

Evaluation of Talking Time©: Plain English Summary of Results

Trial registration: ISRCTN84530173 (<https://doi.org/10.1186/ISRCTN8453017>)

Why was this study done?

Children growing up in economically disadvantaged households are more likely to have speech, language and communication difficulties than their more advantaged peers. These gaps tend to open up early and widen over time, with knock-on effects for children's later school achievement, wellbeing and employment prospects. Nursery staff often lack the training and confidence to build activities that support oral language into everyday practice.

Talking Time© is a programme designed to help close this gap. It gives early years practitioners high-quality training in supporting children's language development, then asks them to run short, structured small-group sessions with three- and four-year-olds twice a week. Earlier, smaller studies of Talking Time© had found promising effects on children's vocabulary, but were too small, or disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, to provide strong evidence.

What did the study involve?

This was a randomised controlled trial (RCT). It involved 123 nursery settings across England, including 97 maintained or school-based nurseries and 26 private, voluntary and independent providers. Settings were randomly allocated either to deliver Talking Time© (62 settings) or to continue with their usual practice as a comparison group (61 settings).

Around 1,700 children aged three to four years took part. Their language skills were assessed before the programme began, in autumn 2024, and again after it finished, in summer 2025, using standard tests of vocabulary, picture description and grammar. Practitioners in Talking Time© settings received training and ongoing mentoring, then delivered two 15-minute small-group sessions per week for 20 weeks. Alongside the main trial, researchers also spoke with practitioners, setting leaders and trainers to understand how well the programme was delivered and what people thought of it.

What did we find?

On average, children in Talking Time© settings made about one month's additional progress in their overall language development, compared with children in the comparison settings. Looking more closely at different aspects of language, the benefit was strongest for children's expressive vocabulary (their ability to name and use words), and weakest for grammar, where no clear overall benefit was found.

Children eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium funding, and children learning English as an additional language, appeared to benefit somewhat more, making around two months' additional progress. However, these were smaller groups of children, so these particular results are less certain and should be treated as encouraging rather than conclusive.

How well was the programme delivered?

Implementation generally went to plan. Four in five children attended at least 80% of sessions. Practitioners felt well trained and confident to deliver the programme, and reported that some of what they learned, such as having longer conversations with children, carried over into everyday practice beyond the formal sessions.

Staff also described some challenges: high staff turnover made it harder to keep trained practitioners in post, and fitting two sessions into a busy nursery timetable required flexibility. A small follow-up study around a year later found that most settings visited (seven of nine) were still running the programme, though two had stopped, mainly because trained staff had left.

What does this mean?

Overall, Talking Time© produced a small but reliable improvement in young children's language development, particularly their spoken vocabulary, and was generally well received and well delivered by nursery staff. The findings are broadly in line with earlier, smaller studies of the programme.

Limitations of the study include the following. About 16% of the children who started the trial could not be included in the final results, mainly because they were absent on testing days or had moved to a different nursery. Many settings, in both the programme and comparison groups, were also running other oral language activities alongside the trial, which may have narrowed the apparent difference between the two groups. Finally, because the study measured attendance at Talking Time© sessions specifically, rather than practitioners' overall engagement with its ideas, and did not directly measure change in practitioners' knowledge and confidence, some of the finer detail of how the programme achieves its effects remains uncertain.

Cost

Running Talking Time© cost an average of around £3,500 per setting, or roughly £64 per child per year when averaged over three years, covering training and programme management. This does not include the additional staff time practitioners said the programme required, which was not formally costed.

Further information

This trial is registered with ISRCTN (isrctn.com), registration number ISRCTN84530173. It was funded by the Education Endowment Foundation together with four Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs — Liverpool City Region and Beyond, A Brighter Start, REACHout, and Thrive Together — as part of the Department for Education's Early Years Education Recovery programme.