in setting. At the end of each of the five modules was a questionnaire for staff to fill in.

We included our administration staff and ‘Lunchtime Friends’ in training as to be truly a Communication Friendly Setting; all staff, not just those who work primarily with children, need to feel ownership of a whole setting approach. The workload was not too intense as it focused on the practice in place, and ways in which we could improve it.

Here is a quote from one of our staff members:

*"I have valued the time we have spent as a team really thinking about our children. Revisiting and refreshing our knowledge and understanding and really trying to focus our whole team on placing a greater emphasis on the value of communication. Understanding how important our roles as Early Years practitioners can be in effecting change for our little people. **It has highlighted that, by really focusing on our delivery we have the potential to impact on and improve not only the short but even the long-term life chances for our children and their families.** For me I can now see more clearly just how vital it is that this becomes thoroughly embedded in all our practice."*

As part of the accreditation process, we visited one of our fellow cohort settings to carry out an informal review of communication and language as part of an end of course audit. It is a privilege to visit other settings as there are always ideas that you can bring back and implement in your own setting.

Using the principles learnt through our ELKLAN Communication Friendly Setting Status, we continue the journey to improving the language and communication of the young people in our care.

Time to reflect

Is there an area of Communication and Language in your setting that needs focus?

How do you gather information on the speech and language needs of the children in your setting and how does it inform your practice?

What evidence-based strategies/interventions do you put in place?

Next time we will focus on *Implementation* – how our intent became implemented and embedded in our practice and how we turned 52% of children working below expected levels of communication and language to almost 80% at or above within a year.

References and further reading

Putting Evidence to Work: A school's guide to implementation, EEF 2019

[EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#)

Preparing for Literacy: A guidance report, EEF 2021

['Preparing for Literacy – A guidance Report'](#)

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