



SUBMISSION

Early Learning Strategic Plan

(Round one, online survey)

Submission 090/18

Prepared by campaign director Alison Sutton on behalf of Talking Matters, July 2018

Talking Matters is a campaign of



[COMET Auckland - Te Hononga Akoranga](#) is an independent charitable trust and Auckland Council's CCO focused on education, skills and lifelong learning across Auckland and, increasingly, other parts of the country. Our latest Statement of Intent is [here](#).

About Talking Matters

Talking Matters is a campaign to encourage us to talk more and differently to babies and young children. Talking Matters promotes the importance and impact of early oral language in young children's development. It is a multi-year, multi-sector collaborative campaign involving family facing health and wellbeing services, early learning providers, schools, education providers, researchers and professional development experts.

The quality and quantity of talk and interaction with a child in their 0-5 years sets a child up for future educational success and life opportunities.

Rate the system 1-5

I am going for 2.

In your opinion, what are the strengths of New Zealand's early learning system?

The aspiration of 3+ age children in quality early learning is admirable.

Putting qualified teachers in front of most children

Te Whaariki, a national responsive curriculum for early learning that is flexible and that takes into account language, culture and wellbeing

The opportunities for children to be in an early learning environment in their first language (although problems with IELTS language screening for teachers of those languages means this opportunity is increasingly at risk).

What could be improved about our early learning system? Tell us about the most important first.

The system needs to have an explicit and sustained focus on building the oral language of our infants and toddlers. Why? Oral language is an 'engine' for learning, thinking, literacy and life success. A child's early years (0-3) are particularly important for brain development and language. Language predicts future learning potential.

The education system must focus on early language specifically because language is an equity issue. A child's early language plays a role in their life chances. The quality and quantity of talk available to the child by age 7 months predicts their vocabulary, conceptual understanding and expression at age 2 years (Newman, R. 2015). By age 5, children who have been involved in rich communication on a day-to-day basis enjoy a huge language and conceptual advantage over their peers who have had less opportunity. Children are more at risk of having limited early language when they are in low socio-economic communities, when families are under considerable toxic stress. Early language is best developed in a family's home language, not just English.

Currently most early language initiatives focus on 3-5 year olds and school readiness. This investment does not align to the research findings that are very clear about the importance of developing language early. There about 81,500 children under 3 currently in licenced early learning services and the number is growing. Our system needs to adapt to provide services that meet their unique needs. Very small children can only develop language through sustained conversations with adults – back and forth talk where adults notice and respond.

For optimal development, children need repeated, child-focused and meaningful interactions with a responsive carer. Our policies, processes, staff ratios, licensing arrangements, group sizes and professional practices need to ensure all children experience this responsive interaction repeatedly each day (through talk-accompanied daily routines, play with talk, storytelling, shared reading, singing etc). There is a downstream benefit for this focus on talk. Strong early language increases the likelihood that children will learn to read easily

Some children are not experiencing this language rich interaction on a sustained basis. The ERO report [**Extending their language - expanding their world: children's oral language \(birth - 8 years\)**](#) illustrates that many services are not providing quality language-rich environments.

Dr Alison Leversha's *Welcome to School* study of 120 new entrants in Tāmaki demonstrates how children who have attended ECE may still start school with low language. *Welcome to School* also highlights the complex connection of health and wellbeing. The study found children who had oral language well below developmental norms, were not identified as having issues by health services, parents or ECE services.

What role could the government play in raising the quality of early learning services?

1. Support the sector to build capability around early language

- Substantially increase access to early language-related professional development particularly for 0-3 services. Provide additional sustained PD opportunities about early language for services operating in other languages.
- Focus early language initiatives on the under 2s, not just on the 3+ years and school readiness.
- Establish a network of expertise for early language (include school transition, speech and language and Year 1 of school expertise in that group). Oral language is not a subject per se, so expertise is not widely available around the country. Some Kahui Ako are starting to focus on early language at age 5, which is useful and important but too late. An Early Language Network of Expertise would expand the professional learning and development support across the system.
- Work with initial teacher educators to increase the intentional focus on early language. New teachers do not know enough about children's language development trajectories.

2. Create systems that support language-rich services

- Increase the teacher to child ratio and reduce group size, so children have a much greater opportunity to have talk with adults, particularly for ages 0-3.
- Make stable relationships a feature of quality standards and systems. Very small children need a primary caregiver (high quality services provide this). Unfortunately, ratios, group sizes and rostering can make it very difficult to achieve.
- Provide more guidance to services about the fundamental relationship between attachment, language development and self-regulation. Building strong attachment happens through

loving touch and talk. To develop self-regulation and executive function, children need a language for expressing emotions and controlling their behaviours.

- Increase access to specialist advice and support for children with early speech and language issues. Working with children intensively and early is the best way to reduce the likelihood of language issues later. The current system makes it almost impossible to get language support for toddlers and 3 year olds.
- Work with the sector on teacher capability, particularly when a growing number of early learning teachers are from diverse backgrounds. Issues include moving from instructional language to responsive back and forth conversations so children have the opportunity to grow vocabulary and take more turns in conversation; supporting overseas born teachers with diverse accents and different ways of articulating English

3. Recognise the importance of early language in cross-agency work for vulnerable and priority children

- Include early language in child wellbeing policy and service settings (e.g. Whānau Ora, Foster Care provision, Family Start, child mental health services, etc).
- Support Talking Matters to raise awareness of the power and impact of early language with families, whānau/aiga through social media and public awareness campaigns
- Systematically link early learning services able to access child health and development expertise from public health and wellchild services

What role could the government play in supporting all young children to learn and thrive regardless of background?

- Being read to is important for all children and is a particularly important protective factor for at risk children. Government could substantially increase the range of resources available in mother-tongue and home languages to support early learning in young children regardless of background. This would build on the success of the bi-lingual resources. For wide general take up, the resources need to come with guidelines (and videos) about facilitating conversations with parents (and coaching videos).
- Increase the free /readily available resources for low-literate adults to read to infants and toddlers (which may not be the same as the resources above). Many of the families with whom we work in Talking Matters have book-free homes and they are reluctant library users. Government has a role in creating a seamless book provision pipeline for vulnerable communities in the early years. Storytime Foundation provides free books for infants and toddlers for some Deprivation Index 9-10 families; Duffy Books brings books into some low-income homes. There is a gap in making books accessible for the 1-3 age groups around the country.
- We endorse the availability of Early Reading Together for communities and ECE services. We would like that material refreshed and made more visually attractive, with increased support for its use. Early Reading Together has great potential.
- Strengthen the quality of the early learning sector generally. Its only high quality care that provides an advantage to children, particularly priority children and ERO reports illustrate just how far many services have yet to travel.