



“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).

Siobhan Campbell is Assistant Director for The East London Research School and has worked as a mentor for The Early Years Conversation Project. Her background is in primary school teaching and leadership.



“If I were to daydream about the optimum future for EYCP, it would be mandated.”

Siobhan Campbell, EYCP mentor

This is the fourth post in a series of blogs 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.

Siobhan Campbell is a mentor for the EYCP. As a mentor Siobhan helps settings put what they have learned on the EYCP training into practice. I wanted to get a sense of how Siobhan is finding the EYCP programme and her work.

We talked ...

Just thinking about the EYCP programme overall, Siobhan, what would you say is its greatest strength?

I think a huge strength of the programme is how versatile it can be. Every setting operates in its own unique way and, in my experience, the EYCP can fit in somewhere or other.

Having said that, it's not always easy to adapt to a new programme. It's here that the outside eyes of a mentor can be helpful. Part of taking on any new approach involves adjustments and inevitable teething problems- I've found that my input can help practitioners solve these difficulties and obstacles. This part of the work always feels especially satisfying.

Can you name one more way in which you think your role as a mentor makes a difference?

I think I'll have to say that a mentor can mean that the intervention doesn't lose flight: our routine visits support repeated practice and offer motivation and reassurance. Being there alongside the Champion can be a boost if things are a bit tricky or a little lacking in energy.

What would you say is the greatest change you've seen with EYCP?

I know how I'll answer this one straight away!

It happened when an EYCP champion felt they had the evidence-informed licence to follow their instincts-they did, and it was incredible. I think they were confident on an intellectual level about the power of the intervention, but also *felt* that it was the right thing for the children they care for and educate. This combination led to their blossoming- it was wonderful to witness.

Oh hearing that, it sounds like you consider the EYCP to be an empowering programme for the Champions?

The very nature of the word 'champion' indicates how much EYCP is about empowering or 'championing' practitioners to be long term advocates of good practice.

Using the RNAR (Rehearse, Notice, Analyse and Refine) framework with the mentor's support helps enable this. RNAR comes from the [Talking Time evaluation](#):

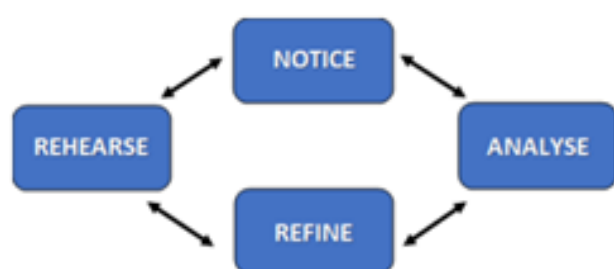


Figure 1: The Rehearse, Notice, Analyse and Refine (RNAR) cycle used to embed language-supporting practice

I feel that two of my champions are moving in their practice in a way that's becoming so habitual that it will change the way they approach their wider practice. I think of it as an example of the [Butterfly Effect](#).

So, I've heard about some of the positives, but what about the more challenging or problematic aspects of the EYCP. What would you say is the main one?

I think progress is limited when the approach of an individual or setting doesn't 'naturally' align with being attuned to children and sharing attention with them- as in [the ShREC approach](#). This tends to be in settings where the day is more structured with many adult-led activities. The success of the intervention has a ceiling in such cases.

Arguably, this is where the intervention is needed most, so it's important to address this. Those who sign up for EYCP are already on the right path. But what about those who wouldn't give it a second glance – how can a programme of intervention reach those?

Now's your chance to say one final thing about the EYCP – whatever you'd like to share'

If I were to daydream about the optimum future for EYCP, it would be mandated! Such is my conviction that this intervention is an engine for better practice. Its genius is that it seems simple, yet the changes that ripple from it are so powerful. My conviction comes from the evidence-base and from my experience on the project this year.

The EYCP has implications for so many areas of early years practice - continuous provision; making the most of the everyday; SEND; multilingualism and so on. Developing a good core practice such as communication also helps to develop other aspects of practice - again, it's the Butterfly Effect!

By Caroline Vollans

Further reading:

EYCP: Sheringham Nursery School and Children’s Centre.

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Early Years Conversation Project

Research tells us that the early years are highly important in determining a child's future. All children deserve access to high-quality education and care.

What happens early matters for a lifetime.

- Do you want to learn about the brain-building power of conversation, and how it improves children's communication and wellbeing?
- Do you want to learn effective strategies that you can use with every child, every day?

If so... the Early Years Conversation Project (EYCP) is for you!

EYCP is based on a strong body of research evidence that consistently shows that communication and language approaches benefit young children's learning. Early language ability is one of the strongest predictors of later development through school and in life. Language is essential for thinking, social and emotional wellbeing and learning in all areas of development.

A Brighter Start, East London's Early Years Stranger Practice Hub is delighted to invite applications from early years' settings to take part in this study (funded by the Education Endowment Foundation) to evaluate the Early Years Conversation Project.

Programme Details

Delivered by Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre, the programme aims to develop staff's interactions with children to improve the language skills of two- and three-year-olds. The evaluation will be led by Durham University.

- 20 hours of training over 6 months (blended online and in person). This averages 3-4 hours a month.
- FREE training material in either 2024/25 or 2025/26 (depending on randomisation).
- £600 incentive payment.
- 50% of staff costs.
- Settings are supported by a mentor who will offer tailored support throughout the project.

Sheringham SPH (2024): [5 things to know about Talking Time](#)

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Stranger Practice Hub

Early Years Conversation Project

5 things to know about...

Talking Time



Caroline Williams 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 Lewis changed parenting* (Knowledge 2018) and co-editor of *Putting the EYF5 Curriculum into Practice* (Sage 2023).

The association between oral language delay and long-term negative educational and social outcomes is clear.

Talking Time is an evidence-based programme that addresses this concern.

1

Talking time is a small intervention for all children

Talking Time is a structured intervention with a manual to guide practitioners. The programme aims to give practitioners the tools they need to improve their interactions, thus creating a high quality language-learning environment for young children.

Every child has equal access to Talking Time: it is not only for children with SEND, EAL or who are living with disadvantage.

Led by Dr Sandra Mathers (University of Oxford), Professor Julie Dockrell (University College London) and the late Professor James Law (Newcastle Uni), this programme has been developed and refined over many years.

2

It is evidence based

Talking Time draws on much the same evidence as:

- ① [Early Years Conversation Project](#): a 6-month sustained programme to improve children's communication through CYP.
- ② [The Jolly Approach](#): four specific strategies used to improve their interactions.