

News story: Multi-million fund to boost children's early language skills

New support to help parents improve their children's early language and literacy skills at home before they start school have been announced today (30 April) by Education Secretary Damian Hinds.

Two schemes will build the confidence of parents to support their children in language and reading at an early stage. This has been shown to help close the so-called 'word gap' – the gap in communication skills between disadvantaged children and their peers when they start school.

A new £5million scheme will be run by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) to trial projects to provide practical tools and advice to parents so they can help their children learn new words through simple steps like reading and singing nursery rhymes.

Alongside this, an £8.5million programme has opened for local authorities to fund projects to improve early language and literacy development for disadvantaged children.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

This Government wants every child to have the best start in life which means mastering the basics of speaking, reading and writing at an early age. It is important that parents and families can feel confident about supporting their children so they can start school with the appropriate level of language and social skills.

This new support will help parents with early language learning at home by giving them practical advice on activities like reading and learning the alphabet which are so important in making sure no child is left behind.

Through the hard work of teachers and the government's reforms, academic standards are rising with 1.9 million more children in schools rated good or outstanding than in 2010 and the attainment gap is narrowing in both primary and secondary school. English children are also rising up the international literacy league tables from an early age, helping to make Britain a country fit for the future.

Despite this progress, too many children arrive at school struggling with language and social skills, putting them at a disadvantage when they begin their formal education and making it harder for them to master the fundamentals of reading that other children take for granted.

Over the past 40 years, the amount of time parents spend on development activities, such as playing and reading with their children has risen from 23

minutes per day to 80 minutes, but research shows that three year olds from certain backgrounds are 37 percentage points less likely to be read to every day than their peers.

The EEF will trial projects in the north of England, looking at what works best in improving children's communication skills at home before they begin school, a key part of the government's ambition to give every child the best start in life.

The projects aim to give parents and carers the tools to widen children's language, vocabulary and social skills in the pre-school years to tackle the 'word gap' that exists between disadvantaged children and their better off peers at age five, and there is evidence that shows this has a long term effect on educational outcomes.

First announced in the government's social mobility action plan [Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential](#), published in December, these measures target support in areas that need it the most – ensuring equality of opportunity for children and young people and laying the foundations to give them an excellent education.

Sir Kevan Collins, CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation, said:

Parents care very much about the future of their children, whatever their background or wherever they come from. But it can sometimes be difficult to get them involved in their child's learning and we know little about how to do this well.

By testing different ways of tackling issues like the early years 'word gap', this new fund will give us much needed information about how we can give parents the tools they need to give their child the very best start in life.

In a separate drive to aid social mobility, the government has also committed £8.5million to a new Early Years Social Mobility Peer Review Programme with the Local Government Association, which will see councils working together to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children.

Councillor Roy Perry, Vice Chairman of the Local Government Association's Children and Young People Board, said:

We are very pleased that the Government has announced funding for a new LGA peer review programme of sector-led support which will share and promote good practice and knowledge across councils.

Councils are absolutely determined to make sure that children get the best start in life. This is why we need to close 'the word gap' in the early years, by focussing on key early language and literacy skills, so that all children can begin school ready to thrive.