Let’s Talk! An intervention supporting children’s vocabulary and narrative development through sustained planned pretend play and group shared storybook reading in the early years.

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Background to the topic: Being literate empowers children to become adults who can function in society in a meaningful way (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010; Justice, McGinty, Cabell, & Kilday, 2010). Early intervention in literacy development is crucial and has proved successful in having a long-term impact on children’s life-chances or outcomes (Nutbrown, Hannon, & Morgan, 2005; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2011). In particular, younger children benefit from oral language interventions that contain talk and narrative, which can improve their reading later in life (Aram, 2006; Bergen, 2013; Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008; Fricke, Snowling, Bowyer-Crane, Haley, & Hulme, 2012; Landry & Smith, 2006). Dialogic discussion that takes place during storybook reading can develop de-contextualised language (Coyne, Simmons, Kame’enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004; Sénéchal, 1997; Whitehurst & Zevenbergen, 1999). Vocabulary and inference training can also improve oral comprehension, vocabulary and sentence repetition in young children (Dockrell, Stuart, & King, 2010).

Aims:

1. To support the development of vocabulary in children in the Early Years

2. To support the development of story retelling in children in the Early Years

3. To support children’s use of new vocabulary in play and conversation

4. To promote children’s retelling of narratives that draw on language patterns of stories

5. To facilitate children’s enjoyment of listening to, and use of, spoken language, and turn to it in their play and learning

6. To encourage children to listen and respond orally to story

7. To enable children to plan and review their play

8. To enable children to explore children’s play preferences through their talk in planned play

To deliver an intervention that supports children’s oral language in 10 weeks

An intervention (Let’s Talk) that targeted three and four year old children’s oral language was devised for this study. The intervention was piloted first and then run over twice-weekly sessions. The first session was a shared storybook reading session with a puppet, where dialogic discussion took place and the children practised sequencing the story using visual prompts. The second weekly session consisted of planning, acting out and reviewing an extended planned pretend play episode based on the storybook that was read in that week’s first session. Ninety-four children were randomly assigned to a control or intervention group and were tested at pre- and post-test on a test battery of vocabulary and narrative assessments. The children’s cognitive ability was also tested using British Ability Scales II. This was used as a control variable. The results of a Randomised Control Trial were positive in favour of the intervention, with medium to large effect sizes for both vocabulary and narrative outcomes.

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