

# WONDER WORDS EAST BELFAST: YOUR WORDS WORK WONDERS

LIFE IN LOCKDOWN 2020



## THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY COMMUNICATION SKILLS

**Save the Children** believe that all children should have the opportunity to arrive at school with language and communication skills that meet their age-related expectations – giving them a strong foundation for successful learning and development. The evidence from neuroscience is clear that the first years of a child's life are critical for optimum brain development, and that the level of support, nurture, and resources during the first five years is the foundation of lifelong health and well-being.

Children's early communications skills are regarded as the single best predictor of future cognitive skills and school performance – children who have speech, language and communication difficulties are significantly disadvantaged in their ability to learn. Falling behind so early in life has profound consequences for a child and the impact can extend far into adulthood. The research tells us that children coming from poorer backgrounds are more likely to arrive at school with skills in language development that are below the age-related expectations putting them at an educational disadvantage from the beginning.

A stimulating home environment and responsive and nurturing relationships are key to any child's cognitive, social-emotional and language development. Language development begins in the womb and once a baby is born research shows that they are immediately responsive and ready to communicate. Those early smiles and responses from a baby to an adult followed by babbles and gestures as they grow are the foundations of language development. Research shows that a parent's role in tuning in to their baby, both in communicating directly with them and responding when their baby communicates back, is vital to their brain development and laying these neural pathways for language to develop. At this early stage, parents are literally the architects of their children's brains.

The amount and style of language that parents use when conversing with their children is known to be one of the strongest predictors of children's early language and learning.



However, for families living in poverty there are a range of barriers that impact on the way that parents are able to support their child's early language development. Low income, long working hours, unstable relationships, poor housing, and poor parental mental health are some of the challenges faced by parents living in poverty and for many reasons this can affect the parent's availability for their child.

We shouldn't feel guilty for something we didn't know about

Often parents living in poverty do not understand the importance of their role in their child's development and they suffer from low self-esteem and confidence around parenting skills.

## WONDER WORDS: OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT IN EAST BELFAST SURE START

Wonder Words gathered the voices of parents engaged in East Belfast Sure Start services to hear about their daily routines and the activities that could incorporate a nudge to encourage more chatting, singing, and playing with their young children, in the home or out-and-about in their local community.

Over a 4-week period the information from Changing Time is Chatting Time (CTCT) was shared with a group of 7 parents by the Sure Start Speech and Language Therapist (SLT). CTCT is a resource developed by Belfast Health & Social Care Trust (BH&SCT) Sure Start SLTs to give parents information about early brain development and highlight the role of parent child interaction in supporting this development. It demonstrates how when you smile, talk, laugh and sing with your child at changing time and anytime throughout the day, you are laying down foundations on which all future learning (including learning to talk) will build.



The parents had a chance to explore and discuss this information and gain a deep understanding of their role from birth (and even before) in supporting their child's development. Experts in behavioural science and message insights, Claremont, then worked with this group of 7

mums to co-design a suite of positive behaviour messages, drawing from their lived experiences and the knowledge of what will inspire other parents to adopt the early behaviours so important for early brain development.



Parents identified the moments which already involve parent-child interactions, and then explored how to incorporate a prompt or 'nudge' to smile, talk, laugh and sing inside and outside of the home. They also explored how these messages and nudges could be communicated to other parents at a population level using a range of communication channels such as digital platforms, public advertising, transport systems, open spaces and on trusted products.





## WONDER WORDS: PARENTAL INSIGHTS

### 1 This Matters

*'This is about giving our kids a better start in life. It's everything to us. Everyone should be educated to understand why this matters - we the parents, families, professionals, schools – people need to get behind this.'*



### 2 Anytime Can Be Chatting Time

*'Everyone's lives are different. There's no one size fits all. This needs to be in lots of different places to accommodate all the different ways people live their lives – in the home and out of the home, online and offline, on our own or with other people. People need PROMPTS as close to the behaviour as possible.'*

### 3 Be Helpful

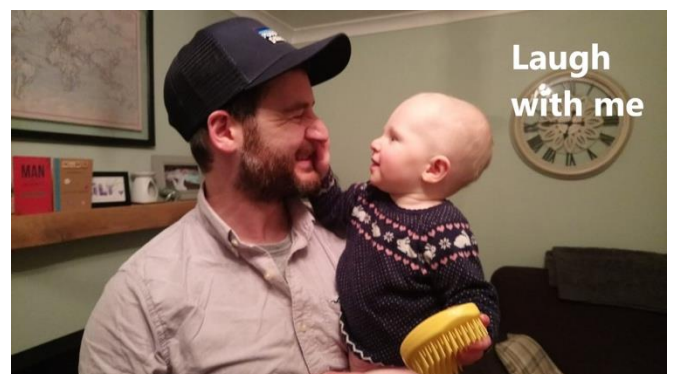
*'Don't just tell us where we should be, help us to actually get there. We absolutely welcome the tools and ideas and knowledge that'll help us do the right thing by our kids. But if you're not giving practical help then you're probably part of the problem.'*

### 4 Messengers Change The Message

*'It works two ways: People we respect can help us through their advice and by showing us how to do things. Other people, whatever they say we're likely to bristle or maybe even do the opposite.'*

### 5 There's Joy In This

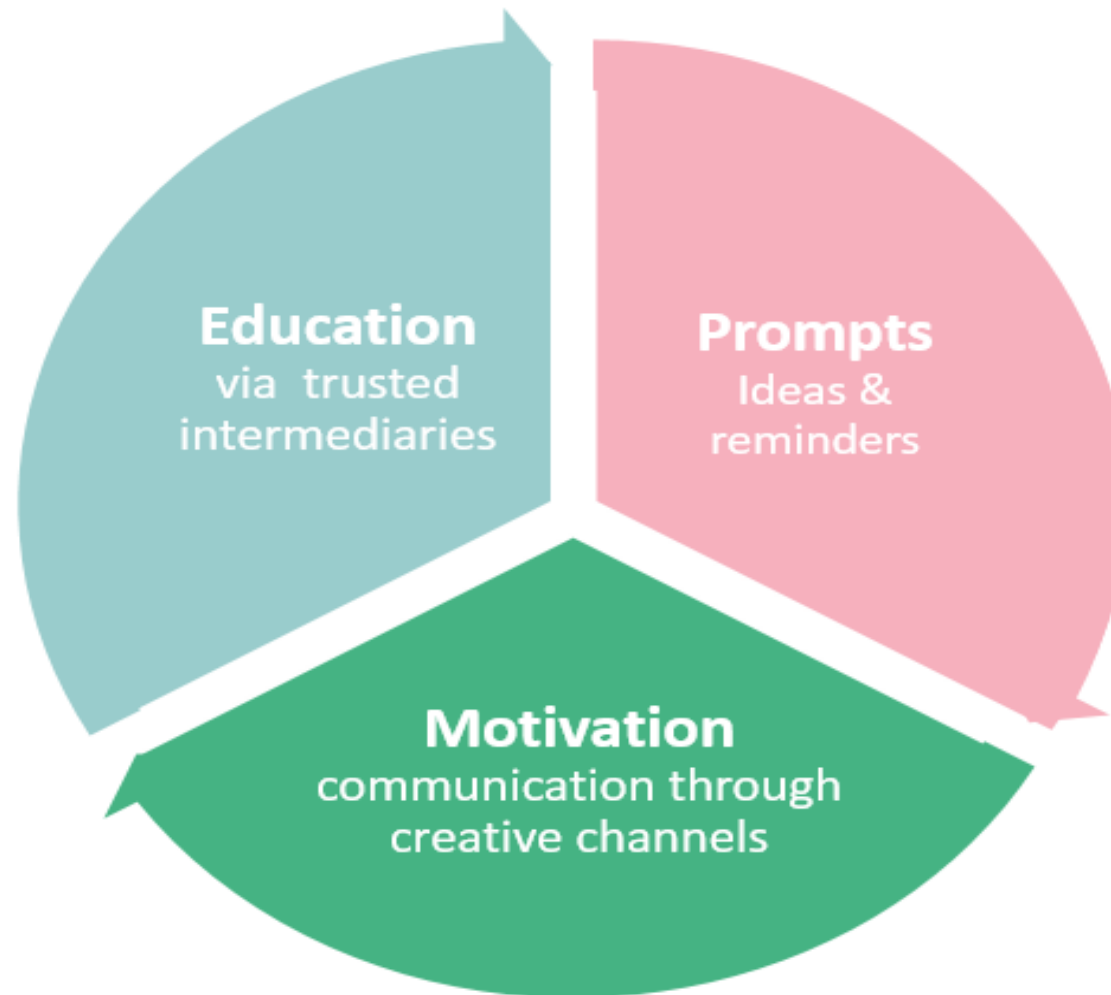
*'Seeing babies thrive – smiling, happy, laughing, bonding – it warms your heart. It makes your day. What's even more amazing is that I've made that happen. I'VE CAUSED THAT. It's the best feeling in the world.'*



# YOUR WORDS WORK WONDERS

## WONDER WORDS: MODEL OF ENGAGEMENT

There are three interlinking elements of the model – providing the knowledge through trusted individuals, sharing and modelling ideas and techniques and building the motivation through creative channels of communication.



## WONDER WORDS: APPLYING THE LEARNING IN LOCKDOWN

In March 2020 we entered uncertain times as the Corona-virus pandemic threatened our lives, resulting in a nation-wide lockdown. Organisations offering support to vulnerable families had to think creatively and re-configure how they reach out and support families. This provided a unique opportunity in East Belfast Sure Start to apply the learning from the parental insights and explore the impact of this at a practice and family level.

As the children could no longer attend the Sure Start centre for face-to-face sessions, practitioners emphasised parents' role in their children's development through providing a warm, nurturing, and supportive experience, through use of social media and phone contact. Early years practitioners used the Wonder Words parental insights to guide them as they modelled the approach that they wanted parents to adopt. They used digital and social media platforms to encourage parents to smile, chat, laugh, sing, and play with their children through encouraging reading, play and physical activities.



Early years practitioners regularly sent prompts to encourage parents to engage with their children. Positive behaviours were role modelled and shared on-line by practitioners who had formed trusted relationships with the families to

enable parents to understand the 'how' in a practical and meaningful way.

Parents were offered a digital platform to share photo's, short video clips and ideas of how their children were responding to activities and parental cues. Sharing the 'joy' and sense of pride in seeing their children thrive, as a result of their interactions, reinforced the positive behaviours. Parents began to model the behaviours to other parents, praising each other and creating a powerful community of peer-to-peer learning and support, thus building on strengthening and sustaining the behaviour.

## WONDER WORDS: CAPTURING THE LEARNING

The learning and relevance of the five parental insights during lockdown were captured through:

- An early years practitioner survey
- A parental survey and in-depth parent interviews (6)

Claremont, experts in behaviour change, designed a parental survey to gain insight into how parents were interacting with their young children during lockdown and the critical elements that encouraged and enabled interaction. The survey was disseminated to parents engaging with East Belfast Sure Start through Facebook and WhatsApp groups. This was followed by a survey with early years practitioners in East Belfast Sure Start to understand how they adapted their practice during lockdown and the impact of this upon relationships with parents, parent/child interaction at home and child development. Finally, 6 in-depth parent interviews were undertaken to explore emerging themes and understand if positive parental behaviours were adopted during lockdown as a result of the mirroring of the Wonder Words parental insights practised by Sure Start professionals.

## Early Years Practitioner Survey Findings

A survey was undertaken to understand how early years practitioners within East Belfast Sure Start adapted their practice during lockdown and how this impacted upon relationships with parents, parent/child interaction at home and child development. There were 29 respondents from a range of early years professionals including; Family Support Workers, Programme for 2-Year-Old (Supervisors and Assistants), Early Years Workers (Supervisors and Assistants), Inclusion Officer, Speech & Language Therapist and Parent and Family Co-ordinator.

As a result of the lockdown 82% of practitioners stated their practice had to be significantly adapted to support parents during this time. These adaptations largely included transitioning support and services on-line and providing one to one telephone calls.

*'Usually, my job is hands on with the children and their families, so I had to adapt to working from home and spending my time making story/activity videos for the children, researching ideas for the parents to do at home and keeping in contact through phone calls and zoom sessions.'*

During this time 58% described their relationships with parents as changing for the better, whilst 38% stated their relationships were good prior to the lockdown period and remained this way throughout.

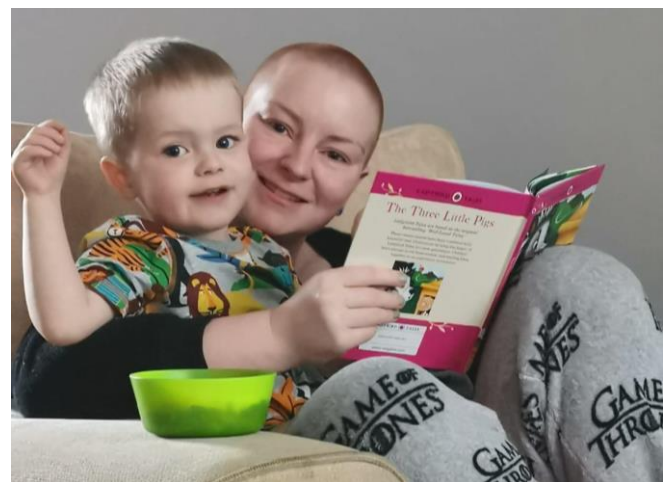
*'Parents seem to be a lot closer with me and talk more about their daily lives with their children at home including their struggles and asking for help.'*

Practitioners described how parents were keen to open-up and ask for support across a range of topics such as sensory needs, child communication needs and toilet training. A sense of bonding, building of parent/practitioner trust and an increased understanding of families and

their daily struggles was a strong theme throughout the respondents.

*'I feel the one-to-one phone calls each week with the parent of my key children has helped me to form a better relationship with them, as normally in the setting some parents can find it difficult to express how they are feeling in front of their children.'*

*'Generally, they have been keen to talk during phone calls and I have supported many with different issues, such as toilet training, sensory needs and communication needs.'*



Some practitioners described a feeling of 'all in this together', practitioners and parents working together to support each other. Adaptation of practice included, live story telling sessions, modelling activities, singing rhymes, and sharing videos with parents of fun activities they could do with their children on social media sites.

*'The WhatsApp group has been a valuable support for parents and has been a good platform to share ideas, photos and videos. The zoom sessions have been a great way for us to see the families and for them to see each other. I think because we have all experienced lockdown together it has brought us closer, and I think it has created a sense of team and we are all working together to support each other.'*

Respondents noted an increase in the quantity and quality of the parent and child interaction



during the lockdown period and felt this was linked to the method of practitioner engagement such as videos providing information on the 'why' and modelling the 'how', reinforced with regular prompts to encourage the behaviour.



*'Parents appreciate and take on board our interaction ideas e.g. reading stories together, making play dough from the simplest recipe, learning something new and most importantly cherish the time they spend together.'*

*'Parents with children with additional needs have really stepped up with adapting their environment to help their children, for example, the use of visuals. A lot of parents are engaging in lots of activities that they may not have done before especially messy play activities.'*

Having quality time and reduced distractions from everyday day life pre-lockdown was recognised as an enabler to increased parent/child interaction in the home.

*'Lockdown has given some parents time to really tune in to their children and we have noticed some children's communication is really coming on over the past few months. Some of our parents have been providing some really great play experiences and making activities for their child, helping them learn numbers, colours and letters.'*

*'A lot of parents have said their child's speech has improved and they have toilet trained their children.'*

Early years practitioners reported parents engaging well with the adapted method of family support delivery. For some parents' engagement was noted to be more responsive, sharing photos and modelling the activities.

*'The parents always being with their child on zoom calls and showing so much interest for what their child is doing and learning and then they send pictures that show activities they may have done together.'*

Findings from the survey highlight how the adapted family support practice during lockdown has strengthened the relationship between the family and the practitioner. Techniques and strategies shared by early years professionals as a 'trusted individual' have been embraced by parents.

*'Families who maybe wouldn't have been keen to engage in certain things before lockdown are a lot more willing to engage in them now. For example, they may not have engaged in stay and play sessions before but are now engaging in our outdoor session as a family.'*

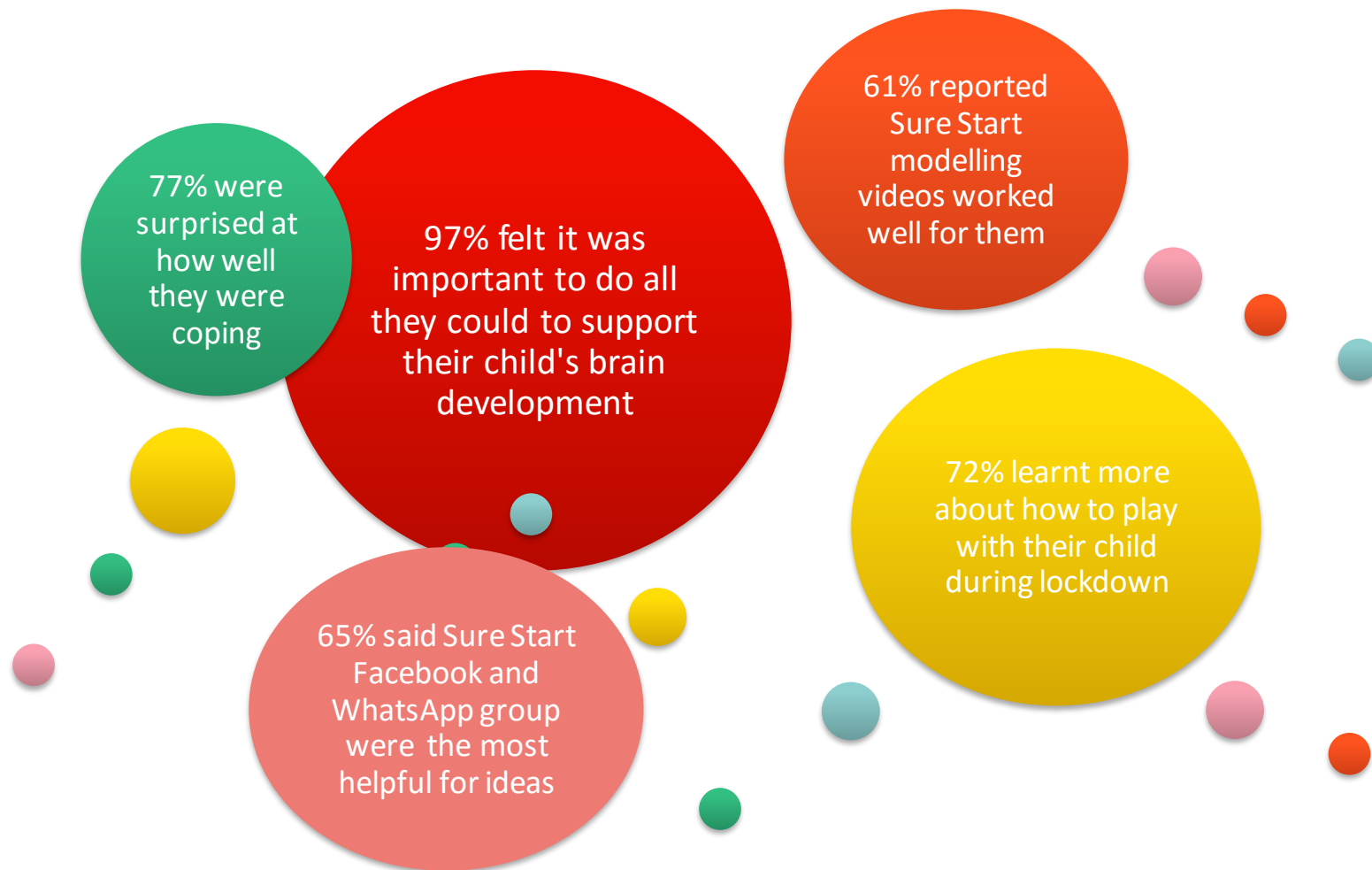
The modelling of activities through digital platforms has empowered parents with the 'how' resulting in increased quantity and quality of parent and child interactions observed by practitioners. Practitioners noted how parents were eager to hear and learn more about ideas and strategies that would support their child's development. Parents actively engaged in sharing photos of the activities they had done with their child on social media platforms with practitioners and other parents, evidencing a sense of joy, pride, and peer-to-peer support.

*'The parents have looked for activities to engage with their children and showing of the artwork etc that they all did as a family.'*



## Parent Survey and In-depth Interview Findings

In total 98 parents completed the survey which was open to responses over a 2-week period in June 2020. Most respondents (70%) reported having one child under the age of 4, with a third reporting having 2 or more children at home. Over a quarter were in part-time or full-time employment during lockdown and 18% reported being on furlough with 35% not in any form of employment. Parents reported being in lockdown with a partner, (72%) other family member (7%) and 21% reported being in lockdown with their child/children on their own.



Findings from the survey and in-depth interviews indicated that the majority of children are thriving during lockdown with parents reporting improved eating habits, siblings learning and playing together, children reaching development milestones such as toilet training, improved speech and language and generally adapting to the situation well.



*'I'm surprised at how well they are adjusting to it. I'm also surprised at activities they can do and enjoy which I hadn't tried before Sure Start team suggested them.'*

*'We were able to focus on potty training because we had so much time. He got that super quickly. Around the beginning of August with the odd accident he was using the toilet independently.'*

Parents described having extremely stressful and busy lives that sometimes got in the way of having quality time with their children pre-lockdown. The responsibility of looking after young children, working, maintaining a household and social support to family members meant that parents were constantly juggling a wide variety of tasks.

*'It made me realise (Lockdown) I don't really spend as much of one-to-one time with him as I probably should.'*

*'Before lockdown we were always in a rush, everything become slower paced, he can now dress and feed himself at a slower pace.'*

Some parents described how pressures from outside of the home hindered or influenced their ability and sense of agency which had the potential to act as unintentional barriers.

*'I am a great believer in things happen for a reason and maybe I needed that time on my own with no one else saying 'aw sure just give him a bottle' or whatever. I didn't have those people make those comments not intending to make me anxious, but it did. So, I think not having that and having the space to get motherhood in my head you know on my own really helped.'*

Findings from the research reinforced the insights captured from parents previously and the need to not just advise parents what they should be doing but to help them get there in a practical way. Parents have been extremely open to receiving ideas and prompts around routines and activities that will support their child to thrive. These messages have been well received when communicated by trusted individuals such as Sure Start professionals and other parents going through similar experiences.

*'I was doing a parenting course with Sure Start. We were in week 2 or 3 then lockdown happened, and we didn't finish it. That group became a zoom call and a WhatsApp group. People would share their ideas there and what they were doing with their kids. That was nice.'*

*'There was a WhatsApp group from the breastfeeding group. Everybody shared stuff on that. I would get a lot from that.'*

The development of trusted relationships between parent and practitioner was an emerging theme within the early years practitioners survey, reaffirmed within the parental research.

*'The key worker rang every Wednesday to chat with me to see if I needed anything, so to be honest, just having that wee bit of adult conversation was such a*

*big plus. The same Sure Start worker, I don't know what I would of done without her.'*

Parents reported an increase in the amount of one-to-one interaction they were having with their children with the most popular activities in the home being, playing with toys and games, arts and crafts, singing nursery rhymes, cooking, baking and reading. The sharing of ideas and modelling behaviours by Sure Start workers and other parents via zoom calls, WhatsApp groups and social media was cited throughout as providing ideas and prompts for fun activities for parents to do with their children.

*'I was happy to be part of the zoom call as it helped me more with singing and reading to my child.'*

*'We started painting at home we also got some play dough and magnets to build things.'*

This would suggest that parents benefit from stimuli such as prompts, resources, and the modelling of activities to take place to provide them with the content, ideas, and the confidence to carry out the positive behaviors.

*'I'm also surprised at the activities they can do and enjoy which I hadn't tried before the Sure Start team suggested them.'*



*'I have to say I have thoroughly enjoyed the one-to-one interaction and watching her grow and teaching her. I think she's quite advanced for her age, but that's*

*because I got to spend so much time with her and she's learning from me.'*

A sense of achievement and the joy expressed by parents when they see how their children reached developmental milestones and a recognition that this was linked to what they were doing as a parent was also a strong theme coming through. The joy parents have experienced through interacting with their child and seeing how this has helped their child's development has strengthened and reinforced the positive behaviours building on previous parental insights 'there is joy' in this behaviour.



*'Making memories and spending unlimited time with your child is something money will never be able to buy! Seeing the delight on my son's face every night before bed when I ask him what he would like to do the following day is something I would like to hold on to and continue when lockdown is over as he feels he has choice'*

In summary, the research evidenced that when embedding the five parental insights into practice parents have gained a sense of agency, increased confidence, and motivation to try new activities with their children at home. The trusted relationship with the practitioner and the method of delivering the message, along with the peer-to-peer support from other parents is key to encouraging positive behaviours. The joy in seeing their children happy and thriving re-enforces this behaviour enabling sustainable change.

## WONDER WORDS: THE SUMMARY

The last year has been extremely challenging for our families, our communities and for the services and practitioners who provide support. The aim of the practitioner and parental research was to test if the 5 parental insights were put into practice, what would the impact be for early years practitioners, parents, and children.

### 1 This Matters

With the closure of settings and reduction in services parents really stepped up to supporting their children's development and learning in their earliest years. Parents were keen to understand the 'why' this was important and the 'how' to do it. Early years practitioners noted that parents with children with additional needs really 'stepped up', even adapting their environment to meet the needs of their child and introducing a wide range of activities and messy play.

### 2 Anytime Can Be Chatting Time

During the lockdown most parents who responded to the survey and took part in the interviews demonstrated how they incorporated talking, singing, and playing into everyday tasks. Parents reported an increase in using the outdoor spaces on their doorsteps. With the closure of settings, playparks, and limited opportunities for social interaction outside of the family unit, parents were open to new ideas.

These ideas were best received when coming from a trusted individual and communicated in a helpful manner. The use of prompts through social media and the sharing of videos and photos encouraged and re-enforced positive behaviours. Parents reported that they intended to maintain these behaviours due to the joy and sense of pride they felt as a result of seeing their children thrive.

### 3 Be Helpful

Unanimous feedback from the parental surveys and interviews highlighted the need to not just 'tell' parents what they should do, but to 'show' them how to do it. Modelling videos, live zoom sessions, one to one calls and peer to peer sharing of ideas were all cited as invaluable during the lockdown period. This led to increased parent and child interaction.

### 4 Messengers Change The Message

Parents were bombarded with information and links to on-line resources during the lockdown period. Whilst they welcomed support and advice this was best received when provided via a trusted individual and in a way which was helpful. Both parents and practitioners talked about the strengthening of relationships and trust. Parents reported a growing sense of confidence in their own abilities to support their children's development and learning. This was strongly linked to the trust they had built up with practitioners and other parents which increased their knowledge and confidence. There was a strong sense of agency and parents felt equipped to try out new ways of interacting and playing with their children.

### 5 There's Joy In This

There was a strong sense of joy and pride throughout the parental survey and interview responses. An unintentional positive outcome for some families during the lockdown period was the removal of pressure from the outside world. The opportunity to slow down and go at their child's pace. The joy they experienced when seeing their children blossom, making progress in their development and the sense of bonding was a strong theme throughout. The joy and pride in knowing that this was as a result of their actions re-enforced the positive behaviours.



## WONDER WORDS: THE RECOMMENDATIONS

### Implications for Practice

Listen to parents and trust what they are telling you. They are the experts in their own lives.

Build a culture of really listening to parents within your organisation. This is the foundations on which to build trusted relationships.

Relationships are key. Take the time and effort to find the right practitioner/family fit. The outcome will be truly life changing.

Be specific in the ideas and activities you would like parents to engage in and why. The 'why' and the 'how' is important.

Use creative methods to model the behaviours. 'Don't just tell parents what to do, show them how to do it'.

Embrace technology. Explore how to use digital methods of engagement and create virtual, safe spaces for parent-to-parent support.

### Implications for Policy

Embed participation / consultation into service and policy design and development to test and tailor approaches to the needs of families.

Adapt service and policy delivery in changing circumstances based on consultation and insight from families to make the most of change.

Engage with families throughout the lifecycle to develop working insights and adapt policies and service delivery based on lived experience.

### Further Research Opportunities

Findings have evidenced that when the 5 key parental insights are applied in early years practice, positive parental behaviours are adopted in the home. Further exploration of the impact of positive parental behaviour on children's outcomes in relation to social and emotional development and language development would be beneficial for future practice and early years workforce development.

The research evidenced positive behaviour change within the home which is reinforced with regular ideas and prompts provided by the trusted individuals. Further research to explore how this behaviour could be sustained and motivational prompts woven within the spaces and places parents and children spend time in – public spaces, parks and play areas, shops, and transport to enable positive parent and child interaction to flourish as a social norm.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was undertaken in partnership by Save the Children, East Belfast Sure Start, Claremont, the BH&SCT Lead Sure Start Speech and Language Therapist and the Parents engaging in East Belfast Sure Start services.

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For more information on Save the Children and **Wonder Words** contact:

Laura Feeney, Senior Practice & Partnership Manager [l.feeney@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:l.feeney@savethechildren.org.uk)