

News story: New training for health visitors to boost early language skills

Children most at risk of starting school without the basic language and communications skills are set to benefit from expert education support at home.

Health visitors – who routinely do home visits to check on a child's development at age two – will receive additional training to identify speech, language and communication needs early on, with a new assessment and support package.

Specialist training will be provided for 1,000 health visitors who will work in some of the most deprived communities in England, as part of the Government's drive to tackle the 'word gap' – the gap in communication skills between disadvantaged children and their peers.

Speaking to an audience of 300 early years professionals in Manchester today (Thursday 28 February), Children and Families Minister Nadhim Zahawi will also announce £24 million of additional funding for the 2019-20 academic year for Maintained Nursery Schools, providing reassurance for these settings which tend to care for higher numbers of disadvantaged children, often most at risk of falling behind.

Children and Families Minister Nadhim Zahawi is expected to say:

Being able to communicate and express yourself is the gateway to success, not just in school but in later life. It's these crucial early years that make the most impact on a child's future path – because for those children who start out behind their peers, it's so much harder to catch up.

The evidence tells us that we need to improve children's communication and language before they arrive at school, when so much of a child's time is spent at home, to help get them on track to be confident, able learners.

If we are to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, we must think about how we can do things differently – including through parents. No parent has all the answers – so we need to make it easier for them to kickstart their child's learning at the earliest opportunity, whether by encouraging them to take part in educational activities as a family, support from trained experts at home to identify concerns earlier, or better access to high-quality early years education.

Children who start school with poor vocabulary are twice as likely to be unemployed as an adult, so health visitors will be trained to recognise early signs of delays with a child's speech and language development and take action when it can have the most benefit.

The programme, a joint initiative being rolled out across the country by the Department for Education and Public Health England, will benefit thousands of families across the country, with a focus on parents who may lack the time, resources, or confidence to support their children's learning at home.

It builds on the Education Secretary Damian Hinds' society-wide ambition to halve the proportion of children leaving Reception year without the communication, language and literacy skills needed to thrive within the next decade.

The first wave of training will involve 400 health visitors in 49 council areas identified as being in high need, based on deprivation factors including free school meal eligibility and the level achieved in speech, language and communication among children aged five in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. The next wave will train a further 600 health visitors from 2020 onwards.

Professor Viv Bennett, Chief Nurse at Public Health England, said:

Health visitors have trusted relationships with families and play a vital role in supporting young children's health and wellbeing. This important new training will help more children develop the language and literacy skills they need to reach their full potential, ensuring that specialist support gets to those that need it most.

Health visitors in five areas of the country – Derbyshire, Newham, Middlesbrough, Wakefield and Wiltshire – will trial a bespoke early language assessment tool being developed by the University of Newcastle, led by Professor James Law.

The assessment tool will be designed to be quick and easy for health visitors to use to support their professional judgement, taking into account any concerns raised by parents and carers. It will be trialled for the first time this summer and rolled out nationally in 2020.

Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham said:

The early years of a child's life are critical in giving them the best start and the best opportunities to get on. Speech and language skills are essential to that which is why this announcement is good news for Greater Manchester – and good news for our children and families.

This joint programme will enhance the work we are already doing

across the city-region, doing things differently and driving forward pioneering approaches to close the educational inequality gap and ensure no child is left behind.

In recognition of the need for certainty about the 2019-20 academic year in maintained nursery schools, an additional £24 million will be provided to local authorities to enable them to continue funding maintained nursery schools at higher rates. This provides certainty for the sector ahead of the Spending Review.