



ADAPTING FAMILIES CONNECT FOR THREE-YEAR-OLDS PILOT

Interim Evaluation Report

Vicky Hill with Christine Bradley, Tracy Jackson and Lucy Williams

[Savethechildren.org.uk](https://www.savethechildren.org.uk)

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Executive summary



Introduction

This report sets out how we have adapted the Families Connect programme, and summarises the evaluation findings from the first stage of the pilot that took place in Autumn 2018, the purpose of which was to test the suitability and effectiveness of the programme adaptations for children aged 3-4 years.

The Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot was developed in response to calls from schools to adapt the programme to include younger children so that it can be used to engage parents as early as possible in a child's education. Save the Children and participating schools saw the potential benefits for families; maximising children's nursery experience, supporting transition and providing a foundation for children to reach their potential.

In the summer of 2018, a series of workshops were held with parents, children and a range of school professionals to co-design new activity ideas that would be suitable for the younger age group. Using the existing structure and themes of the programme, adaptations focus on the activities that parents and their children do together, and the key messages shared with parents.

The Pilot

Selection criteria for the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot was that schools must have successfully delivered Families Connect before, have a nursery class in order to recruit families of three-year-olds, and have an interest in offering the programme for the younger age group.

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As with the four-to-six-year-old programme, the three-year-old pilot was open to all families with children in the specified age-group (in this case three-to-four years old) within the six nurseries. Schools were advised to particularly target families with children who would benefit from extra one-to-one support, parents who lacked confidence in supporting their children's learning or had limited engagement with the school.

In Autumn 2018, a total of six schools took part in the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot across Wales, the North of England, and Northern Ireland, of which four completed the eight-workshop delivery of the programme, one deferred to the Spring term and the remaining school delivered up until workshop six due to staffing issues. In these schools, a total of 32 families took part in the programme, and 19 families completed the programme (filled in a post-questionnaire in workshop eight), 16 of whom attended a minimum of six workshops. The children taking part were aged between two years and ten months and four years and three months.

Conclusions

The Autumn pilot has been successfully delivered with feedback that indicates the following:

Pilot programme delivery – All participating schools reported that they were satisfied with the pilot programme as a whole. The approach to work within the existing Families Connect programme structure and adapt only where necessary has shown to be welcomed by schools. It was felt by one school that “all of the good bits” of the regular programme that they knew would work with younger children had been retained, while new or adapted activities were largely embraced. Five of the schools reported that they would like to repeat delivery of the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, one of which did so in Spring 2019.

Adaptation of programme activities were largely considered suitable and enjoyable for children aged three and were well received by parents and children. 100% (19) of parents strongly agreed or agreed with statements that they and their child really enjoyed the pilot and felt supported by staff facilitating the programme. In addition, 95% (18) of parents said that they would recommend Families Connect to other people, with many stating that they had valued the opportunity the programme provided to connect with, share ideas with and learn from other parents, as well as learning how to encourage and support their child's learning, particularly through having an awareness of the numerous learning opportunities that exist in day to day life.

“It has brought awareness to me about basic opportunities for learning/interaction with my child. Often simple things around the house.” - Parent

Community Practitioners (for example, nursery practitioners, teachers, teaching assistants or family support workers who deliver Families Connect) were encouraged in the training to test the adaptations while bringing their own expertise and ideas to delivery. Community Practitioners provided feedback on a range of potential ideas for extending and enhancing activities to meet the needs of families they worked with, particularly in relation to how to extend the impact on the home learning environment including suggestions of additional resources and prompts drawing on existing practice. These ideas will be considered for the next stage of development alongside Spring and Summer 2019 pilot feedback to either enrich and enhance example programme activities or contribute to practice examples to support delivery of an integrated programme for three-to-six-year-olds.

Further review and slight refinements will be considered for all workshops, drawing on ideas provided by Community Practitioners delivering the pilot and will be used to strengthen training and resources. Feedback from workshop eight has supported our plan to test a new children's voices activity to enable children to feedback each week and in between weeks rather than just at the end which may enhance children's engagement further. This activity is called 'My Families Connect' and is being tested in Summer pilot delivery.

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Impact - When asked if they felt the programme had been beneficial, the five schools that provided feedback answered that they felt it had, with many reporting on the positive comments they received, and the impact they felt the programme had on the children and parents.

Findings indicate that outcomes for families have been achieved for those that completed the course, with reported improvements in parents' confidence in supporting their child's learning and children's confidence in nursery and interest and understanding of early literacy and numeracy.

"My child would be more aware of numbers, symbols and when reading books she would recognise this and notice letters e.g. she will say 'S' is in my name." - Parent

"Mum seems happier and confident to approach staff and talk about child's learning. There has been a re-focus on her learning and not about her being unsettled." – Community Practitioner

There is also evidence of increased communication between parents and school and parental engagement in the school community including social capital.

One school reported how parents attending began the programme feeling "anxious about being seen to do the wrong thing with their child". While it was challenging for the Community Practitioners to reassure the parents that there was no wrong way to undertake the activities and that the key thing was to spend quality time with their child, it was felt that they were able to convey this more and more as the programme progressed. The Community Practitioners of this school also felt it had been "immensely" beneficial for the parents to see similarities with other participating families, with regard to concerns about children "misbehaving" or exhibiting challenging behaviour. The Community Practitioners reported that parents felt more relaxed as the weeks went on, showing more confidence in their parenting ability and feeling "less judged":

"It was great to see the parents giving each other tips and realising over time that it's really the same issues that they all face." – Community Practitioner

One school noted that the headteacher was keen to highlight that their internal data showed several children had progressed to a higher attainment level, moving from 'working below age related' expectations at baseline to 'working at age related' expectations by the end of the Autumn term following attendance of Families Connect. The areas in which participating children were reported to progress included 'managing feelings', 'making relationships', and being 'self-confident and self-aware'.

Challenges - Retention of families surfaced as a challenge to varying degrees for most of the schools that delivered in the Autumn pilot. This was due to a number of factors similar to the delivery of Families Connect for four-to-six-year-olds, which included day to day challenges faced by parents such as sickness and juggling other priorities. Community Practitioners showed resourcefulness in finding ways to address retention, by for example providing regular reminders to parents and a crèche for younger children as suggested in the training. Two schools where they had recruited a high level of families with English as an additional language (EAL) experienced some barriers to engaging parents due to communication challenges. This initially affected retention early on in the programme which they responded to with practical solutions for supporting group dynamics and ensuring communication of key messages from the programme. Supporting families with EAL is an area that has been identified as needing strengthening within the Families Connect programme. Plans are in place to gather practice examples to enable schools to learn from one another about what strategies they can use to support effective

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delivery. Examples from this report will contribute to developing this resource, and programme manual text will be refined to support Community Practitioners to communicate messages as simply as possible.

Retention rates are slightly lower in the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot delivery than in Families Connect. Feedback from schools indicates that timing is a significant factor impacting on retention, for example, schools gave mixed feedback as to whether the Autumn term was the best term to deliver the programme to families of three-year olds, due to needing to establish new relationships with families for the first time. There was also mixed views from schools on whether it's better to deliver the programme during the time children normally attend nursery or outside of those times, indicating this does have an impact on families' ability to commit to the programme and also that approaches will need to be tailored to individual nursery contexts and communities informed by consultation with families.

School capacity to deliver was also reported to be an issue in two of the six schools where Community Practitioners had limited experience of working with parents which affected confidence in delivering the programme. Feedback also shows how specific experience with three-year-olds supports the delivery of the programme and enables Community Practitioners to use their nursery experience in delivering adapted activities that are flexible and child-centred. We recommend that Community Practitioners identified to attend the training and deliver the programme in their school or nursery have experience of working with parents.

Next steps

Continued pilot delivery - The interim report contains detailed feedback, some of which has already fed into Spring and Summer 2019 pilot delivery and which will be drawn together in a final report once all piloting has been completed.

Developing Families Connect for three-to-six-year olds - Feedback on the adaptations is beginning to inform the development of a single integrated programme, bringing together example activity options to support children's learning and development within this age range, in a flexible and child-centred way. We anticipate that the programme will work best when offered to families from one year-group at a time, with training accessed by either nursery or school staff who can then tailor the programme to groups of children and families they work with. Further consultation with nurseries will be undertaken to inform the implementation of the programme during 2020.

In the process of reviewing the Families Connect programme alongside the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, an exciting opportunity was identified to reprioritise and make more explicit the key mathematical concepts for this age group, such as the importance of estimation. This will align with and has been informed by current research in children's early mathematical development. The need to strengthen this area of the programme was consistently highlighted in evaluation feedback from the Families Connect programme and has been reflected in feedback from the pilot.

Training - Feedback in this report highlights ways in which the Families Connect training and resources can be enhanced to support recruitment and retention in the nursery context. The varying levels of confidence and experience in parental engagement and/or working with three-year-olds seen in this pilot, suggests the benefit of incorporating more early years practice guidance linked to the rationale behind activities. For example, video clips to bring to life particular interactions with children, such as using cards and objects to spark imagination for story building, could be an effective way to support Community Practitioners during their training.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Families Connect is an evidence-based manualised programme that supports parents to engage in their children's learning. It is delivered by schools and designed to raise the attainment of children aged four to six by enhancing the home learning environment. It aims to build parents' confidence and skills to support their child's learning, enhance relationships between parents and schools, and make a difference to children's literacy, numeracy and social and emotional outcomes.

The programme was developed by Save the Children UK with experts from the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) Programme, the National Literacy Trust and Edge Hill University. Since 2014 Save the Children has trained and supported more than 350 schools and organisations. Families Connect has been delivered more than 600 times reaching more than 4000 children and demand for the programme is high. The Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot was developed in response to calls from schools to adapt the programme to include younger children so that it can be used to engage parents as early as possible in a child's education. Save the Children and participating schools saw the potential benefits for families; maximising children's nursery experience, supporting transition and providing a foundation for children to reach their potential.

Using the existing structure and themes of Families Connect, adaptations within the pilot have focused on the activities that parents and their children do together and the key messages shared with parents so that the science behind activities is aligned with the original programme.

The purpose of the pilot evaluation is to test the suitability and effectiveness of the programme adaptations for children aged three-to-four years. The questions we posed to ourselves to guide the evaluation are as follows:

- To what extent are the activities suitable and enjoyable for children aged three-to-four years?
- To what extent are the activities adaptable and can be sustainable at home?
- To what extent did the parents and children engage with the programme as a whole?
- In what ways were the activities or workshops adapted to meet the needs of the children and their parents?
- What further refinements do we need to make to the adaptations?

1.2 Families Connect

Families Connect is delivered through a series of two-hour workshops in school over eight weeks to groups of 10 families. The programme is delivered by Community Practitioners, for example teachers, teaching assistants or family support workers. Schools are provided with training, a delivery manual, printed resources and quality improvement support.

The programme uses play as a vehicle for learning. Each session involves a range of fun activities, techniques and games with a topic focus on one of three key areas:

- Social and emotional development
- Literacy and language development
- Numeracy and mathematics.

The first half of each workshop is for parents only, allowing parents to discuss and try out example activities they can adapt and extend at home. The second half of the workshop is for parents to introduce the activities to their children and enjoy the games together, responding to children's interests and capabilities.

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Families Connect is delivered by schools with 20% or higher eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) or Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) in Scotland across all four countries of the UK.

The programme is universally offered to families with children aged four to six in these schools. Target families include those with children who would benefit from extra one-to-one support and parents who lack confidence in supporting their children's learning or have limited engagement with the school.

The intended long-term effects of Families Connect are that children will have a greater chance of achieving their potential and doing better at school, as their parents will do more in the home to support their learning.

Rigorous inhouse evaluation of the programme has shown:

- Over 95% of parents and children enjoyed the programme with parents saying they would recommend it
- Over 91% of parents perceived an influence on what they do with their child at home
- Significant improvements to children's attitudes towards school and learning reported by teachers
- Significant improvements in children's behaviour reported by parents.

1.3 Co-design process

Millbrook School in Newport, Wales were keen to offer the programme to families attending the nursery. Save the Children worked in partnership with the school to adapt the programme through a co-design process.

The Families Connect programme was reviewed by the Early Learning Services team in Save the Children including feedback on delivery to the four-to-six age group. Content was assessed in terms of its suitability and the level of change required.

It was agreed that adaptation was required rather than fundamental changes to the programme and therefore it was possible to extend the programme to a three-to-six age range rather than producing a distinct programme for three-year-olds. The rationale for taking this approach to integrate adaptations was that this would provide a solid and flexible offer to schools which could be tailored to a child's level of development, capabilities and interests rather than being age specific.

The Early Learning Services team established the development project aims as twofold:

- To adapt the programme to include nursery children, to ensure that the programme is suitable for children aged three-to-six
- To strengthen the core content of the programme based on feedback on Families Connect delivery where it was identified that the content could be enhanced further.

The next step was to take a closer look to identify a hypothesis as to which workshops would need the most adaptation and which would need limited adaptation to ensure content suitability for three-year-olds. This informed the scope for adaptations which concentrated the first stage of piloting on activity examples which parents try out and do with their children during workshops and the alignment of key messages providing context for these.

A Save the Children project team was established and met to agree the approach and scope based on the hypothesis with the following aims, objectives and outcomes:

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Aim	To design, develop and test adaptations to the Families Connect programme to ensure it is suitable for families of three-year-olds.
Objectives	Design and develop a brief for adaptations for three-year-olds and innovate co-design workshops through which adaptations can be developed, tested and evaluated; Co-design with staff, parents and children from Millbrook School.
Outcomes	School staff, parents and children participate in and enjoy the co-design workshops and contribute to shaping and reviewing adaptations for three-year-olds; Adaptations for three-year-olds upholds the values and principles of Families Connect, are fit for purpose and can be easily integrated into the programme to meet the long-term vision of Families Connect for three-to-six-year-olds; Products include session plans with enhanced messages for parents for pilot delivery of workshops and additional activity resource sheets or guidance when appropriate; Adaptations inform a training for Community Practitioners to deliver Families Connect with three-year-olds in Millbrook School and a small group of nurseries across the UK.

In May to June 2018 Save the Children ran a series of co-design workshops at Millbrook School with parents, children and a range of professionals from schools in South Wales including senior leaders, early years teachers, parental engagement officers and special educational needs teachers.



Save the Children prioritised the workshop activities identified as requiring the most adaptation for the first set of workshops with parents and practitioners – *The Importance of Listening*, *Beyond the Page*, and *Number Names*. These workshops aimed to provide parents and practitioners with an opportunity to co-design new activity ideas in response to key messages shared on topics supported by discussion prompts and a range of materials to stimulate inspiration and experimentation. One parent had experience of the Families Connect programme and additionally contributed to the development of activity ideas for the *Focus on Feelings* workshop suggesting the use of mirrors, which also came up as a suggestion by practitioners in the subsequent workshop.

Parents' ideas were shared with a group of professionals at the beginning of the practitioner workshop so that these could be considered and built upon. The day included a detailed look at the remaining three workshops – *Focus on Feelings*, *The Importance of Praise*, *Book Talk* and *The Importance of Counting* for which the hypothesis was that less adaptation to activities was needed – practitioners were consulted on this and provided expertise on more nuanced changes required to the science behind the activities. Practitioners also added new ideas alongside guidance on how to adapt existing activities.

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Save the Children also consulted with parents and practitioners on the Celebration and Evaluation workshop and on how capturing children's feedback of their experience of Families Connect could be further enhanced. One-hour workshops were run with two year-groups of children at Millbrook school to gain an insight into children's agency in the home context including their views on what their younger siblings have a say on and can make choices about.

1.4 Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot

Project Design

School Recruitment:

In addition to the criteria used to select schools for the Families Connect programme, guidance for selection for the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot was that schools must have successfully delivered the programme before, have a nursery class in order to recruit families of three-year-olds, and have an interest in adapting the programme for the younger age group.

Family Recruitment:

As with the Families Connect programme, the pilot was open to all families with children in the specified age-group (in this case three-to-four-year-olds) within the six nurseries. However, schools were advised to particularly encourage families with children who would benefit from extra one-to-one support, parents who lacked confidence in supporting their children's learning or had limited engagement with the school.

Delivery:

Schools were additionally provided with a two-hour briefing session prior to attending two-day training on adapting Families Connect for three-year-olds. The briefing session covered pilot expectations and discussions on recruitment of families, provision of resources and funds to support pilot delivery of the programme.

The planned aims and intended outcomes for the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot are:

Aims:

- To find out whether the activities work for children and if they are suitable for age group three-to-four years,
- To gather feedback from Community Practitioners, parents and children to inform programme and training design.

Expected impact and programme outcomes:

The intended long-term effects of Families Connect are that children will have a greater chance of achieving their potential and doing better at school, as their parents will do more in the home to support their learning.

Intended outcomes for children that we will be measuring:

- Improvements in child's interest in and understanding of early literacy and numeracy.
- Improvements in child's confidence in nursery.

Intended outcomes for parents:

- Increase in parent's confidence in supporting their child's learning.
- Increase in communication between parents and school regarding their children's learning.

Intended outcomes for schools:

- Increase in parental engagement in the school community (including social capital).

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Methodology

The process used in the original piloting of Families Connect in 2014 was replicated for this project. Monitoring and Evaluation forms were based on the Families Connect programme and adapted to be suitable for measuring perceived impact on outcomes for three-year-olds.

A number of qualitative tools were used during the pilot:

- Community Practitioners completed a 'learning log' at the end of each week of the programme, with questions to prompt reflection on the example activities and resources provided, what had been successful or challenging about the sessions and suggested refinements for future development and delivery.
- Parents and children's views on the programme, in particular their most and least favoured sessions were captured by Community Practitioners via a 'thumbs up/thumbs down' activity in the final session. Parents and children were shown pictures that related to each of the workshops and were asked to indicate with either a thumbs up or thumbs down what they thought about it.
- Save the Children trainers supported community practitioners to complete a site evaluation form during an end of project meeting after completion of the programme which captured the successes and challenges of the pilot as a whole.

Site visits were also undertaken by Save the Children trainers, where individual sessions were observed, and the trainer's observations recorded.

The primary objective of the quantitative element of the evaluation was to assess changes in child and parent outcomes of those attending the programme over time.

Two quantitative tools were used during this test:

1. Parent questionnaire
2. Teacher questionnaire

Teachers completed the questionnaire at pre- and post-programme and parents at post-programme only. In most cases in the nursery context these were completed by one of the Community Practitioners who worked with the children on a daily basis.

A demographic questionnaire was administered to parents post-programme. This questionnaire included questions on age, gender, ethnicity, disability and special educational needs of the participating child, and age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and employment status of participating parent.

The teacher questionnaire was administered at two time points, pre- and post-programme. It included a measure to assess child interest and understanding in early literacy and numeracy and parent and child confidence in learning and engagement in the nursery. The questionnaire also included free text response on teachers' perceived impact of the programme on the parent and child.

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2. Delivery

2.1 Overview

Following the completion of the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot delivery, individual end of project meetings were held between each of the six schools' delivery teams and Save the Children programme managers. The purpose of these meetings was to gather the Community Practitioners' thoughts on how the adapted programme had worked in practice, what had aided or challenged delivery, and if there were any changes they would make if running the programme for families of three-year-olds again in the future.

Four schools completed the full programme as planned. One school delivered five of the eight workshops whilst struggling with retention of families due to a range of external factors affecting families including sickness and extended school absences. Although Community Practitioners from this school planned to complete the programme in the Spring term they were unable to due to staff changes. This school provided feedback on the workshops they delivered and their overall feedback is based on this.

One school struggled to retain a sufficient number of families early on in the programme and therefore decided to defer pilot delivery until the Spring term. This school provided feedback on their challenges which are summarised in the Challenges section below.

2.2 What worked

All five of the participating schools that delivered the programme agreed or strongly agreed that the pilot delivery had been manageable, with all agreeing that they had adequate staffing and financial resources to deliver the programme, and most (80%) agreeing that they had adequate time to plan and prepare for the workshops.

When asked what had supported delivery of the pilot, most of the Community Practitioners agreed that being provided with pre-prepared resources had been a "huge help", though they indicated that they would be happy to provide the resources themselves in future delivery. Some also highlighted that they had found the session plans useful, particularly as they were so detailed, clearly laid out, and provided prompts for the Community Practitioners. One school, however, felt the scripts were "too wordy and repetitive" and therefore amended the wording, ensuring that the key messages were still relayed to the parents.

Only one of the schools made reference to their prior delivery, noting that delivering Families Connect the previous term made them feel "very prepared". Another school highlighted that they had appreciated the support provided by Save the Children throughout the pilot. During delivery, Save the Children trainers made check-in calls with Community Practitioners and held discussions during visits made to the schools, providing them with opportunities to reflect on delivery and ask questions. It was felt that having Save the Children staff available for this "support and clarification" had been very valuable.

Preparation

The schools were asked if they had felt prepared to deliver the pilot programme based on the training and support they had received, with all five agreeing that they had felt prepared. This is consistent with the feedback provided by Community Practitioners following the pilot training some months earlier, in which the majority indicated that they felt confident to deliver the eight workshops.

All of the Community Practitioners indicated that the training had been well-received, particularly by nursery staff or new staff who had no prior experience of running Families Connect. One school noted that one of their facilitators had never delivered a parent and child group before and found the training to be "brilliant", while they were later observed to have "gained confidence" in their ability to deliver the programme over the eight weeks.

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It was also noted that the support offered by Save the Children throughout the pilot had been particularly valued:

“It was very helpful that the school Families Connect team were aware that they could contact both the Save the Children trainer or the programmes manager with any queries or for support, who were always willing to help” – Community Practitioner

Only one of the schools indicated that they felt the preparation for delivering the programme could be improved, by providing Community Practitioners with the opportunity to “observe a live session of Families Connect in another school before starting their own delivery.”

Changes

When asked to what extent they had made any changes to the set-up, content or delivery of the programme during the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, most of the schools advised that they had made few or none at all.

One of these schools reported that they made slight changes to the activities to accommodate a child with special educational needs, for example providing the child with a “busy box” filled with various tactile and sensory objects to keep them engaged alongside Families Connect activities.

Similarly, another of the schools felt that some of the activities were slightly too “advanced” for some of the younger three-year-olds in the group and so “re-modelled” them as necessary. One of the Community Practitioners at this school felt that being an experienced Early Years practitioner meant she had the necessary skills to adapt the activities and was concerned that “not everyone would have this level of experience or confidence to do so and they could panic a bit if the session was not going exactly according to plan.” They provided the example of the *Listening* workshop in which some children found it difficult to complete the task of making a shaker. The Community Practitioners felt their Early Years experience enabled them to support parents to realise that the objective of the session was less about completing the craft activity and more about the process of making and listening, therefore keeping the session on track.

Another of the schools had a significant number of parents with EAL in their group, so took the step of pairing each of them with an English-speaking parent when trying out the activities and ensured they modelled the activities before the children joined the group. The Community Practitioners also made changes to the script, simplifying the language so that the parents with EAL could better understand what was required of them and to “enable them to fully participate in the activities.”

The school that chose not to make any adaptations to the programme advised that they had made changes previously in their delivery of Families Connect with four-to-six-year-olds, to meet the needs of parents and children with EAL.

Two of the schools made minor changes to the sessions. One adjusted the timings for some of the workshops, reducing them to one and a half hours which was felt to be adequate “given the age of the children.” They also added supplementary resources and activities, as did another school – sticker charts and listening cards, catalogues for making story cards, and ingredients and recipes for play dough, all of which can be taken and used in the home and were noted to be well-received by the parents. One of the schools also advised that they had written up ideas shared in the session and provided copies for the parents to keep.

Differences

When asked if there were any differences in the implementation of the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot compared to the Families Connect programme, schools reported that there hadn’t been a great deal of difference.

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One school had offered a crèche for the younger children of the participating families which they felt had been invaluable to the three-year-old delivery, as without it many parents would not have been able to sign up to attend the programme.

Another observed that retention had been better on the Families Connect programme delivered with four-to-six-year-olds and felt that this was due to the children already being in school as it is a statutory requirement. On the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, the school observed that if a child had not attended nursery, it would “inevitably” mean they would not attend Families Connect on that particular day. However, it was noted that children were encouraging their parents to stay for the programme workshop, “which had a positive impact on attendance.” Additionally, it was found that parents who did attend “saw more value in working with the school.”

Workshop Materials

We were interested to know how the schools felt about some of the materials that had been adapted for three-year-olds, in particular the workshop scripts and the messages and text on the parent handouts, and if they could suggest any changes. The schools broadly agreed that the handouts did not need further amendment, the messages were clear and concise, and the use of a large font and lots of pictures had helped those parents with limited or low literacy. One school also felt that they were an improvement on the handouts provided on the Families Connect programme. The workshop scripts, however, divided opinion. While two of the schools felt that the scripts were useful as they are and helped “keep you on track”, two felt that they needed to be “less wordy and less repetitive” and facilitators had used their own language when delivering the key messages to parents. It is important to note that the scripts provided for use during the pilot were working drafts which were focussed on changes made to the content of the workshops. Community Practitioners were advised in their training that the script is there for reference and rather than deliver it verbatim, they are encouraged to present the information in a way that is comfortable for them and feels appropriate for the group they are delivering to.



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Satisfaction

All of the participating schools reported that they were satisfied with the pilot programme as a whole. It was felt by one school that “all of the good bits” of the Families Connect programme that they knew would work with younger children had been retained, while another cited the support provided by Save the Children as a significant factor.

When asked if they felt the pilot had been beneficial, all five of the schools answered that they felt it had, with many reporting on the positive comments they received, and the impact they felt the programme had on the children and parents (see the ‘Outcomes’ chapter for more detail).

One school noted that the headteacher was keen to highlight that their internal data showed several children had progressed to a higher attainment level, moving from ‘working below age related’ expectations at baseline to ‘working at age related’ expectations by the end of the Autumn term following attendance of the pilot. The areas in which participating children were reported to progress included ‘managing feelings’, ‘making relationships’, and being ‘self-confident and self-aware’.

Another school reported how parents began the programme feeling “anxious about being seen to do the wrong thing with their child.” While it was challenging for the Community Practitioners to reassure the parents that there was no wrong way to undertake the activities and that the key thing was to spend quality time with their child, it was felt that they were able to convey this more and more as delivery progressed. The Community Practitioners of this school also felt it had been “immensely” beneficial for the parents to see similarities with other participating families, with regard to concerns about children “misbehaving” or exhibiting challenging behaviour. The Community Practitioners reported that parents felt more relaxed as the weeks went on, showing more confidence in their parenting ability and feeling “less judged”:

“It was great to see the parents giving each other tips and realising over time that it’s really the same issues that they all face.” – Community Practitioner

Several of the schools felt that the programme had been particularly beneficial in terms of improving the parents’ and children’s confidence. One school reported that they had a child who was experiencing difficulties socialising in groups, and it was feared that he would not attend or be able to engage with the sessions, “but he came every week and participated, which was a shock.”

Another school reported that, although the parents they had in attendance were not those they would have targeted, they nonetheless learnt valuable skills and grew in confidence over the course of the programme. The Community Practitioners related the case of one mum of six children who, as a result of the programme, instigated a weekly family game night and uses the key messages with all her children:

“Mum now sees herself as an individual, not just a mum and has grown in confidence when speaking to school staff.” – Community Practitioner

2.3 Challenges

While the five schools felt the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot had been manageable to deliver and had positively impacted on families, there were nevertheless a variety of challenges to be overcome.

Two of the schools reflected that a lack of previous experience of running parents’ groups had made delivery difficult for their Community Practitioners. One reported how staff members who are usually class-based were drafted in to deliver the workshops while the original facilitator was absent and found their lack of a relationship with parents a hindrance, particularly when trying to recruit families. Another Community Practitioner found that

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not having children herself affected her confidence as “she didn’t feel best placed to advise parents,” as she felt she did not have any personal parenting experience to make reference to.

Staff capacity also proved to be a significant issue. Although all five of the schools had initially indicated that they felt they had adequate staffing and time to prepare for the workshops, two later reflected on the difficulties they experienced during pilot delivery. In both schools, teaching staff took on the Community Practitioner role of facilitating the programme and consequently found it a challenge to find time outside of class to set up for the workshops, as well as engage parents, and ensure the pilot evaluation requirements were met. One of the schools was not even able to hold a recruitment coffee morning due to staffing issues.

The school that deferred delivery due to low retention of families highlighted the following two key challenges: some parents recruited had already attended Families Connect with older siblings and had different expectations of what the programme would be; and running the pilot during nursery time did not work for many parents who felt they needed this time for other things. Another significant factor included a change to staff delivering Families Connect - both were new to programme delivery and felt they needed time to build rapport with parents through additional parental engagement activities before running the pilot.

Supporting parents with English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Parents with EAL made up a significant proportion of the participants at two of the schools, which Community Practitioners noted caused communication issues resulting in challenges affecting delivery. While one school did not elaborate on how this had affected the workshops, the other recounted that the parents had found it difficult to fully participate in the pilot and needed a great deal of support. Following the decision of some of the parents with EAL to leave the programme in its first weeks, the facilitators attempted to prevent further departures by pairing parents with EAL with those that spoke English when practising activities, and by modelling all of the activities to parents before asking them to have a go, which was felt to be helpful and allowed the parents to be fully involved in the workshops.

Recruitment

The most significant challenges that affected delivery of the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot were reported to be the recruitment of families and retaining their engagement with the programme. When asked, only three of the schools agreed that they had strategies and processes for recruiting families, and just two agreed that they had strategies for helping families to keep coming to the programme. While strategies for the recruitment and retention of families is covered in the training Community Practitioners receive for the Families Connect programme, it was less of a focus in the training provided for the three-year-old pilot, as the schools taking part all had prior experience of delivering the programme with four-to-six-year-olds. Instead, discussions around recruitment were held during briefing sessions at each school ahead of the training and were tailored to recruiting families from nursery classes.

Another school felt that recruitment had been impacted by parents’ cultural expectations of nursery that had made “many of the parents reluctant to access non-statutory childcare provision before formal education,” and so made it difficult to encourage attendance at Families Connect. It was also felt by the school staff that reluctance to join the programme may have been based on the erroneous assumption that it would negatively affect the chance of their child being offered a place at the school (for example, if the child exhibited difficult behaviour during the sessions).

One of the schools reflected that the attitudes of parents who have older children and feel they “know it all” is a barrier to signing up families they feel would benefit from attending the programme. It was noted that “word of mouth” had helped to overcome this issue to some extent, with one parent joining the programme on the strength of a friend’s recommendation.

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Retention

Following recruitment, keeping families coming to the programme proved to be a difficulty for all of the participating schools, with many suffering drop-outs. In addition to practical issues such as communication difficulties faced by parents with EAL, or timings that made it difficult to accommodate working parents or children who attended nursery part-time, schools reported that personal circumstances also impacted attendance. During the pilot cycle, child illness (including hospitalisation in one case), bereavement, and visiting family abroad for an extended period all caused disruption or curtailment of attendance at the workshops. While the facilitators recognised that these circumstances were beyond the families' control, it was nevertheless "frustrating."

Some of the schools related how they had attempted to improve retention, in one case by changing the days of delivery and putting on extra sessions to provide attendance options, in another by establishing a WhatsApp group for participating families to remind parents to attend every week. However, none of these methods were reported to have had the desired effect of increasing participation.

When asked if they had any suggestions for improving recruitment and retention of families of three-year-olds, the schools provided a broad range of ideas.

Three of the schools suggested that employing methods to remind families to attend the workshops would be a simple but effective approach to encourage more consistent attendance. One school suggested sending regular messages, for example a weekly text might be sufficient, while another devised a flyer which was distributed to parents on joining the programme and reminded them of the workshop dates. It was suggested that Save the Children could develop an official flyer for schools for use in this way, that could be customised with the details of an individual school's delivery.

It was observed by one of the schools that provision of a crèche was of particular importance in the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, as four of their parents would not have been able to attend without it.

Two of the schools reflected that recruitment may have been positively impacted had the parents been engaged informally prior to the programme. It was felt that this would have helped to build relationships between the parents and the nursery staff and would potentially make parents more willing to commit to an eight-week programme. One school suggested they would consider holding informal sessions in the Autumn term to prime parents ready for delivery in the Spring term. It was also proposed that engaging parents as co-facilitators as well as in preparing snacks and workshop resources might improve participation.

One of the schools relayed how they had created a Families Connect notice board as an aid to recruitment. Placed in a prominent location within the nursery that was easily visible to families, the notice board featured information and photos of families participating in the workshop activities. The school felt the notice board "definitely generated interest" in the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot and related how parents had enquired about the programme after seeing staff setting up the display.

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Timings

Three out of the five participating schools confirmed in the end of project meeting that they are planning to run another cycle (delivery) of the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, with one already in the process of recruiting families. One school answered that they may consider running another cycle (delivery), while the remaining school said they would not. The school that are not planning to deliver the programme again felt that it would be better delivered by Flying Start (a Welsh government programme operating in targeted areas) before children attend nursery. Another consideration for this school was that a number of parents with children in the nursery have older children that have already gone through the programme and therefore would not be suitable to attend.

When asked if they would run the programme in the same term, the schools were of mixed opinion. Two of the schools felt that Autumn was the most appropriate term to run the programme, partly as it facilitates an informal support network which is beneficial to parents who are new to the school (“lots of our parents new to school developed friendships by participating in the course”), but also because it allows time for parents to put newly learnt strategies in place across the rest of the school year. The remaining three schools were adamant that Spring or Summer term would be more suitable for delivery. It was felt that the Autumn term, especially during December, was a particularly busy time for both parents and the school so a later term would be preferable as there are likely to be fewer competing commitments. It was also noted that as children will have attended nursery for at least one term before delivery begins, it is more likely that the school will have established a relationship with the parents, and the children will be more used to the routine of attending nursery. One school also thought that lighter evenings during the summer term might positively impact recruitment, while the warmer weather could enable some of the activities to be delivered outdoors, which they felt the parents would enjoy.

The schools similarly differed in their responses when asked if they would run the programme when children normally attend nursery, or outside of these times. Three of the schools answered that they would run the sessions at the time the children would normally attend. It was felt by one of the schools that it would be difficult to get parents to attend outside of these times due to other commitments, plus the need to provide childcare for the nursery children as well as their siblings would have staffing implications. One of the schools that delivered outside of nursery times did not have any other option as there was not additional space or staff available otherwise. The

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remaining school however felt that running the programme outside of the participants' general nursery time effectively gave the children an extra nursery session which proved to be useful as a means of recruitment.

The schools were also asked if they would run future Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot cycles on the same day and at the same time of the day as they had in the pilot. For two of the schools, there had been no choice around when to run the sessions, one of which being a stand-alone nursery with all their spaces and staff occupied during class time. Three of the schools agreed that scheduling the workshops to end at school pick up time was preferable as the children would then be able to go straight home with their parents. One school which ran the workshops during the morning noted that some children found it difficult to separate from their parents at lunchtime, but they are nevertheless proceeding with this timeslot for their next cycle.

One of the schools delivered the pilot on Friday afternoons, but found that attendance was negatively impacted as many Muslim families attend mosque at this time. The school advised that they would run future cycles mid-week to allow enough time beforehand to remind or encourage families to attend, and time afterward to "touch base" and find out how they are getting on with the activities at home.

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3. Adaptations

Five of the six schools delivered the pilot as planned and provided learning logs and feedback on the adaptations. This section focuses on adaptations made by Save the Children to children's activities rather than the parent only sessions.

3.1 General adaptations

Alongside the adaptations made to the individual workshop activities, a number of more general changes were also made by Save the Children to the session materials and content. The workshop scripts were simplified to allow Community Practitioners to better adapt and present the content to suit their own style of delivery and the group to which they were delivering, while more detailed prompts were included throughout to support reflective discussions. At the end of each session, parents were invited to bring something to the next session to encourage greater parental involvement and contribution to the workshops. The closing activity was also replaced with a chosen song or rhyme known by the children in their respective groups in order to further support their language development.

3.2 Workshop 1 – *Focus on Feelings*

The core aim of this workshop is for parents to understand the importance of supporting children to recognise and name their feelings through talking together regularly about them, and to have the confidence and some strategies to do so.

In the Families Connect programme, the *Focus on Feelings* workshop features an activity in which parents and their children look at a range of scenario cards and talk about the feelings that they might experience in the different situations they depict. A 'feelings fan' (a fan featuring a face with a different expression on each paddle to show a range of six universal feelings) is used by the child to indicate how they might feel. A magnifying glass is also used by the child to 'look for clues' as to what this might feel like in their body.

In the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, greater emphasis is placed on understanding facial expressions rather than how feelings are experienced in the body, so a mirror replaces the magnifying glass to enable the child to practice conveying their feelings through their face. A smaller range of three scenario cards are used, ensuring those that are simpler and most relevant to the younger age group are featured. Parents can also choose to focus on feelings their child is able to recognise rather than using the whole fan range so that it's pitched to their individual level of development.

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Children

At all five schools, community practitioners observed that the adapted activity went down well with the children. Broad enjoyment and engagement were reported, and it was felt that the activity was “pitched at the right level for most children”, though it was noted at one school that those a little younger (‘summer born’) struggled with their concentration. The addition of the mirrors was reported to be particularly popular with the children, the opportunity to make faces successfully securing their engagement in the activity.

Parents

Community Practitioners reported a high level of engagement from parents in this first session. In one school, the activity prompted a rich discussion “around the different vocabulary used to name feelings”, while at another one parent indicated the effect the session had had on her, stating that she “never realised how feelings could have such an impact on the child.”

Across all schools, parents demonstrated ability in supporting their children to lead in the activity. One Community Practitioner reported that one of the parents in their school was able to use the feelings fan to facilitate a conversation with their child about their day:

Parent: “How did you feel in school?”

Child: “A boy hit me I felt sad.”

Although the session was broadly successful, one school reported that the parents in their group struggled to identify the feelings represented by the faces on the feelings fan, while another observed that some parents felt uncomfortable practicing the activity with each other.

Suggestions/refinements

To encourage the activity in the home following this workshop, one school suggested asking parents to take pictures of themselves and their child engaged in the activity which could be shared at the next session, while another thought that involving other members of the family and relating scenarios that affect them might ensure

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further engagement. One school noted that one of the parents suggested watching the children's film *Inside Out* would also "tie in nicely."

When asked if the activities needed further refinement, the Community Practitioners were able to provide a range of suggestions for extending practice to enhance or compliment the Families Connect activities:

- Introduce iPads to provide the option of taking photos during the session;
- Provide a choice of feelings stones or puppets to supplement the activities, and encourage parents to think of other ideas;
- Display a range of age-appropriate books about feelings;
- One school suggested reducing the number of faces on the feelings fan if difficult for children to identify all the feelings.

3.3 Workshop 2 – *The Importance of Praise*

The objective of this workshop is for parents to understand what makes praise helpful in developing confidence and the ability to learn, and to feel confident in using it with their children.

In the Families Connect programme, parents and their children work together on a craft activity led by the child to create a 'superstar award' – an award to be presented to members of their family in recognition of skills, qualities or efforts. During the activity, parents are encouraged to praise the child's efforts.

In the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, the 'superstar award' activity is retained, and additionally tactile and sensory craft materials are encouraged to be provided to suit the interests and capabilities of individual children. The workshop had also been adapted to have a greater emphasis on effort and progress in terms of children's learning and development, rather than focusing on behaviour, making messaging more relevant for younger children who may be doing a lot of things for the first time and in the early stages of developing pro-social behaviour.

Children

Four schools completed their learning logs for the second workshop, one of which was unable to complete it in detail due to having had to combine workshops. Those that did provide feedback on this workshop reported that the 'superstar award' activity successfully engaged the attention of the children who particularly enjoyed the craft materials – "glitter is always a success!" One school also reported that the activity also enabled some children to practice mark making.

It was noted by one school that, as some children are not as dextrous as Reception-age children, more thought could be given to the range of resources provided for the activity for three-year-olds.



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Parents

The schools reported that the parents were broadly engaged in this session and understood the concept of the activities, though one Community Practitioner observed that the parents in their group were “surprised by the ideas”. One school did report that there were communication issues with one parent with English as an additional language (EAL), causing them to misunderstand the aim of the activity, and complete it *for* the child instead. The Community Practitioners recognised that this could be avoided in future by demonstrating the activity more clearly.

Suggestions/refinements

Suggestions for encouraging the activity at home centred on providing an alternative to the ‘superstar award’, such as a sticker chart, or a marble/penny pot system. It was also proposed that an activity sheet could be added, providing ideas for craft activities that could be done in the home with minimal resource, giving parents opportunities to offer praise.

Suggestions offered for possible refinements to the activity included:

- Adding another activity alongside the ‘superstar award’, as it didn’t last quite long enough in one school;
- Providing a sticker chart and stickers that can be taken and used at home as parents may not have the resources to make one;
- Providing larger collage materials for children who struggle with fine motor skills.

3.4 Workshop 3 – *The Importance of Listening*

In this workshop, parents identify, learn and practise the key skills of ‘good listening’ so that they can use these with their children, ensuring they feel valued and to help them develop academically, personally and socially.

In the Families Connect programme, parents support their child in the creation of a ‘magic envelope’, a printed paper based game in which the child draws their favourite thing (animal, book, food or game) and then talks about the topic with their parent. The parent practises using open questions to prompt further discussion about their child’s interests.

In the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, the ‘magic envelope’ activity is replaced with an activity in which the parents and their children work together to make a pair of shakers (handmade musical instruments). The children lead the activity, choosing what to make their shakers from, what should go inside it and how it should be decorated. By providing choice, the child is encouraged to share their views, their likes and dislikes as they engage in the making process. Parents can then also extend the activity by having a go at listening and responding to the sounds the shakers make, taking it in turns with their child.

Children

All five schools were able to provide feedback for the third workshop, and unanimously reported that the activity had been successful in engaging the children and sustaining their focus for a long period of time. It was felt that the shaker activity was suitable for the age group and had been greatly enjoyed, particularly as it involved “getting messy and had lots of glitter.” One school related how they had enjoyed watching the children interacting with their parents - “the children’s faces showing their pride when they had completed their shaker was lovely to witness.” Only one school faced issues in this session when children were asked to share resources and their difficulty in doing this caused a degree of stress for their parents. The Community Practitioners said they would provide children with individual sets of resources next time to avoid this situation.

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Parents

It was reported by all of the schools that parents enjoyed this activity, particularly as it allowed them to spend time being creative with their children. Parents were observed letting their children lead the activity, which enable them to practice their listening skills and ask different open and closed questions. In one school, it also proved to be a good opportunity for the parents to implement the skills they had gained from previous sessions – “The parents... were praising the children’s efforts and achievements.”

One school reported that their parents were particularly engaged in discussion during the parent-only ‘Science Bit’ of the workshop and were comfortable sharing their own experiences, and then using the strategies discussed when they were joined by their children. Another school also observed that the parents made up a “listening game” to play with the children and their new shakers and another school encouraged children to use their shakers during the closing song.



Suggestions/refinements

Suggestions for how to encourage the activity at home centred on providing parents with more resources (craft materials, containers etc.) to take away so that they can repeat the activity with their child, as they may not be able to provide the resources themselves. One of the Community Practitioners reported that some of the parents in their group had not used the shakers at home with their children and instead discarded them. It was suggested that using the shakers in the session for parents and children to recite or sing nursery rhymes together might make the activity transfer better to the home environment.

Four of the five schools said that they did not think the activities in this session needed further refinement and would not run the session differently next time. The remaining school suggested that there could be more focus on parents “recognising and valuing their child’s body language and actions.” While no further suggestions were given, one school did advise that they had provided cue cards and pictures to prompt the children to practice making different types of sounds, for example a picture of an elephant to prompt loud sounds, or a picture of a mouse to prompt quiet sounds.

3.5 Workshop 4 – Book Talk

The core aim for this workshop is for parents to feel more confident about sharing reading time, books and stories as a family in ways that engage children’s interest and maximise their learning potential. They also learn about

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helping their child to make book choices that suit their personal interests and abilities, and how this contributes to improved reading motivation, enjoyment and reading frequency.

In the Families Connect programme, parents choose a book to share with their child, asking questions about what they have read together as they go along in order to find out, and improve on, their understanding of the text using 'book talk' techniques.

In the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, the activity remains the same, though with the promotion of books suitable to the younger age group. In addition, the parents can share the *CBeebies Storytime* app with their children, practising their book talk techniques as they read a story together – this activity was previously in Workshop 5 of the regular programme and has been brought forward into this workshop. There is also more of an emphasis on songs and rhymes in examples of ways to extend children's interest in stories and books and use of closed questions alongside open questions to support young children's language development.



Children

The schools provided limited feedback on how they felt this session's activities had worked for the children. All reported that the children had enjoyed the activity, while one observed that they were "completely engaged and answering questions that their parents had asked them."

Parents

All five of the schools reported that the parents really enjoyed and engaged with the session, responding well to techniques for asking questions and putting thought into what books to choose for their children, and the questions to ask them. However, one school noted that the parents were not comfortable reading stories to each other, though they were happy to read to their children.

While most schools noted that the parents enjoyed the *Storytime* app, one reported that they did not want their children to use it, "they wanted them to enjoy the books and get used to handling them rather than spending more time on phones and tablets."

It is clear from the Community Practitioners' feedback that there was a lot of enthusiasm and interest from the parents in this session. All schools observed that their parents were comfortable sharing their own ideas with the

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group and were receptive to those suggested by the Community Practitioners and asked numerous questions. It was reported by one school in which all of the children have EAL, that their parents had specific questions around which language they should use to share books. These parents were then observed putting the strategies they'd learned into practice with their children.

Suggestions/refinements

One of the schools said that they will be arranging a trip to the library with the parents to support them in joining and to introduce them to the range of activities on offer. Another school suggested presenting each child with a book to take home at the end of the session.

When asked what refinements they would suggest for the activities, schools had the following suggestions:

- Using the classroom's interactive whiteboard so that the group can enjoy watching a story together using the *Storytime* app;
- Providing supplementary materials, such as magazines;
- Providing a good selection of books for all abilities (fiction, non-fiction, flip books, sensory books) and more options for children with attention issues.

3.6 Workshop 5 – *Beyond the Page*

The objective of this workshop is for parents to feel more confident about fitting reading and storytelling into a busy day and to know how to use resources they have available to support reading and stories outside of school.

In the Families Connect programme, the parents and their children use photo cards to make up stories together. Starting with "Once upon a time...", they turn over a card at a time to prompt the next line of their story. Following this activity, the parents share the CBeebies *Storytime* app with their children, practising their 'book talk' techniques as they progress through a chosen story.

In the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, the activity has the same focus on making up stories with the option to use story cards, but there is also a new activity of making up stories using a range of interesting objects provided by the nursery, with prompts for 'scene', 'character' and 'what happens next'. Parents and children can decide to use one or combine options to suit individual child's interests. The session focusses on the children's imagination and the ways storytelling can be prompted through day to day opportunities.



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Children

Four of the five schools completed learning logs for this session, of which only three provided observation of the children's experience. Two of the schools noted that the children engaged well with the session, enjoying selecting items to use as props and taking pride in showing the items they had brought in from home and telling stories, "including children with EAL" at one school. One of the schools provided supplementary sensory bags containing items to smell and touch (for example, scented oranges) which were reported to support the session well. However, one school felt that the activity was "too challenging for the nursery" and felt that the session wasn't needed at all, stating that the activities "are not necessary for nursery age children." This reflection suggests it would be helpful to strengthen the training by giving further consideration as to how the example activity options are introduced and by making links to effective early years practice and the rationale behind the design of the activities.

Parents

The observations of the parents' experience of the activities shows that reactions were mixed. Two of the schools reported that the parents engaged well with the session, readily shared ideas with each other to encourage reading at home and were open to learning new strategies to share stories with their children. The parents were observed to be "more relaxed and engaged" and had fun "making up silly stories with their children." However, the other two schools that provided feedback reported that the parents found the session challenging, with one group struggling to make up stories rather than read to their children, and the other finding it difficult to grasp the concept of the activity, causing them to be "reluctant to try it out."

Suggestions/refinements

Suggestions for encouraging the activity at home included providing parents with catalogues to enable them to make their own story cards at home or using family photos or photos of special events. One school had a teddy bear that they sent home with children so that they could take pictures of him and make up stories about his time with them. One school was able to provide a gift of a small collection of books for children to take home and keep.

When asked if they could suggest any refinements for this session, one school said that it could perhaps be combined with *Book Talk* as the activities felt too short. Another school felt that the activity was suitable, but that using story cards which featured familiar characters (for example, Peppa Pig or Paw Patrol) might help children with making up their own stories.

Save the Children reflection on feedback

The story cards and objects are intended to be open-ended to encourage children's imagination, building on the books focus in the previous workshop where stories are chosen, explored and extended through 'book talk'. The mixed feedback from this workshop suggests that the programme description and training would benefit from further enhancement to support Community Practitioners' understanding of the purpose and flexibility of example activity options that can be tailored to individual children and their families.

3.7 Workshop 6 – The Importance of Counting

The core aim of this workshop is to increase parents' awareness and knowledge of early counting skills, enabling them to support their children to develop and extend their skills. Parents will develop confidence around fun counting games and feel able to adapt and amend them to suit their children.

In the Families Connect programme, parents and their children play a game of '10 nice things'. Both the parent and child each have a box filled with 10 small objects. The first player uses a spinner, and the number they spin is how many of the items they can take from the second player. The parent and child can adapt the rules together to

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help make the game their own, and to adjust how easy or hard it is based on the child's ability. Community Practitioners are encouraged to provide families with a number line to support their counting.

In the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, the game has been retained with only some small adaptation. The game is now called 'a number of nice things' to allow for more variety in the number of individual items, with larger boxes and a range of larger everyday items being used. A bigger dot dice is also included, and the rules are simplified and more open to being tailored to the individual child.

Children

All four of the schools that provided feedback for this session reported good levels of enjoyment and engagement from the children. The inclusion of larger dice worked well for the children's smaller hands, while the spots on the dice were useful for counting as well. Children were observed engaging with the various items, exploring their possible uses, matching and sorting them into groups as well as practicing to count with them.



Parents

Each of the four schools that provided feedback reported that the parents engaged well with the session overall. Parents at each school were reported to enjoy playing 'a number of nice things' with their children, and were able to adapt the activity as necessary, making up their own games and differentiating the activity for their child's stage of development. One school also reported that the activity also enabled "lots of great language development" as the children enjoyed counting the items and rolling the dice.

Suggestions/refinements

One of the schools reported that a parent said they would definitely use the 'a number of nice things' activity again at home. To give further encouragement, one school suggested that parents could find familiar objects from the home to play similar counting games with. One school said that making games that parents could take away would support their engagement in this activity outside the classroom.

All of the schools said that they would not do anything differently if running the session again, though two did suggest the inclusion of a number line or number fan would help to support the children with their counting. One other school said that a refinement would be to "ask the parents how they would interpret the game", which they did, and which worked well.

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3.8 Workshop 7 – Number Talk

The aim of this workshop is to raise awareness among parents of the difficulties associated with some number names – a common issue that can be easily rectified once identified. This workshop highlights how parents can easily help to familiarise their children with numbers as part of their everyday interactions.

In the Families Connect programme, parents and their children play two paper-based number games together. In the first, players are required to ‘drive’ a numbered bus card to the correct ‘teen’ or ‘ty’ garage showing their understanding of how to sort decimal numbers. In the second, players take turns to pick number cards, and then search for the number in a ‘number scene’ picture.

In the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, both the number games are replaced by an environmental print hunt in which the parent with the child taking the lead, look for numbers on everyday objects and in photos that are placed around the room. The children are also provided with play dough in which they can make number prints using number magnets. Only numbers under 10 are used with the younger children and as in the previous workshop on counting, parents are encouraged to start at a level appropriate to their child’s development, for example numbers one to three, or one to five and so forth.



Children

All four of the schools that provided feedback for this session reported that the children engaged well with the range of activities, with the number hunt and making prints in play dough being particularly enjoyed and prompting use of “good mathematical language.” One school provided a ‘number sponge’ activity for the children, which they then continued in class as it was so well received.

Parents

Each of the four schools reported that the parents enjoyed the activities, particularly setting up and taking part in the environmental print hunt. One school reported that their parents found the activities useful as their children were not always able to recognise written numbers. Another also related how one parent stated that the session had made them “more aware that numbers are all around us” and will use the skills learned in the session to encourage counting in day to day life.

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Suggestions/refinements

To enable the activity to be continued outside the programme, one school advised that they had provided ingredients and recipes for parents to make their own play dough at home. They also suggested that it could be beneficial to mention board games or other number games that can be played at home.

One of the schools that provided feedback felt that the activity needed further refinement – “perhaps adding a number line to consolidate the use of the magnets.” When asked what they would do differently if they were to run the session again, one school advised that they would provide paint for printing numbers, while another said they would put up number lines and perhaps provide 3D numbers larger than the suggested magnets for easier use by “small little fingers.”

3.9 Workshop 8 – *Celebration and Evaluation*

In the final workshop of the programme, parents and children tell us about their experience of Families Connect and make recommendations and suggestions for improvement. Evidence is collected that allows evaluation against expected programme outcomes. Children and parents celebrate and value their achievements alongside each other and school staff.

In the Families Connect programme, each parent and child are given a question sheet titled ‘Can You Tell Me?’ Then, using a finger puppet, the parent asks the child the questions on the sheet, writing their responses as they go and capturing the child’s thoughts on their experience of the programme.

In the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, the Can You Tell Me? sheet is replaced by a ‘thumbs up/thumbs down’ activity. Children are shown photocards depicting the activities from each session or examples of resources on a table display and are asked to indicate which their favourite and least favoured activity was by placing either a ‘thumbs up’ or ‘thumbs down’ card on the appropriate picture. Additionally, a greater emphasis was placed on how to make this session more of a celebration event for families.



Unfortunately, only two of the participating schools were able to provide feedback on the final session of the programme. While both felt that the parents’ evaluation had worked well, opinion was split on how successful the children’s evaluation had been. One of the schools felt that the ‘thumbs up/thumbs down’ activity had been “pitched at the children’s levels” and that the children were able to relate to the photographs and remember the different workshops. Photos taken by the school of each session were also provided to aid the children’s memories.

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However, the other school reported that the children's evaluation had been tricky as the children found it difficult to remember previous sessions. The Community Practitioners and parents also weren't certain that the children understood the concept of 'favourite.'

The Community Practitioners at this school did report that the session went well, particularly as they provided extra activities (for example, "craft collage beans, colouring, decorating biscuits") to occupy parents and children while others were completing evaluations. They also set up a "teddy bears' picnic" which they felt went "splendidly" and created a "nice atmosphere."

When asked if they felt the session needed further refinement, the school that had experienced difficulties with the children's evaluation suggested that evaluating weekly rather than asking children their views at the end of the programme might produce more reliable results. They also reiterated how adding a range of activities to occupy everyone during the evaluation had been helpful. The other school suggested presenting each child with a simple craft pack or a book to take home to encourage continuation of the activities beyond the programme. They also indicated that "next time" they would arrange for a well-known character (such as the Gruffalo) to present certificates to the children.

3.10 Parents' and children's views

To ensure that parents' and children's voices continue to feed into the development of the programme, we wanted to find out how the participating families felt about the workshops. The following feedback was gathered via the 'thumbs up/thumbs down' activities undertaken by parents and children in the final week of the programme.

Parents' views

Feedback from parents was received from four of the participating schools. The *Number Talk* workshop received the highest number of 'thumbs up' cards with six, followed closely by the *Focus on Feelings* and *The Importance of Praise* sessions which were each given five.

"I learnt that praise is important but not to over-do it if not authentic" - Parent

"Counting and recognising numbers were good. My child realised that there is a lot of print around us." - Parent

"Feelings – everyone in the house uses the feelings fan" - Parent

The *Book Talk* workshop appears to have been regarded by the parents as their least favourite, receiving a total of seven 'thumbs down' cards. This could be due to parents being more familiar with reading as an activity they can do with their children compared to some of the other Families Connect-specific activities which may be experienced as 'new' to parents. This finding is contrary to feedback reported in the Community Practitioners' learning logs where this workshop had been reported to have gone well with parents being engaged and asking lots of questions. There is a possibility that parents were referring to the other literacy workshop *Beyond the Page* which had received mixed reviews.

The parents also gave more general feedback, with one suggesting that sessions could have been more "hands on" as children "like to make and explore." Another parent said they thought more time should have been allotted for them to practice the activities with their children.

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Children's views

Only three of the participating schools collected feedback from the children, which indicated that *The Importance of Praise*, *Book Talk* and *Number Talk* sessions had been enjoyed the most with each receiving four 'thumbs up' cards. This is also reflected in Community Practitioner and parent reported outcomes through the post-questionnaires, in terms of children's increased interest in these activities in the nursery and at home. The *Focus on Feelings*, *The Importance of Listening* and *Beyond the Page* sessions were close seconds, each receiving three 'thumbs up' cards, indicating that the programme as a whole was well received by children with individual preferences showing through in what they enjoyed the most.

"play dough was the best one"

"Loved looking at all books reading all different stories"

"Love numbers"

The Importance of Listening workshop was voted by children as being the least enjoyed with five of them giving it a 'thumbs down' card, contrary to feedback from Community Practitioners who reported this to be a really engaging session for both parents and children. Children's feedback about the workshop below remind us how individual children will react differently to activities in response to their interest, capabilities and needs.

"didn't like the shaker – it was too noisy"

"Really enjoyed making a shaker each"

Save the Children has continued to explore ways of capturing children's voice in the Summer 2019 delivery of the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, building on this learning and to test alternative ways for families to evaluate their experience of Families Connect with Community Practitioners.

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4. Outcomes

4.1 General

A total of six schools took part in the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot; three in Wales, two in the North of England, and one in Northern Ireland. Four of the schools completed the eight-week delivery of the programme, one ran until week five and one deferred to the Spring term. Therefore, four out of the six schools provided us with post-questionnaires containing outcomes data.

32 families from four schools participated. Of those participants who attended the coffee morning and/or signed up to the programme, 16 attended a minimum of six sessions and 19 completed the programme (completed parent post-questionnaires in workshop eight). Attendance at any given session ranged from highest at 81% at workshop two to lowest at 39% at workshop six.¹

In the four schools that completed delivery, the age of the children taking part ranged from two years and 10 months to four years and three months, and more than half were female (58%). Demographic information was collected on the parent post-questionnaires which were returned for 19 of the children. None of the children were reported to have had special educational needs. Parents taking part were largely biological mothers (74%), and most were white British or white Irish (79%) with the rest identifying as white and black African (5%), black African (5%), and Pakistani (5%).

Parents' views on the pilot programme overall

Parents filled in post-programme questionnaires in workshop eight of the programme. A total of 19 questionnaires were completed, representing 59% of the families.

Parents were asked to report on their enjoyment, satisfaction and perceived influence of the programme on their family, their responses being consistent with those received from parents who have participated in the Families Connect programme:

100% (19) of parents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they really enjoyed the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot.

100% (19) of parents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that their child really enjoyed the pilot.

100% (19) of parents felt supported by staff facilitating the pilot.

95% (18) of parents perceived the influence of Families Connect on what they and child do together at home.

74% (14) of parents perceived an influence of the pilot on other members of the family at home.

Community Practitioners' views on parent and child outcomes

Community Practitioners filled in pre- and post-programme questionnaires, reporting on the participating children's interest in numeracy and literacy, as well as the parents' and children's confidence. A total of 16 sets of pre- and post-questionnaires were completed, representing 50% of the participating families.

Child interest

Changes in children's interest in literacy and numeracy were measured using a bespoke scale developed to be an age appropriate assessment of children's engagement in learning within nursery school. The scale includes a range

¹ Unfortunately, one school's monitoring information was not submitted, while another submitted incomplete information. Therefore, their data has been omitted from the overall retention rate – figures are based on four out of six schools that submitted full attendance records.

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of statements such as 'How interested is this child in joining in with songs and rhymes' and 'How interested is this child in joining in noticing print', to which the teacher rates on a six point Likert scale from 'shows no interest' to 'shows a great deal of interest' (a full version of the scale is included in Annex A). Cronbach's alpha (α) was used to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the scale, which was considered good when applying standard criteria at pre- and post-programme; $\alpha > 0.8$ at each time point (Cronbach, 1951; George and Mallery, 2003).

Significant improvements were assessed based on paired t-test comparison of means across pre- and post-programme. A significant difference was evident in child interest in numeracy and literacy as reported by Community Practitioners between pre- and post-programme assessment for the 16 children where measures were completed at both time points. Pre-programme mean score = 24.8 (SD= 7.87) and post-programme mean score = 30.1 (SD= 6.00), ($t = -5.1$ (14) $p < .001$).

Parent and child confidence

Changes in the parents' and children's confidence were measured using a bespoke scale developed to assess the confidence of the children within the nursery setting, and the parents in their involvement with their children's learning and in their interaction with the nursery. The scale includes a range of statements such as 'How confident do you think the child is in expressing their views' and 'How confident do you think the parent is in supporting their child's learning at home', to which the teacher rates on a six point scale from 'not at all confident' to 'shows a great deal of confidence' (a full version of the scale is included in Annex B). Cronbach's alpha (α) was used to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the scale, which was considered reasonable when applying standard criteria at pre- and post-programme; $\alpha > 0.7$ at each time point (Cronbach, 1951; George and Mallery, 2003).

Significant improvements were assessed based on paired t-test comparison of means across pre- and post-programme. A significant difference was evident in parent and child confidence as reported by Community Practitioners between pre- and post-programme assessment for the 16 children where measures were completed at both time points. Pre-programme mean score = 18.6 (SD= 7.80) and post-programme mean score = 24.9 (SD= 4.67), ($t = -4.3$ (15) $p < .01$).

The quantitative data collected indicates a potential positive impact on children's interest in early learning activities, as well as parents' confidence in supporting their children's learning and children's confidence in the nursery. These findings are further supported by the qualitative data collected from both the teacher and parent questionnaires, as well as the parent and child session feedback.

4.2 Outcomes for children

Interest

On completion of the programme, both parents and teachers reported on whether they thought the programme had impacted on the children's interest in a range of early learning activities – joining in with songs and rhymes, joining in with stories, books, counting, noticing print, and mark making. 78% (14) of teachers and 84% (16) of parents who provided feedback said that yes, the child's interest had been impacted, in some cases across multiple activities.

Observing from within the nursery setting, teachers reported that more children showed an increased interest in mark making and counting than any other activity, though all the activities received some increased interest.

"(the child) is aware of letters and sounds in the environment, especially if he sees or hears 'd'. He is beginning to show more interest in writing his name. Previously it was 'I can't do it'". – Community Practitioner

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It is interesting that children were seen to show increased interest in mark making by Community Practitioners in the nursery context, as this was not a specific topic focus of any of the workshops. Some opportunities however were offered within topics as part of craft-based activities which also support development of children's fine motor skills. This finding may relate to children's increased awareness of print all around them, and that letters and numbers carry meaning which may have impacted positively on children's interest in mark making.

From the learning logs provided by the Community Practitioners, we can see that the sessions which focussed on numeracy were particularly well received by parents, with some commenting on the post-programme questionnaires that they were increasingly aware of numbers and print in day to day life and the learning opportunities this provides for children. This suggests that parents have grasped the key messages of the numeracy workshops and have been able to transfer the strategies they've learnt to the home learning environment.

Interestingly, the children appear to have favoured different activities when in their home environment, with parents reporting that most children showed an increased interest in counting (similarly to when at nursery), followed by joining in with stories, and books. However, none of the parents reported an increased interest in mark making.

"She loves making up stories and it helped me realise how I can help her to do that better. And that we can do it at home as well as when out and about." - Parent

"My child would be more aware of numbers, symbols and when reading books she would recognise this and notice letters e.g. she will say 'S' is in my name" - Parent

Again, the increased interest in counting is consistent with the qualitative data received from parents which shows that they have understood the concepts introduced in the numeracy workshops and are able to transfer the activities and skills learnt to the home.

The learning logs showed that there was great enthusiasm for the *Book Talk* workshop, with parents reported to be highly engaged and asking thoughtful questions about how to best support their children's literacy. It is encouraging to see that children's interest in books and stories increased in the home environment in particular, as it suggests parents have understood the importance of early literacy and have put the skills learned into practice.

It is perhaps unsurprising that none of the children were reported by their parents to have had an increased interest in mark making in the home context as it was not a specific focus of any of the workshops, and therefore parents did not explicitly learn strategies for supporting it in the home. As the nursery would be introducing mark making to this age group, there is perhaps more opportunity and encouragement to engage with this activity within this setting.

Impact

When asked if they thought attending Families Connect had had a positive or negative impact on the child, 83% (15) of teachers who responded said that it had had a positive impact, particularly in terms of their social and emotional development. A number of children were reported to be happier and more outgoing, and more comfortably settled when in nursery, while others were seen to interact more with their peers and begin to form friendships. A majority of children were observed to exhibit increased confidence and self-esteem in nursery following attendance of the programme.

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“The child is more settled and is beginning to make friends” – Community Practitioner

“I think now mum is more relaxed and confident it is helping the child's confidence and self-esteem” – Community Practitioner

“Child is more confident to join in with other children's play” – Community Practitioner

Some schools reported in the learning logs that quieter children were feeling more comfortable joining in with activities during the workshops. One Community Practitioner felt that the smaller group environment may have facilitated this. Having their parent attend with the child in the nursery setting may also have provided a reassuring presence for some children. Through the qualitative data provided by Community Practitioners and parents, there is evidence that activities were continued outside of the programme, making learning more continuous and not something that only takes place in nursery, which may have helped some children to feel more confident in attending nursery.



4.3 Outcomes for parents

Impact

Teachers were also asked if they thought attending the pilot had had a positive impact on the parent, with 81% stating that it had had a positive impact.

The majority of the Community Practitioners' responses highlighted that the parents appeared to have increased in confidence since attending the programme, particularly with regard to approaching nursery staff about their child's learning. This indicates that parents may be more confident in having a role in their children's education and feel more empowered to support them. It also suggests that parents are working more in partnership with nursery

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staff. It was noted that some parents appeared more comfortable interacting with each other following attendance of the programme. This is supported by qualitative statements provided by parents on the post-questionnaires, as well as observations recorded by Community Practitioners in the weekly learning logs, which indicates that the programme had served as a forum for sharing ideas and experiences with other parents, consistent with feedback provided on the Families Connect programme.

“Mum was worried and anxious looking at the beginning of programme. It has helped to develop her confidence and relationship with the staff” – Community Practitioner

Parents' views

At the end of the post-programme questionnaire, parents were asked if they would recommend Families Connect to other people, with 95% (18) saying that yes, they would.

The reasons given for wanting to recommend the programme were diverse, ranging from valuing the opportunity to spend time with their child, to feeling that the programme had enabled better communication between parent and child, and appreciating having gained an understanding of the child's perspective. However, the most cited reasons for recommending the programme to others centred on having the opportunity to connect with, share ideas with and learn from other parents, as well as learning how to encourage and support their child's learning, particularly through having an awareness of the numerous learning opportunities that exist in day to day life. This indicates that, as the Community Practitioners observed, the workshops had facilitated the emergence of a supportive community which was greatly valued by the parents. It also suggests that the content and messaging of the programme is being transferred to families' day to day lives with ease in a way that is positively impacting the home learning environment, as well as supporting parents to understand how they can support their children's learning and the value of their contribution.

“You learn so much from one another” - Parent

“I think Families Connect has made me realise how important it is to make sure you take time with your child e.g. leaving the washing etc.” - Parent

“It has brought awareness to me about basic opportunities for learning/interaction with my child. Often simple things around the house” - Parent

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5. Conclusions and next steps

Next steps

- Continued pilot delivery - The interim report contains detailed feedback, some of which has already fed into Spring and Summer 2019 pilot delivery and which will be drawn together in a final report once all piloting has been completed.
- Developing Families Connect for three-to-six-year-olds - Feedback on the adaptations is beginning to inform the development of a single integrated programme, bringing together example activity options to support children's learning and development within this age range, in a flexible and child-centred way. We anticipate that the programme will work best when offered to families from one class group at a time, with training accessed by either nursery or school staff who can then tailor the programme to groups of children and families they work with. Further consultation with nurseries will be undertaken to inform the implementation of the programme during 2020.
- In the process of reviewing the Families Connect programme alongside the Adapting Families Connect for Three-Year-Olds Pilot, an exciting opportunity arose to reprioritise and make more explicit the key mathematical concepts for this age group, such as the importance of estimation. This will align with and has been informed by current research in children's early mathematical development. The need to strengthen this area of the programme was consistently highlighted in evaluation feedback from the Families Connect programme and has been reflected in feedback from the pilot.
- Training - Feedback in this report highlights ways in which the training can be enhanced to support recruitment and retention in the nursery context. The varying levels of confidence and experience in parental engagement and/or working with three-year-olds seen in this pilot, suggests the benefit of incorporating more early years practice guidance linked to the rationale behind activities. For example, video clips to bring to life particular interactions with children, such as using cards and objects to spark imagination for story building, could be an effective way to support Community Practitioners during their training.

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Annex A: Children’s engagement in early learning activities, bespoke scale

In your view, how interested is this child in the following:

	Shows no interest	Shows a little interest	Shows neither interest or disinterest	Shows some interest	Shows quite a lot of interest	Shows a great deal of interest
Joining in with songs and rhymes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Joining in with stories	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Books	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Counting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Noticing print	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mark making	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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Annex B: Parents' and children's confidence, bespoke scale

In your view, how confident do you think

	Not at all confident	A little confident	Neither confident nor unconfident	Somewhat confident	Shows quite a lot of confidence	Shows a great deal of confidence
the child is in nursery, in general terms?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
the child is in expressing their views	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
the parent is in asking staff about their child's learning in nursery?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
the parent is in supporting their child's learning at home?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
the parent is in getting involved in activities taking place at the school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐