



“Let’s talk about the Early Years Conversation Project”



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A conversation between two mentors...



The [Early Years Conversation Project](#) (EYCP) is a programme designed and delivered by the [East London Research School](#) and funded by the [Education Endowment Foundation](#) (EEF) and the DfE through [A Brighter Start - East London’s Early Years Stronger Practice Hub](#). It aims to develop the interactions of practitioners with children, to improve the communication and language skills of two and three year olds.

Marion Samuel and Anni McTavish are mentors for the EYCP. As mentors, they help settings to put what they’ve learned on the EYCP training into practice. This might mean checking that everyone is consistently using the strategies they have been trained in. Or helping settings to overcome barriers to implementation, like key staff leaving and new staff needing to be trained. Without good implementation, a programme will fail. As mentors, Anni and Marion are there to help settings to succeed and make the EYCP programme work as planned.

I wanted to get a feel of their work and how it’s going. We talked ...

How would you describe the role of being a mentor on the EYCP?

Marion: “Well, it’s varied and interesting which is always a plus.

“Our work is all about supporting (or mentoring) the *EYCP champion* in the settings we visit. The champion is the practitioner who advocates for and leads the EYCP programme – sometimes we refer to them as a *mentee*.

“We start by building a relationship with them and then support them with understanding and implementing the four [ShREC strategies](#). So, a substantial part of our role is sharing knowledge and practice of this evidence-informed approach.

“Every setting and EYCP Champion are different, so we must be flexible. We try to build on their strengths and sensitively guide them. Fortunately, the programme runs over 8 months, so this gives us plenty of time for the mentoring to work.”

What attracted you to applying?

Anni: “We both enjoy being part of a group – this gives us the opportunity to collaborate, learn and reflect together.

“We also think it’s important to spread the word about an evidence-informed approach. It’s safe to say we’re strong advocates of ShREC.

“Also, we both have experience in nurturing relationships with settings and individual practitioners. This was a big motivating factor.”

What does a day / session in the life of a mentor look like?

Marion: “Well, this depends on where we are in the programme.

The first and final visits are 2 hours of observations where we focus on communication, interactions and reading practices.

“The monthly support visits are 1 hour – in these we meet with our EYCP Champion and video each other using the ShREC strategies with the children. At first this can feel a little awkward, as both mentor and mentee can feel vulnerable being recorded. It’s worthwhile though as it’s such a useful learning process for mentors and mentees. It becomes second nature as the weeks progress, and we all become more confident.

“We also have EYCP Hub meetings (online and in-person) – these are when we come together as a group of settings (up to seven) and review our training, picking out key points to discuss. We also watch videos of interactions and analyse how we all use the strategies. These meetings are fundamental to the programme - we’ve seen the group gel and develop the confidence to share their work.”

How would you describe the process you are making?

Anni: “We’re lucky enough to see some fantastic progress.

“Our mentees have grown in confidence and are developing their ability to reflect on their interactions with children. They too are making changes to their practice - some things might seem small but have huge impact – such as waiting a little longer for the child to speak or asking fewer questions.

It’s very rewarding to see such progress.”

What do you consider to be the main challenges?

Marion: “It can be tricky to fit everything into a one-hour visit. There’s a lot to do so it’s important for us to manage our time well.

“Settings are also very busy with a lot going on, so we need to find ways of working around their timetables and prior commitments.

“Staffing issues arise, including one mentee leaving! We usually manage to overcome these things.

“We’ve certainly developed our skills in adaptability!”

Can you name the single greatest change that you’ve seen?

Anni: “Oh, it’s difficult to select just one. I think I’d say that many settings have made their spaces cosier and more welcoming, such as creating a book corner that’s inviting. This helps children to enjoy regular shared book reading which is so beneficial to their language development”

Marion: “I agree, there are lots to choose from. The main one for me has to be the positive outcomes for children with additional needs. The ShREC approach focuses on developing communication and language for children with SEND who are non-verbal or have limited verbal interactions. They have more of a voice - what more could I wish for?

By Caroline Vollans

