

Communication and language approaches

High impact for very low cost, based on extensive evidence.



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Communication and language approaches emphasise the importance of spoken language and verbal interaction. They are based on the idea that children's language development benefits from approaches that explicitly support talking, verbal expression, modelling language and reasoning. Communication and language approaches used in the early years include reading aloud and discussing books with young children, explicitly extending children's spoken vocabulary by introducing them to new words in context, and drawing attention to letters and sounds. Approaches usually involve an early years professional, nursery teacher or teaching assistant, who has been trained in the approach, working with a small group of children or individually to develop spoken language skills.

How effective is it?

Overall, studies of communication and language approaches consistently show positive benefits for young children's learning, including their spoken language skills, their expressive vocabulary and their early reading skills. On average, children who are involved in communication and language approaches make approximately six months' additional progress over the course of a year. All children appear to benefit from such approaches, but some studies show slightly larger effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Some types of communication and language approaches appear, on average, to be more effective than others. There is consistent evidence that reading to young children, and encouraging them to answer questions and talk about the story with a trained adult, is an effective approach. A number of studies show the benefits of programmes where trained teaching assistants have supported both oral language and early reading skills. Most studies comment on the importance of training and teacher development, and supporting teachers with the implementation of different approaches. There are indications that practitioners should take a range of different approaches to developing communication and language skills, as it is unlikely that one approach alone is enough to secure progress.

How secure is the evidence?

There is a secure evidence base showing the impact of communication and language approaches, including a number of meta-analyses. The evidence is relatively consistent, suggesting that communication and language approaches can be successful in a variety of environments. Little is known about the long-term impact of communication and language approaches, so additional evidence about whether and how to ensure that benefits are maintained once children start school would be valuable.

The evidence base includes a number of high quality studies from the UK.

What are the costs?

Overall, the costs are estimated as very low. There are few, if any, direct financial costs associated with this approach. Additional resources such as books for discussion may be required. In a recent UK evaluation the cost of these additional resources was estimated at between £10 and £20 per pupil. Professional development or training is also likely to enhance the benefits on learning.

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What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. How can you help children to articulate and express their ideas and experiences verbally?
2. What training will adults involved received to ensure they are able to model and develop children's spoken language skills?
3. How can you link children's spoken language with their developing writing and reading skills?
4. Combining a range of communication and language approaches is likely to be more effective than a single approach. How will you ensure that children are exposed to a range of different communication and language strategies?