

News story: Multi-million investment to support children's early communication skills

Disadvantaged families will benefit from extra support to nurture their child's early development at home, thanks to multi-million pound projects launched today (14 November) by the Education Secretary Damian Hinds.

The projects, backed by nearly £18 million, will include funding for additional training for health visitors who work with families of young children to identify speech, language and communication needs early on, helping to address and support concerns when they can have the most impact. It will also fund educational games, apps and text message 'tips' for parents and carers from disadvantaged backgrounds, helping them to interact with their children when at home or out and about, making everyday activities an opportunity for learning.

The Education Secretary will today host a summit bringing together nearly 100 businesses, charities and public sector organisations designed to tackle the 'last taboo' in education – supporting parents with learning at home. The summit will draw on a bank of existing research on parents' confidence and behaviour when it comes to learning at home with their children.

Research is clear about the importance of the home environment for a child's early learning, and even small changes can encourage conversations between parents and their young children. The Sutton Trust found parents are twice as likely to talk to children in face-to-face buggies, as opposed to those where the child faces forwards.

Speaking at today's summit, Education Secretary Damian Hinds is expected to say:

Education begins long before children arrive in the classroom. It begins as soon as they leave the maternity ward, in the crucial early years in the home, where their parents and carers help shape and prepare them to start school. But for lots of parents, as much as they want the best for their children, they lack the support they need to ensure that their children are arriving at school at the same level as their peers.

That is why I am working with experts from around the country, using research from around the world, to propose a set of actions for parents to teach them simple steps to playing with, reading with and chatting with their children.

Because a strong home learning environment is about more than supporting literacy and communication skills – it is the key to

building a child's confidence, their belief in their own abilities, and their determination and strength of character.

Organisations including the National Literacy Trust, the National Children's Bureau and the Scouts will get a share of the funding to boost parents' confidence with learning at home, drawing on data that shows a lack of skill or fear of embarrassment can discourage them from interacting in this way. Grants will also go towards improving the training available for professionals working with young children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

One in eight children in receipt of free school meals say they do not own a single book at home, according to the National Literacy Trust. Many of today's new projects will go to voluntary and community groups to improve early language, literacy and communication skills, building on the free childcare offers already available to three and four-year-olds and the most deprived two-year-olds in England.

They will harness technology and the latest global research to make user-friendly resources like text message prompts for parents to teach children new words and numbers, or strategies to help parents manage behaviour in the home.

Alongside this, the Department for Education has confirmed that a £20 million programme of training for early years staff in disadvantaged areas will support children's early language, literacy and numeracy skills, benefitting up to 60,000 pre-school age children.

The announcement comes ahead of today's summit that brings together a coalition of charities, media groups, technology companies and businesses to explore longer term opportunities to support parents with early learning at home, building on the Education Secretary's commitment in July to raising outcomes for every child – by halving the percentage who leave reception without the early communication or reading skills they need to thrive by 2028.

Successful grants being announced today include:

£6.5 million for projects focused on closing the disadvantage gap at age five and improving the early years education of children with SEND, including:

- ICAN's Change the Conversation about Language project, which will work with disadvantaged parents in three metro mayoral regions using an app called EasyPeasy, a 'Tots Talking' programme promoting language development among two-year-olds most at risk of delayed speech, and by investing in parent champions on the ground;
- National Literacy Trust (NLT) to improve the home learning environment through volunteering and digital support;
- the Scouts Early Years Pilot Programme in partnership with Action for Children to create and test a national volunteer-led Early Years Scouts programme for children aged four and five;

- the National Children's Bureau's consortium of organisations – including the Council for Disabled Children, Contact a Family, ICAN, The Communication Trust and NASEN – to work jointly across councils and with parents to encourage a culture shift in support for children with SEND, through improved training for professionals in speech, language and communication
- Pre-School Learning Alliance's (PSLA) First and Foremost programme, providing families with access to digital activities and support through the early years workforce;

£5 million for trials to be led by the Education Endowment Foundation in partnership with Shine the north of England that will research the best way to help parents in disadvantaged communities to start building their children's skills at home, so that no child starts school behind their better-off peers. This investment will trial new and existing schemes, including

- a text-message scheme for parents aimed at improving literacy, maths and social and emotional development, called TipsByText, based on a similar successful programme in the United States;

£1.8 million for a programme with Public Health England, including new speech, language and communication training for health visitors, delivered by the Institute of Health Visitors; and

£5 million for organisations to investigate what works through bespoke local projects focused on best practice in early language, literacy and maths, to build and share a stronger evidence base. A second round of projects applications has now opened.

Natasha Kaplinsky, broadcaster and co-founder of Mum&You, chairing the summit, said:

Being a parent is the most important job you can do, but it doesn't come with an instruction manual. We are often our child's first teacher, talking or playing together at home and encouraging their early development long before they start school – so the right support needs to be available for parents who may not feel confident about how to do this well.

I'm pleased to be chairing this summit, which is the start of an important national conversation about how we as a society can improve every child's language, literacy and communication skills from the earliest opportunity.

Duncan Selbie, Chief Executive of Public Health England, said:

Every child deserves the best start in life and our work with the Department for Education to promote language and literacy at home will help more children develop the skills they need to reach their

full potential.

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 improving the home learning environment – from texts to parents to home visits – these new trials 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.

Christine Lenehan, Director Council for Disabled Children:

Early years are a key point of learning and intervention for children with SEN. We know if we can get in early, we can make a lifetime of difference. NCB and CDC are delighted to lead this work with our partners, and continue to ensure young children get the best possible outcomes.