

Early Words Together at Two

Evaluation from 2020 to 2021

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Introduction

Language development at the age of two strongly predicts a child's readiness for school¹, and development at 22 months has been shown to predict educational outcomes later in life². At the same time, by the age of five, children from the poorest families can be up to 19 months behind in their vocabulary compared with their more affluent peers³, affecting their later literacy and ability to learn, and increasing the risk of them developing behavioural and mental health problems later in life⁴. In 2020, 96% of schools were concerned about communication and language development of children who first started school⁵.

Early Words Together at Two was developed by the National Literacy Trust in 2017 to support parents and practitioners to help all children acquire the early literacy skills they need to succeed. The programme provides training for early years staff to increase their knowledge and confidence to be able to empower parents to support their child's early communication and literacy development by building literacy into daily life. Through 5 weekly sessions focusing on extending talk, songs and rhymes, reading and sharing books, mark making and

¹ Snowling, M. J., Hulme, C., Bailey, A. M., Stothard, S. E., & Lindsay, G. (2011, November). *Better communication research programme: Language and Literacy Attainment of Pupils during Early Years and through KS2: Does teacher assessment at five provide a valid measure of children's current and future educational attainments?* Department for Education.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183539/DFE-RR172a.pdf

² Feinstein, L. (2003). Inequality in the early cognitive development of British children in the 1970 Cohort. *Economica*, 70(277), 73 – 97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0335.t01-1-00272>

³ Sutton Trust. (2012, May). *The social mobility summit: Report of the Summit held at the Royal Society, London 21 – 22 May 2012*.

<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/st-social-mobility-report.pdf>

⁴ Law, J., Charlton, J., & Asmussen, K. (2017, September). *Language as a child wellbeing indicator*. Early Intervention Foundation.

<https://www.eif.org.uk/report/language-as-a-child-wellbeing-indicator>

⁵ Bowyer-Crane, C., Bonetti, S., Compton, S., Nielsen, D., D'Apice, K., & Tracey, L. (2021, April). *The impact of Covid-19 on School Starters: Interim briefing 1: Parent and school concerns about children starting school*. Education Endowment Foundation.

https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/documents/projects/Impact_of_Covid19_on_School_Starters_-_Interim_Briefing_1_-_April_2021_-_Final.pdf?v=1630925205

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getting out and about, parents gain the skills and confidence they need to support their child at home.

In the face of the lockdowns and restrictions brought on by the global COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the programme was adapted to encourage engagement with positive activities at home by providing support digitally, through online learning sessions and resources, as well as through activity booklets delivered to the families. Digital platforms enabled practitioners to not only share key messages around creating a positive home learning environment with families, but also to demonstrate key activities, engage children and their parents in learning, and respond to questions from families.

In addition, the programme was adapted to support outdoor learning to enable safe delivery for the settings and equip parents with tips on how to use the natural environment to support their child's learning. This adaptation allowed children's centres and other early years settings in disadvantaged communities to utilise their outdoor space to give children the opportunities they may have missed out on during lockdown as one in eight households had no access to a private or shared garden during lockdown⁶ and one in five children in low-income households spent lockdown in an overcrowded home⁷.

This report explores the benefits of Early Words Together at Two for children, families and practitioners. It will use data collected from 182 parents and 32 practitioners as part of the programme evaluation to highlight changes for children's early literacy engagement, parents' understanding, confidence and behaviours around creating positive home learning environment, and practitioners' knowledge and confidence in supporting parents in the home.

Data used in this report

In order to explore the changes for children, families and practitioners as a result of taking part in Early Words Together, this report uses data from parents and practitioners collected as part of the programme evaluation:

- All parents were asked to complete a survey at the end of the programme asking them to reflect on changes for themselves and for their child. Overall, these were collected from 182 parents between March 2020 and February 2022⁸.
- Practitioners were also asked to complete a survey at the end of the programme, exploring their reflections on changes for their own practice and benefits for the

⁶ Office for National Statistics. (2020, May). *One in eight British households has no garden*.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/oneineightbritishhouseholdshasnogarden/2020-05-14>

⁷ Judge, L., & Rahman, F. (2020, July). *Lockdown living: Housing quality across the generations*. Resolution Foundation.

<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/07/Lockdown-living.pdf>

⁸ 90% of the parents who completed the survey were mums, 6% dads and 4% had another type of relationship to the child (e.g., grandparent). Nearly 3 in 5 of them were aged between 30 and 39 (58%), while 1 in 5 were aged 20 to 29 (21%) and 40 to 49 (19%). 44% said they speak a language other than English at home. Parents in some programmes (n= 125) were also asked about the employment status of the adults in their household. 1 in 5 (21%) said that none of the adults in the household are in employment. Finally, half of the participating children were identified as female (49.7% vs. male 50.3%).

families and children they work with. 32 practitioners completed this survey between March 2020 and February 2022.

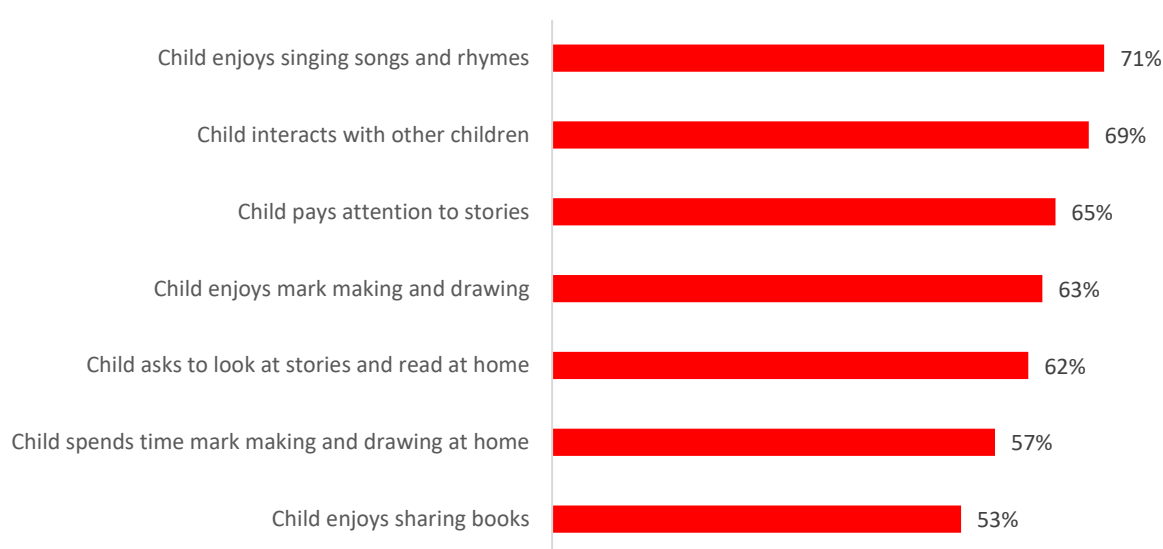
Key findings

- Data collected from 182 parents since March 2020 indicated that the programme has been successful in supporting children's engagement with stories, songs, mark making and interaction with other children:
 - For example, 3 in 5 (65%) parents said that after taking part, their child paid attention to stories more than before.
 - 65% also felt their child interacted with other children more than before after taking part in Early Words Together, which is particularly encouraging in the light of the reduced opportunities for social interaction brought on by the pandemic.
- In addition to changes for children, we also saw positive changes for their parents and for families as a whole:
 - For example, 3 in 4 (76%) parents said they understood the importance of talking to their child more than before, and 3 in 5 (62%) felt more confident to share books with their child.
 - Changes in parents' knowledge and confidence are also reflected in how they engaged in activities with their child. For example, 3 in 5 (60%) shared stories with their child more than before taking part in the programme.
- Analysis of particular families benefiting from the programme based on demographic factors indicated that Early Words Together may have been particularly beneficial for families who speak another language at home and those where none of the adults in the household were in employment:
 - For example, more parents who speak another language at home than those who do not said they shared stories with their child more than before taking part in the programme (73% vs. 50%) and more said they sang songs together with their child more than before (81% vs. 62%).
 - In addition, more parents from households where none of the adults were in employment compared with those from households where at least one parent worked said their child enjoyed sharing books more than before taking part in the programme (80% vs. 43%) and more of these parents reported sharing stories with their child more than before (80% vs. 50%).
- Finally, we also observed changes in practitioners' knowledge and confidence to support parents in engaging with their child's early language and literacy development:
 - This was particularly the case for overall engagement with parents as 97% of practitioners felt increasingly confident and 94% felt increasingly skilled to do so.

Benefits for children’s early literacy engagement

One of the key aims of Early Words Together is to support children’s engagement with stories, songs and mark making. Data collected from 182 parents since March 2020 indicated that the programme has indeed been successful in doing so. For example, 7 in 10 parents said that after taking part, their child enjoyed singing songs and rhymes more than before, while 2 in 3 felt their child paid attention to stories more than before (see Figure 1). In addition, nearly 2 in 3 reported their child enjoyed mark making and drawing more than before and that their children asked to look at stories and books at home more than before.

Figure 1: Percentage of children who engage in positive early literacy more than before Early Words Together as reported by parents



Analysis of parents’ open-ended comments similarly showed that one of the key benefits of the programme was the children’s improved engagement with various activities, including singing songs and rhymes, reading and sharing books, mark making and getting out and about. As the following quotes highlight, many parents indicated changes in these areas following the programme⁹:

“Most of the time she is singing rhymes, she makes her own story, repeats her activities done in school at home.”

“[They are] more interested in books, [they] love reading now.”

“[They are] much more interest in drawing after mark making session.”

“[They are] doing more craft at home and reading books.”

⁹ Please note that some quotes in this report have been amended slightly to aid clarity

“He pays much more attention to his surroundings and is able to identify and name them.”

Children’s increased engagement was also reflected by the improvement in their language skills. This was evident from parents’ comments, which showed that many had noticed a change in their child’s speech and vocabulary skills since taking part in Early Words Together. Many suggested their child had started to talk and use new vocabulary more after taking part:

“It has really helped my little boy to extend his vocabulary in a fun way.”

“I have noticed my child's speech development has improved so much. She is saying more words and making more sentences now.”

“She understands, listening and knowing what we are talking about. She is curious and asks questions.”

“I have seen a lot of progress with my son, he is talking and understanding more and using new words”.

When asked examples of families who particularly benefitted from the programme, several practitioners also talked about children’s improved language development. For example, one practitioner described a child who had previously struggled with their language but had caught up as a result of the programme:

“I have a three-year-old who was on the verge of requiring intervention for his language development and this programme has helped me engage his parents by supporting them with simple strategies they are able to use at home to aid his development. Nine months on, the gaps in his development have closed and he no longer requires intervention.”

However, from the practitioners’ point of view, the improved language development was particularly linked to children’s improved confidence to use language. This was evident from several practitioners’ comments who provided examples of children for whom they had observed an increase in confidence that they linked to language skills:

“...At nursery we have noticed children's language has progressed and they seem more confident in using language.”

“A two year old child who was not saying many words, her parent was really keen to engage in the project. Her parent often asked about activities she could do at home to help her child's language develop. The child benefited from the activities because the sessions developed her confidence”

“A little girl with very limited language at nursery has flourished and become more confident, we feel that this is from her doing the same activities at home and in nursery”

It is also worth noting that Figure 1 above showed that more than 2 in 3 parents (65%) felt their child interacted with other children more after taking part in Early Words Together. This was also evident from parents' comments, which indicated that the programme had provided children with more opportunities to interact with their peers (see quotes below). This suggests that children had an opportunity to develop their communication and social skills, which is particularly encouraging in the light of the reduced possibilities for social interaction brought on by the pandemic.

“I feel other families should also take part in 'Early Words Together' sessions as it makes the child more interactive, independent and confident.”

“[The biggest change for our family has been] more interaction with outdoor activities, [and] improvement in his socialisation with other children.”

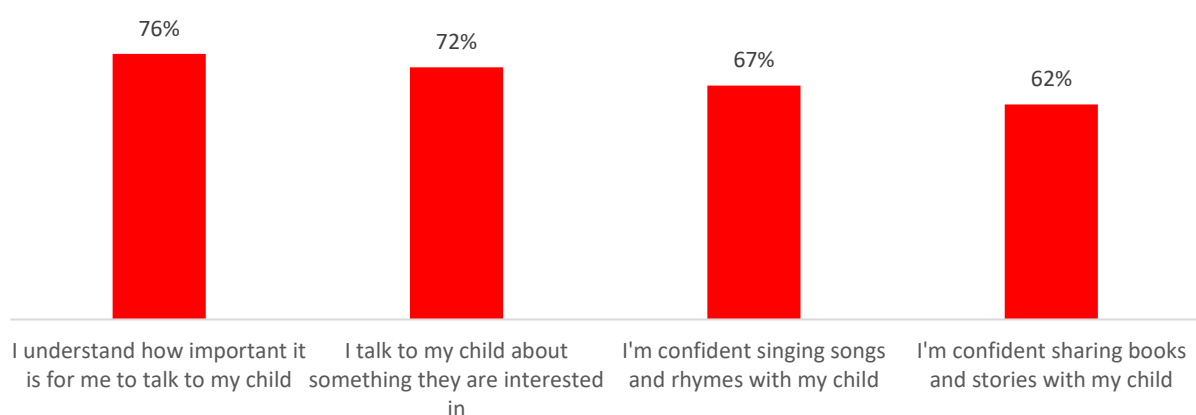
“Socialising with new people, talking more, sharing, making new friends [have been the biggest change following the programme].”

“[It has] been good to see him enjoying creative time with other kids and the staff, as we're not mixing outside nursery at the moment good to see him interacting with others outside the family group.”

Changes for parents and families

In addition to changes for children, we also see positive changes for their parents and for families as a whole. As Figure 2 shows, parents are generally more knowledgeable and confident to support their child's learning. For example, 3 in 4 parents said they understood the importance of talking to their child more than before and nearly 3 in 4 said they talked to their child more. In addition, 2 in 3 felt more confident to sing songs with their child and nearly 2 in 3 felt more confident to share books with their child.

Figure 2: Percentage of parents who indicate they are more knowledgeable or confident to support their child in various areas



These changes were also supported by their comments in the survey. As the following quotes highlight, many parents brought up their increased understanding of the strategies that were introduced throughout the programme and the increased knowledge they had in supporting their child:

“[The change for me has been] making a conscious effort to build conversation around a question or statement he may make”

“Loads of tips for me to support my child, e.g. following her lead, how to share a book without reading it, giving her time to respond I always used to jump in and answer for her but I don’t now. I really learnt such a lot, it has changed how I talk with my daughter and I’m noticing how different she is, she communicates more calmly and seems more confident”

“I [now] do more running commentary and describe what they do”

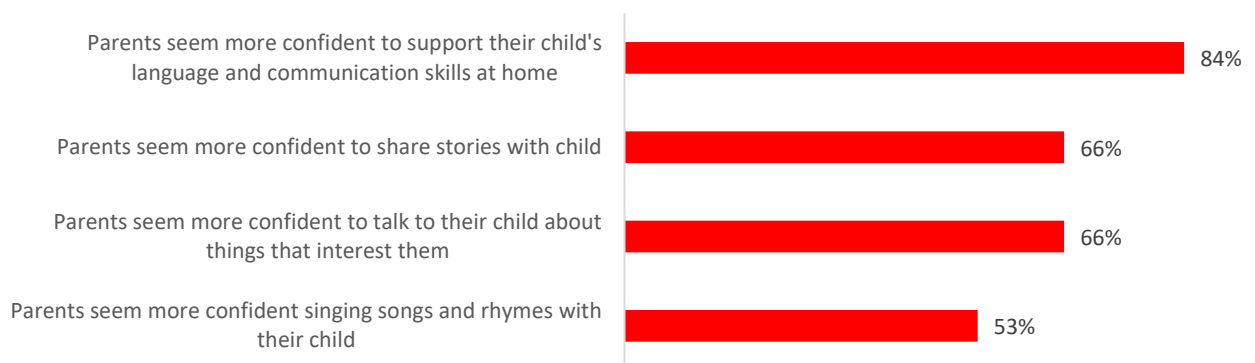
“For me, I have learnt to use more words and also add more 'colour' to words my child says. I am able to expand my child's words. We learn through the activities”

“[I’m now] allowing J time to think and respond, having patience with his development and encouraging speaking before just doing everything for him”

“I have made some new friends and now feel more confident to work with my child.”

Practitioners also reported they had noticed changes in parents’ confidence. As Figure 3 shows, more than 4 in 5 practitioners had noticed parents being confident to support their child’s language and communication skills at home, while 2 in 3 had noticed a positive change in their confidence to share stories with their child and in their confidence to talk to their child about things that interest them. More than half had also noted a positive change in parents’ confidence to sing songs and rhymes with their child.

Figure 3: Percentage of practitioners who have noticed a difference in these areas for parents



It was also evident from practitioners' comments that many of the parents had benefited. In particular in terms of their confidence. Some highlighted parents' being more confident overall to engage with the setting, while others spoke about particular parents who seemed more confident to support their child:

"I have found that parents are now more confident in approaching me around asking for any ideas they can do at home etc"

"The parent felt more confident on supporting the individual needs of the child and with support from the Early Years Team, they created some visuals for the home environment which helped the child with transitions and routine."

"A parent attended who has literacy difficulties herself. She was worried about attending and needed lots of support to come. She really shone in the group speaking up and saying how she makes time to support her children. We witnessed her becoming increasingly confident... To see her confidence grow has been very special"

When practitioners were asked about changes they had noticed for parents following the programme, many also gave examples of parents who had benefited in terms of developing their understanding of how to best support their child and widen the range of ways they support their child at home:

"Yes, one family didn't understand messy play and the process of the children's learning prior to the programme and now will let their child explore this before tidying up so quickly"

"Yes, one family showed a greater understanding of their child's development by the end of the course. Naming things in the environment that they wouldn't normally, going on listening walks etc."

"A particular parent we have supported who did not understand about their child's language developmental needs. We were able to educate her about language development and different targets for different age groups. We were also able to share tips and ideas on how to support both in the nursery and at home."

"A parent used to focus on teaching her child ABCD and numbers. Encouraged her to use words to name objects and self-talk of what is being done. She has reported she has implemented and she's seeing improvement."

These changes in parents' knowledge and confidence are also reflected in how they engage in activities with their child. Figure 4 presents the percentage of parents who engaged in various activities with their child more after taking part in Early Words Together and shows that 7 in 10 of them chatted and sang songs with their child more than before, while 3 in 5

shared stories more than before and more than half painted or drew more than before. However, fewer parents (37%) reported that they engage in digital learning activities more than before, despite the focus on supporting them to do so during the pandemic.

Figure 4: Percentage of parents who spend more time than before doing these activities with their child



Particular families who benefited from the programme

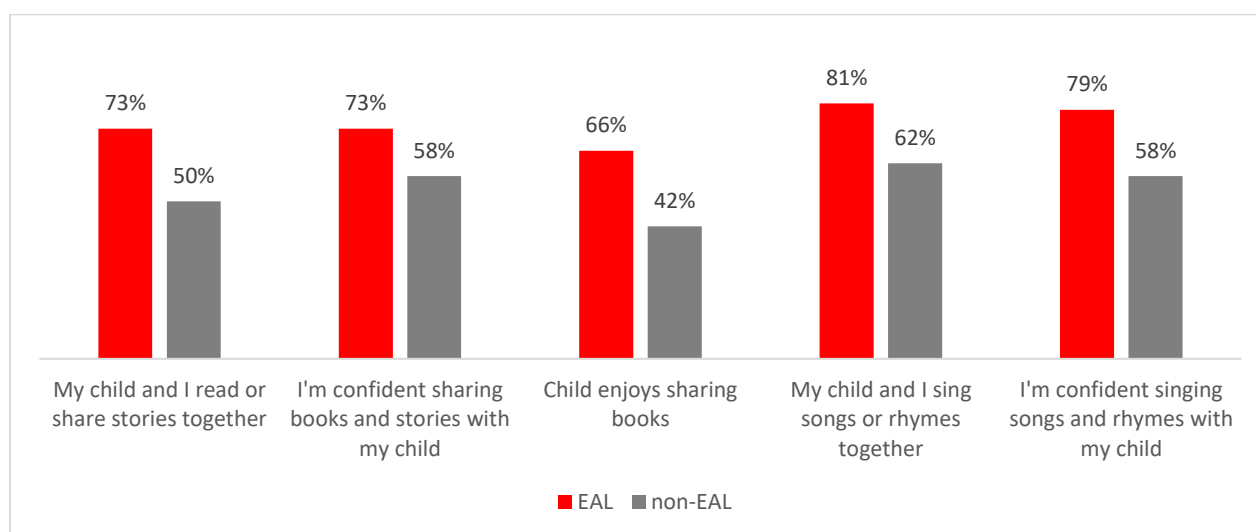
Analysis of any particular families benefiting from the programme based on demographic factors indicated that Early Words Together has been particularly beneficial for families who speak another language at home and those where none of the adults in the household were in employment¹⁰.

Interestingly, the survey data from parents who speak another language than English at home¹¹ indicated that the programme may have been particularly beneficial for them in terms of sharing stories and singing songs and rhymes. More of the parents who speak another language at home than those who do not said they shared stories with their child more than before taking part and felt more confident doing so (see Figure 5). More of them also said their child enjoyed sharing books at home more after taking part in the programme. More of the parents who speak another language than English at home also said they sang songs together with their child more than before and felt confident doing so.

¹⁰ It is important to note that the analyses compared parents who indicated they or their child did something more, the same or less than before, and thus do not reflect true change, e.g., we do not know whether certain families already engaged in specific activities frequently and hence they were not able to do it "more".

¹¹ EAL 44.4%; n= 80, non-EAL 55.6%; n= 100

Figure 5: Percentage of parents who speak another language than English at home and those who do not who indicated they or their child engaged in activities more after taking part in Early Words Together



Practitioners’ comments support these findings as many indicated they had observed changes for those who speak another language than English at home. They highlighted that the programme activities supported these families with confidence and ideas, and improved the children’s language skills as the following comments show:

“All the families chosen [benefited], especially those who are EAL. The skilful ways of the staff and the nature of the EWT activities increase their confidence in interacting with fluent speakers of English who reached out to them by where possible allowing freely for them to communicate in their home language.”

“One Polish/Kurdish family have particularly benefited. A parent has thanked me for giving her lots of ideas on what she can do at home to encourage her son’s speech and language development.”

“A bilingual child, [who] understood everything but [their speech was limited]. A few weeks after joining EWT, the child had increased his vocabulary, by giving mum tools to work with the child he was able to learn more words and build up his vocabulary “

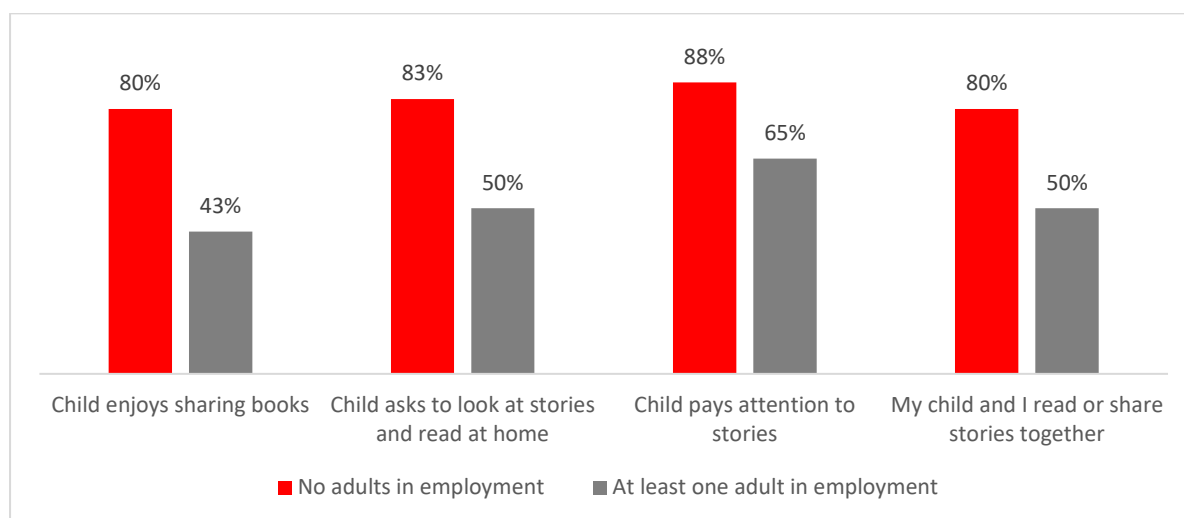
“We had a French child who parents really enjoyed it and felt their child's English was improving.”

In addition to the families’ linguistic background, the programme seems to have been particularly successful in supporting families where none of the adults are in employment¹².

¹² Parents from households not in employment: 20.8%; n= 26; Parents from households where at least one adult works 79.2%; n= 99

As Figure 6 shows, more of these parents compared with those from households where at least one parent is working said their child enjoyed sharing books more than before taking part in Early Words Together. The children asked to look at stories more than before and paid attention to stories more than before. In addition, more of these parents reported sharing stories with their child more than before.

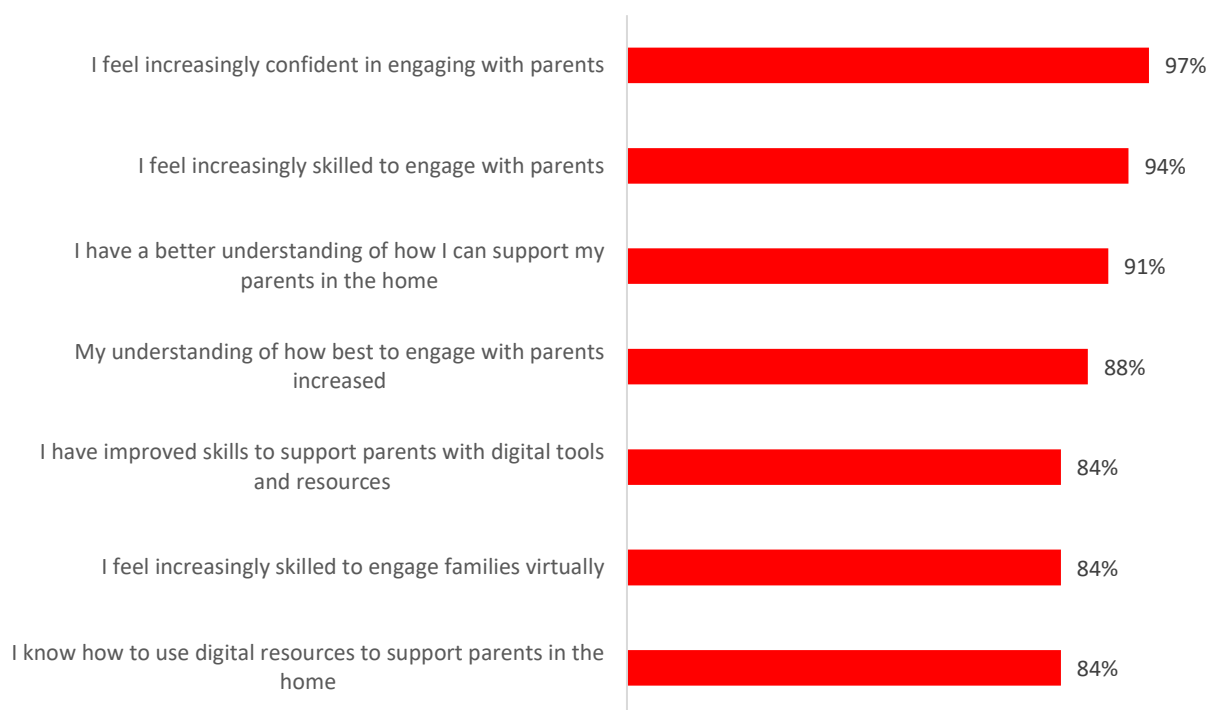
Figure 6: Percentage of parents from households where none of the adults are in employment and those where at least one adult is in employment who indicated they or their child engaged in activities more after taking part in Early Words Together



Changes for practitioners' knowledge and confidence

The positive changes for children and families are underpinned by changes in practitioners' knowledge and confidence to support parents in engaging with their child's early language and literacy development. This was particularly the case for overall engagement with parents as 97% of practitioners felt increasingly confident to do so and 94% felt increasingly skilled to do so (see Figure 7). In addition, over 4 in 5 felt increasingly skilled to engage with parents virtually. Nearly 9 in 10 felt their understanding of how best to engage with parents overall increased as part of the programme.

Figure 7: Percentage of practitioners who feel the programme increased their knowledge and confidence to support parents in their setting



In sum

This report shows that Early Words Together at Two has been beneficial for children, families and practitioners. The programme has successfully supported children’s engagement with stories, songs, mark making and interaction with other children and increased parents’ confidence and knowledge on how to best support their child’s early literacy at home. Practitioners have also benefited as their knowledge and confidence to support parents in engaging with their child’s early language and literacy development have increased.

It is encouraging to note that the programme is particularly beneficial for families where none of the adults in the household are in employment, as we seek to deliver the programme through early years settings with high numbers of families accessing two-year-old funded childcare which is provided for families in England receiving qualifying benefits. The benefits for families who speak another language at home are similarly encouraging and have been noted in previous evaluations. This has led us to create a version of Early Words Together specifically focussing on developing support for parents and children new to English. The strategies honed through the multilingual programme have now been embedded throughout the suite of home learning environment programmes that aim to provide unique support at each particular stage of a child’s pre-school life.

The programme is one of several we offer to support children and their families in the first years of their lives. Our programme for under-tuos, First Words Together, builds parents’

awareness of how babies communicate long before they start to talk; through gestures, showing and giving objects, pointing and vocalising, and gives practitioners and parents' the skills and confidence to support this early communication. Early Words Together at Three continues to develop children's early language and communication skills, with specific activities designed to raise phonological awareness in families at this key age before a child starts school. Early Words Together for four to five-year-olds emphasises the importance of repeating key activities in the home learning environment that are the most impactful in improving early literacy, and supports parents to develop their skills and confidence in sharing books in ways that help their children learn.