

Early Talk for York: Introduction



York has a significant and longstanding gap in outcomes between disadvantaged children and their non-disadvantaged peers. This gap starts at age 5 and, in 2017, the gap at age 5 – as defined by a Good Level of Development - was the largest of any local authority area in England.

Early Talk for York aims to improve the communication and language outcomes for children aged 0 – 5 years. Good communication skills at five years of age are strongly associated with a range of [positive whole of life outcomes](#); including literacy levels, employment, mental and physical health and wellbeing. Early communication and language development is particularly important in the ambition to [tackle outcome inequalities](#).

Early Talk for York set out with three headline strands of focus:

1. Strategy and commissioning – uniting the early years sector around a common outcome to develop better partnerships, strategic decision making and commissioning arrangements.
2. Workforce development – ensuring those working with children and families have the knowledge, skills and tools to provide the right level of support at the right time.
3. Communications and community – sharing Early Talk for York with parents and carers so they could support the aims of the project in the home learning environment.

Activity undertaken through Early Talk for York so far has included:

- training practitioners through an accredited training programme and supporting them to cascade the training;
- using a standardised tool for assessment and diagnosis of needs;
- ongoing support from other professionals, including speech and language therapists;
- working in partnership with parents and carers;
- developing a strengths based communications campaign;

Early Talk for York now has evidence of demonstrable impact on communication and language outcomes across a cohort of children.

Early Talk for York is both a strengths based approach – in that it takes what is already working well in the local area and builds upon it – and systems based – it recognises and builds on the variety of ways children’s development is supported, including in the home, health services, early years providers etc.

Evaluation process

A pilot area was set up in 2019 to investigate the feasibility and impact of the Early Talk for York approach. Partners from across the programme worked together to evaluate Early Talk for York using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods- including a school-based assessment for children aged five years - against an evaluation schedule.

Additional advice, support and expertise around evaluation methods was contributed by the local research school and academics working at the university. A ‘control group’ of schools was matched as closely as feasible against the Early Talk for York group by number of pupils, proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals and previous outcomes.

Through the process of evaluation the group identified six ‘active ingredients’; elements that are fundamental to the success of the approach:

1. A relentless focus on speech, language and communication as a top priority that impacts on whole of life outcomes.
2. Investment in high quality training that is sustained and quality assured.
3. Supported cascading of training to influence the development of whole teams.
4. Universal screening of children’s needs using a standardised tool.
5. Ongoing support of specialists who are proactive in responding to emerging needs.
6. Peer and social support and accountability on delivering the elements above, including working in partnership with parents/carers.



Impact

Early Talk for York has seen impact at system, organisational, practitioner and child level.

One professional reported:

“Our staff in (Early Years Foundation Stage) are now more confident in identifying when children may have a speech and language need, which is allowing us to support the children, with relevant interventions. The staff are now more confident at knowing how to support these children, and when they should refer them to a speech and language therapist.”

(Leader, project primary school)

By 2020 the pilot area saw an increase of 10% in identification across all levels of children’s communication and language needs, within which 2% of children required onward referral to specialist services

Fig 1 below shows the attainment outcomes in communication and language outcomes as measured by the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP)¹.

It shows that between 2019 and 2021² (which includes a significant pandemic period) outcomes for non-disadvantaged children in all York schools, control group schools and Early Talk for York schools all dropped slightly but following a very similar trend to each other. For disadvantaged children in all York schools, and the control group schools, outcomes declined to a greater extent meaning ‘the gap’ has widened during this time. However, for disadvantaged children in the Early Talk for York schools, outcomes continued to improve in contrast to all other groups shown on this chart. Because of issues in relation to attendance during the pandemic, particularly for vulnerable groups of children, it is also worth noting here that attendance of disadvantaged children was lower in the Early Talk for York schools group (70.3%) than the control group (72.4%) and York schools group (71.2%) during the 2020 – 2021 academic year.

¹ The EYFSP is the statutory assessment point at age 5 that provides a broad assessment of children’s development and is used to form the ‘Good Level of Development’ outcome, sometimes referred to as ‘school readiness’. The ‘Communication and Language’ domain consists of 3 ‘learning goals’ against which practitioners assess whether or not a child is working at age expected levels.

² In 2021 statutory reporting of outcomes by schools for children aged 5 had been removed due to the pandemic. However, Early Talk for York schools alongside many others - including the control group schools - continued their usual processes of assessment at this point



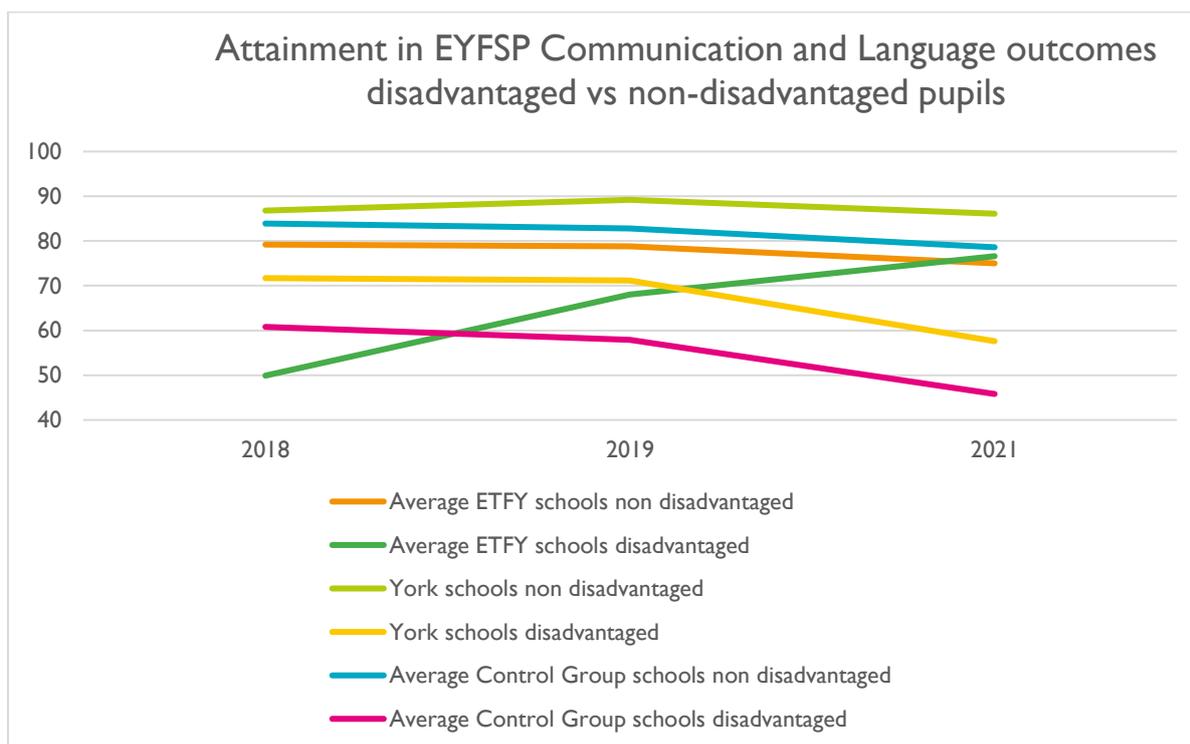


Fig 1. the percentage of children who achieved all 3 learning goals in the Communication and Language domain of EYFSP.

The data in Fig 2 shows outcomes for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in the Early Talk for York area compared to the control group schools and other schools in York. This data deals with small numbers of children and includes children with any special educational need so further caution should be applied to its interpretation but broadly shows a positive picture of the impact of Early Talk for York on children's communication and language outcomes.



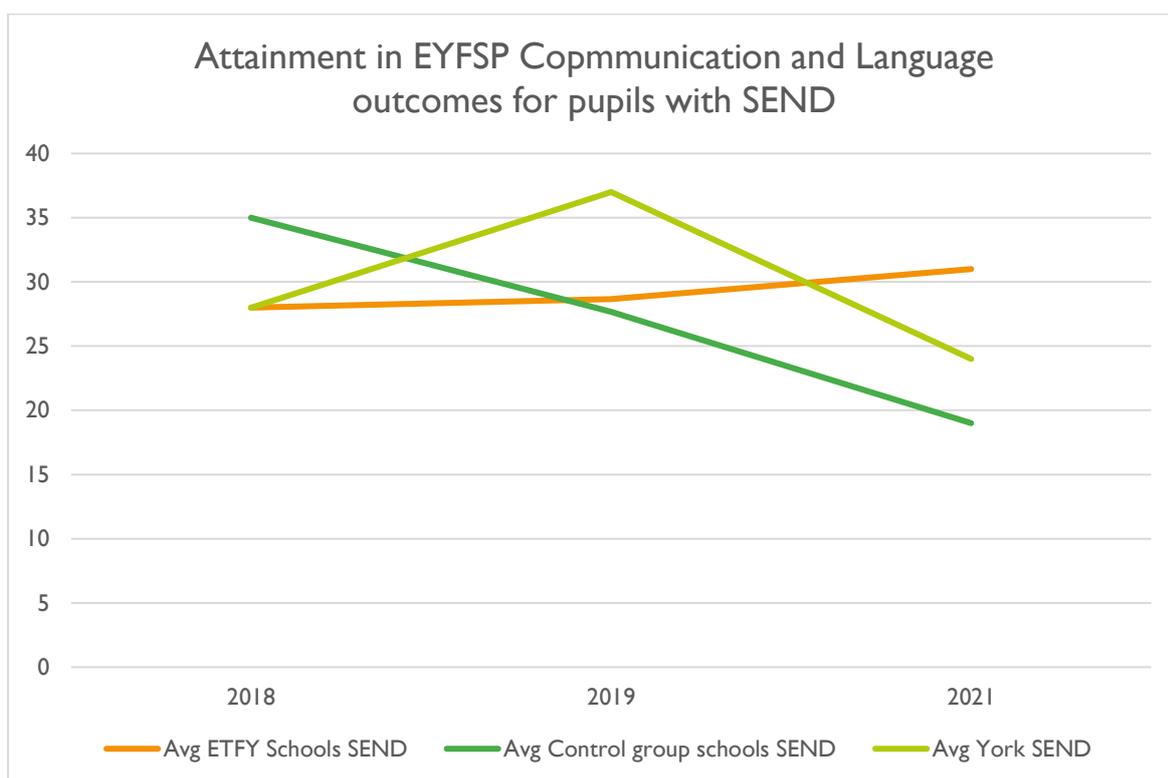


Fig 2

Conclusion

The above analysis gives cautious optimism that Early Talk for York is starting to meet its primary objective to improve outcomes in communication and language for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It provides the local area with confidence that continuing to pursue this approach with efficacy can improve outcomes for children.

Early Talk for York continues to be scaled up in a number of ways. A group of 12 schools and settings is working to replicate the initial pilot area's approaches but at greater pace. Further evaluation of impact will be available in due course.

To support scale up across the whole city the 'Early Talk for York approach' has been developed. The approach breaks down the steps to achieving what the pilot area have done into achievable 'chunks' and more information can be found at www.york.gov.uk/EarlyTalkforYork

As of Spring 2022, over half of all early years group based providers have committed to the first step of this approach with many childminders also expressing interest.

