



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



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A conversation with a mentor - Changes made by the EYCP



The Early Years Conversation Project (EYCP) is ‘a wonderful experience’ and a ‘revelation’, according to practitioners taking part.

But that doesn’t mean changing practice is easy.

This is the second post in a series of blogs focussing on the experiences of participants in the EYCP. 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.

Emma Williams is a mentor for the EYCP. As a mentor Emma helps settings put what she has learned on the EYCP training into practice. Without good implementation, a programme will fail.

I wanted to get a feel of how Emma is finding her work. We talked ...

What was your initial reaction to getting involved in the EYCP?

Excitement!

The programme sounded so promising to me – it's simple, clear and accessible.

I was full of hope. It felt to me that change was achievable.

What have you found to be the most effective aspect of the project?

Using the [ShREC](#) approach - I would go so far as to say that this has been a revelation. I can't stop talking to practitioners about it!

- it's easy and inclusive
- we don't need fancy resources or additional adults or time
- we can do it on the bus, on our way to school and whenever an opportunity arises
- it gives children confidence, space and respect

How has being a mentor most significantly affected your work?

It's given me the privilege of being able to work with several nursery settings and effect change – what I mean by this is *meaningful change*. So, change that's not just for the sake of change, but considered and reflective. I see changes in practice and children's progress in communication and language.

Such changes are always unique to the setting. This is a standout point about the EYCP - we can use it and adapt it to many different settings.

I've been lucky enough to see some fantastic progress.

Can you say something about one particular change?

I've been working with settings on reviewing lunchtimes. Slight tweaks now mean that children wait less and have more opportunities for quality interactions and conversations.

This is just one example of making the most of every opportunity for talking. The same applies to nappy times, toilet times, washing hands and transition times – staff no longer rush these but use them to maximise quality interactions.

Other changes include:

- having smaller snack times / tables – this helps maximise opportunities for talking
- one setting has done away with large story times at the end of sessions, opting for smaller more interactive story sessions throughout the day. Again, this maximises the quality back and forth conversations that can occur during smaller group interactive sessions

What challenges have you encountered in the program?

It hasn't been smooth sailing - there are always bumps along the way where change is involved. Even though barriers crop up in one way or other, they are never insurmountable. It is how we think around them that matters. We must be creative thinkers and doers!

For example, with staff turnover – it can feel like you are starting all over again.

Support from senior leaders is vital.

Is there anything else that you'd like to say about your experiences and learning?

I'd really like to share with you some of the words of the EYCP Champions in the settings I have mentored:

"It's been a joy taking part in this programme. It's so well thought out and impactful. I particularly appreciate how accessible it is and includes all children irrespective of what stage they are in their learning journey."

"Simple changes such as going from a whole class end of day story to small group conversation time has made a real difference to us – it ensures that each child gets high quality interactions every day. I can't speak highly enough about all the ways it has made me a more reflective practitioner. I wish every setting had the opportunity to take part in this wonderful program!"

"The project has been a wonderful experience for me, and I am looking forward to making the ShREC approach part of everyday in Randolph Beresford. I have seen a huge shift in my children's language, particularly one child - he barely spoke when he joined in September, but he now talks every day to adults and peers. The project has also been great for children who are non-verbal - I have noticed higher quality interactions as staff use the ShREC approach. The project has helped me be more reflective about how I interact with children, and I've noticed a positive difference in the staff!"

By Caroline Vollans

