



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



Caroline Vollans is the lead writer and editor for Sheringham’s SPH. Caroline is a psychoanalyst and writer. She writes for Nursery World, family and the Foundation Stage Forum, and is author of Wise Words: How Susan Isaacs changed parenting (Routledge 2018) and co-editor of Putting the EYFS Curriculum into Practice (Sage 2023).

Lindsay Read has been teaching since 2002. She started off her career in KS1 before following her passion and joining the early years team. She is currently the Assistant Head Teacher and Forest School Lead across two maintained nursery schools in Waltham Forest. Lindsay loves spending time with the children, supporting them as they follow their lines of enquiry – watching them grow, develop and learn.



“We’re never too old or experienced to learn a new skill.”

Lindsay Read, EYCP mentor

This blog is a part of a series focussing on the experiences of participants in The Early Years Conversation Project. The [Early Years Conversation Project](#) (EYCP) is a programme designed and delivered by the [East London Research School](#) (ELRS) 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.

Lindsay Read is a *mentor* for the EYCP. As a mentor Lindsay helps settings put what they have learned on the EYCP training into practice.

I wanted to get a sense of how Lindsay’s work is going.
We talked ...

What would you say is the most important quality a mentor needs to have?

I think a mentor needs to be open-minded and respectful.

When I visit a new setting, though it may not reflect what I would like to see, I have to bear in mind that it may work for that setting.

Mentors need to recognise the strengths of a setting. If we can communicate this it gets us off to a good start, enabling us to work together.

Now the second most important.

The ability to share honest feedback- a mentor needs to be able to share both the strengths of a setting and the areas that could do with development.

Building a relationship with the EYCP champion is key. Importantly, it must be reciprocal relationship and dialogue where both parties feel able to be honest.

It helps if the mentor has a sound knowledge of research. This shows that they have a rationale for their feedback, it's not just their opinion.

In terms of children's language development, what do you think is the most significant/effective aspect of the programme?

The [ShREC approach](#): this really increases our awareness of how we communicate with young children.

I also adore [interactive reading](#) - it's ideal for encouraging language and conversation. It's really effective for children who have SEND and who might struggle to engage with a story telling session.

What have been the barriers to making changes?

Some settings get used to a particular way of working-one that has been established for a long time. This usually means that they find the idea of change difficult. We must recognise this and manage it carefully.

It is essential for the mentor to work closely with the setting and build a good working relationship. The programme will only work if the staff are on board- committing to meetings, trainings sessions and, of course, the changes that will come out of these.

What is the main challenge you have faced?

Encouraging managers to release the EYCP champions for the in-person meetings. These are invaluable in creating a network for practitioners where they can share successes, pitfalls and advice. It's an opportunity that very rarely happens for the Early Years sector.

The attendance was particularly hard for settings that were further away.

Now the second.

Getting settings to recognise the many ways in which children with SEND communicate. We all need to know the conversations look different for different people-interactions don't always include the spoken word.

Children with SEND benefit hugely from the practices developed and honed through the EYCP, and it's joy to see them flourish with the back-and-forth interactions.

Have you witnessed a moment you are bursting to share- good or bad?

In one setting, I observed a story time where one child didn't seem to be engaging. He was on the pathway for an ASD assessment and was non-verbal.

Towards the end of the project, I re-observed him when he joined an interactive reading session. During this, he engaged with the book, the practitioner and one of the other children. It was magical!

The practitioner was overwhelmed- it was the first time he'd chosen to interact with a shared experience.

How would you like to see the EYCP develop?

It would be great if it was a part of the training for a Level 1 qualification.

Imagine the impact if every child was having these high quality interactions with every practitioner from the moment they joined the setting!

Is there any final comment you'd like to make about the programme?

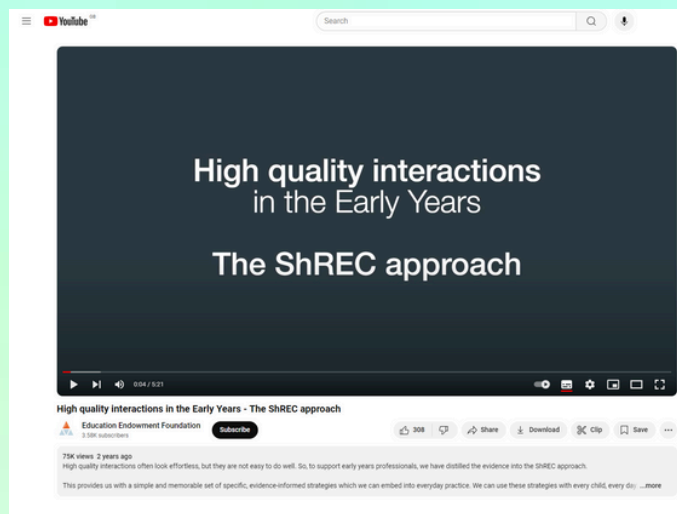
I've been teaching for a long time now and thought I knew all about high quality interactions. However, we're never too old or experienced to learn a new skill. Being part of the ShREC team supporting the EYCP has really developed my personal practice.

I am so excited and honoured to be able to share this with other practitioners in my role as a mentor.

By Caroline Vollans

Further reading:

[Video of the ShREC approach](#): EEF and Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre



[Webinar on the ShREC approach](#): PACEY: High Quality Interactions in the early years - The ShREC approach explained.

