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# Supporting Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) Development in the Early Years: An Evidence Review of Universal, Population and Targeted Interventions

## Executive Summary

### 1. Background

1.1 The Welsh Government has a continuing commitment to ensuring all children have the best start in life. An important contribution to this is ensuring all children have the best opportunity to develop strong speech, language and communication skills, leading to better outcomes in older childhood and adulthood. While some will need specialist intervention, many children have transient needs in the development of these skills which could be eliminated with early intervention. There is evidence that these universal, population and targeted interventions are effective but it is less clear which are the most robust and likely to convey the most benefit to children according to their need.

### 2. Research aims and methodology

- 2.1 The aim of this research was to identify interventions which have strong evidence of improving SLC outcomes for children aged 0 to 4 years 11 months and could be adopted or adapted for use across Wales at a universal, population and targeted level.
- 2.2 The objectives of each review were to:
1. Review the current evidence base for perinatal/infant mental health interventions and identify the SLC elements of these interventions
  2. Review current evidence of parenting interventions and identify the SLC elements of these interventions
  3. Review current evidence regarding SLC interventions available at Universal, Population and Targeted levels.
- 2.3 Three rapid scoping reviews were undertaken to address these objectives using a modified version of the methodology outlined by The Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine (2020). The same methodology was used for each review.
- 2.4 Those interventions which were categorised as a manualised programme style intervention using the descriptions provided in the Better Communication Research Project (BCRP) categories of interventions (Roulstone et al., 2012) and also had Level 1 evidence (at least

one randomised controlled trial) from the hierarchy of evidence formulated by the Clinical Outcomes Group of the NHS Executive (Eccles & Mason, 2001) were included. This was to ensure that the interventions included could be delivered by non-specialists and had the strongest evidence.

### 3. Key findings

- 3.1 In total, 15 different interventions were included. Each was categorised as universal, population or targeted based on descriptions provided in reports of each intervention. Three interventions were identified for objective 1, three for objective 2, and nine for objective 3.
- 3.2 Another 12 programme level interventions at level 1 were excluded because the evidence indicated they are not effective for improving speech, language and communication skills.
- 3.3 The interventions identified for objective 1 were: Family Nurture Intervention, Learning Through Play Plus and Video Interaction Project.
- 3.4 The interventions identified for objective 2 were: The Incredible Years Parent-Toddler Programme, Infant Behaviour Program, and Newborn Behavioural Observations system.
- 3.5 The interventions identified for objective 3 were: Attachment and Biobehavioural Catch-up, Attachment and Biobehavioural Catch-up Toddler, Infant Health and Development Programme, Early Talk Boost, Nuffield Early Language Intervention, Story Friends, Doors to Discovery, Let's Begin with the Letter People; and Read, Play, Learn.

### 4. Recommendations

- 4.1 The work carried out and reported in this review has identified a number of recommendations with regards to available high evidence level interventions for use with parents and children to develop SLC skills. One of the aims for this piece of work was to identify if an effective level 1 evidence intervention programme for SLC was currently available in Welsh. At present no identified intervention fulfilled these criteria.
- 4.2 **Recommendation 1:** A perinatal/infant mental health intervention which includes an element of parental-infant interaction in order to impact positively on the infant's SLC skills should be developed for the Welsh context, using the ADAPT guidance.
- 4.3 **Recommendation 2:** Universal or population level, structured interventions aimed specifically, or at least in part, at the development of SLC should be available within a local context. This provision may be provided by local early years educational settings, primary healthcare providers or similar.
- 4.4 **Recommendation 3:** A manualised intervention targeting, at least in part, SLC development in Welsh-speaking children under 5-years-old should be 'adapted' from a pre-existing intervention. Alternatively, an original intervention should be developed, validated and trialled for its effective implementation in a Welsh context trialled.
- 4.5 **Recommendation 4:** Where any intervention has been adapted to fit the Welsh context, or adopted from a different context, validated measures of child language should be used. Follow-up measures should be taken to ensure the effectiveness of the intervention for improving long term SLC outcomes.

- 4.6 **Recommendation 5:** A pathway or framework of interventions providing equitable access to services should be developed that provides support to families at universal, population and targeted levels to promote parental responsiveness across the preschool years.
- 4.7 **Recommendation 6:** Further research on perinatal/infant mental health interventions using validated measures of child language would be beneficial in order to better understand the impact of parent mental health interventions on child SLC development.

## 5. References

[Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine. \(2020\) PROTOCOL Rapid reviews of evidence for WHO scientific briefs on COVID-19 and selected Noncommunicable Diseases \(NCDs\) - The Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine.](#) (accessed 7th June 2022).

Eccles, M. and Mason, J. (2001) How to develop cost conscious guidelines. Health Technology Assessment 5:16. Available at: doi: 10.3310/hta5160. (accessed 7th June 2022).

[Roulstone, S., Wren, Y., Bakopoulou, I., Goodlad, S. and Lindsay, G. \(2012\) Exploring interventions for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs: A study of practice.](#) (accessed 8th June 2022).

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