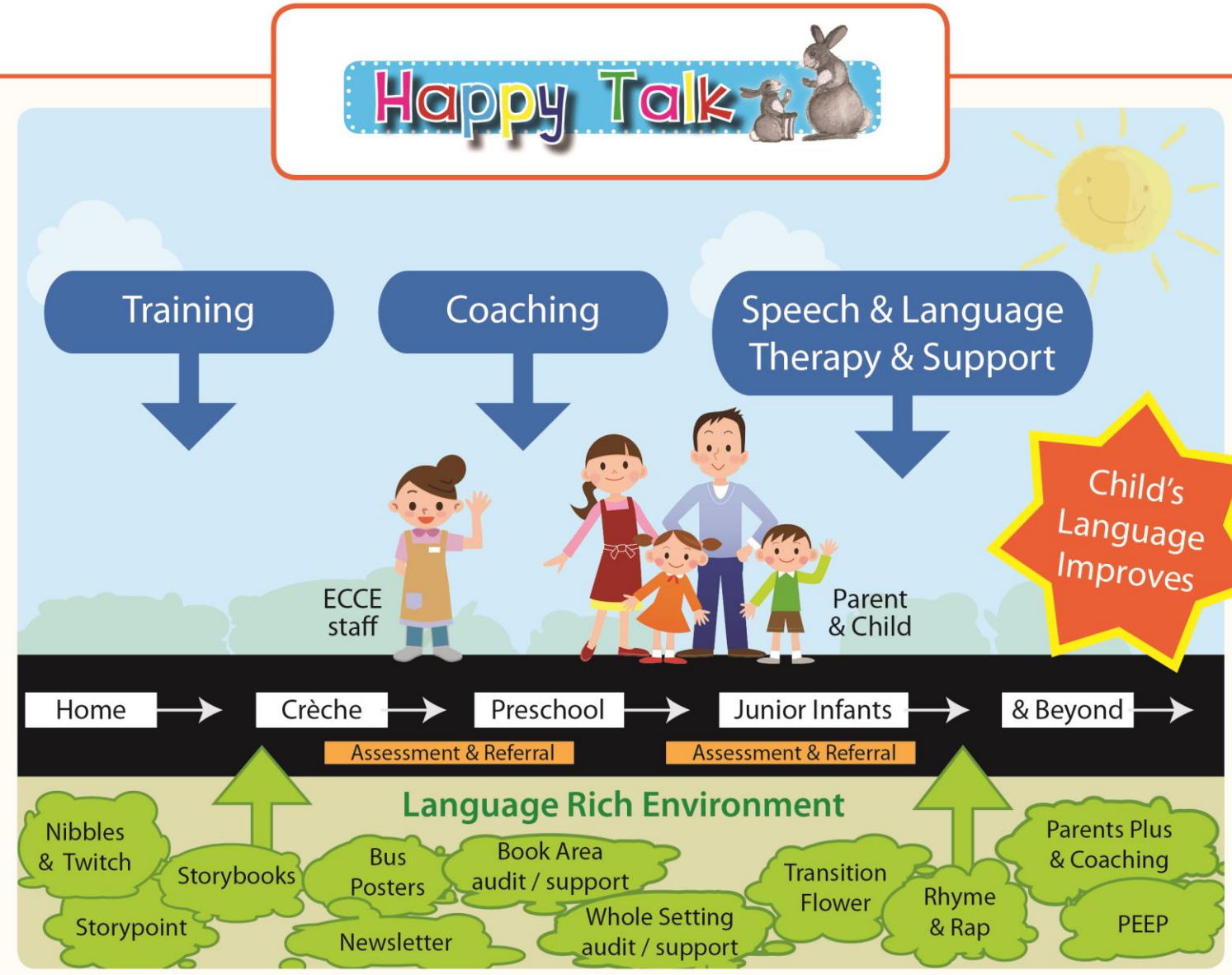


Happy Talk

What is Happy Talk?

Happy Talk is a novel and innovative Project which links best practice in community development and speech and language to meet the very serious speech and language delays in The Glen and Mayfield in Cork City. The project uses an innovative blend of coaching, parental engagement, building awareness, training and up-skilling to improve the speech and language outcomes of children in the 0-6 age group in the Community.

60.4% of children in junior infants presented with speech and/or language delay in the academic year 2011/2012 in The Glen and Mayfield areas.



Why Happy Talk?

Oral Language is the single most important platform from which literacy skills develop and literacy is the main tool for learning in the modern school environment. Research indicates that children in disadvantaged areas are much more likely to experience speech and language delays.

Happy Talk was born through a shared vision for intervening as early as possible with children to improve oral language. The project has been significantly informed by best practice in the field and by international literature in terms of what works for community intervention.



HIGHLIGHTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Measurable Gains in Language Development

Measurable gains in language development of children in the 0-6 age group in The Glen and Mayfield. Standardised tests and statistical analysis show significant improvements in children's language between the beginning of the intervention and the end of the intervention.

This means Happy Talk Works.

Parental Engagement

It can be very difficult to engage with families and parents in disadvantaged communities. Individuals may be experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage and exclusion. Happy Talk found a model of working with parents, which really worked.

75% of parents with children in the 0-6 age group in the area participated.

Awareness of Oral Language

Oral Language is the building block of all learning. The evaluation found very high levels of awareness on the topic. The early childhood care and education and the mainstream education providers in The Glen and Mayfield have a lasting legacy of skills and knowledge, which should have a positive impact on a whole generation of children in the area.

Happy Talk leaves a legacy of the importance of oral language.

Interagency Working

Happy Talk has been run as a Consortium. While it has not been without its difficulties the members have stayed focused on the key issue, retained overall a shared set of objectives and ultimately worked together to ensure that the project could be sustained through a joint commitment of resources.

Happy Talk has emerged as a positive model of interagency working.

Quality Agenda

Happy Talk did not focus specifically on improving quality in settings, however the coaching and training provided to staff together with ancillary initiatives like the whole area audit have supported an overall improvement in quality across the participating settings.

Long term improvements in settings – will support quality agenda and will make initiatives like Happy Talk more effective in these settings.

Happy Talk

Recommendations

Prevention is better than cure - The Happy Talk model should be tested and verified using control groups to identify the level of gains which are attributable to the intervention versus the gains that would normally be expected because of children starting school. Once this follow on research has been undertaken it would be possible to quantify the savings, which could accrue to the exchequer through a cost benefit analysis.

Educating the Educators - It is recommended that an action model like Happy Talk should be introduced into the curriculum for FETAC level 5 and 6 Early Childhood Care and Education and Bachelor of Education Programmes nationwide to supplement theoretical course material. Speech and Language therapists should receive mandatory placements in disadvantaged communities as part of their training at undergraduate level.

Transferring the Learning - It is recommended that the agencies involved in the Consortium should lobby for Happy Talk to be resourced and rolled out in other communities with high levels of speech, language and communication need in Cork City and beyond.

Community Based Interventions - Happy Talk is part of a ground swell of emerging practice in the area of primary health and speech and language which is advocating a more community based grassroots and preventative approach to health and education. The universal approach adopted through the Happy Talk model should be normalised and encouraged through inter-agency collaboration and cooperation.

Parental Engagement - The Happy Talk model of parental engagement has been proven. The Consortium should consider the model when devising strategies in support of families and children outside of the speech and language environment. For the next year of the project, Happy Talk should consider alternative strategies for engaging with crèche and preschool parents.

The Happy Talk manual supported by training for speech and language therapists would form a good foundation for the approach to be used in other places.

Challenges

Interagency Working - Structures became somewhat cumbersome and placed an additional administrative and operational burden on the staff team.

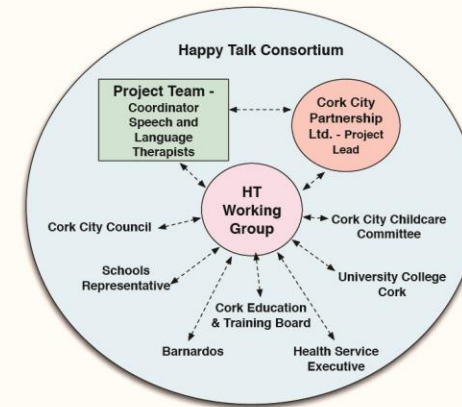
In some cases competing interests caused tensions and challenges for members and staff.

Parental Engagement - Although parental engagement was one of the most successful elements of the Happy Talk project, it was also one of the most challenging issues to tackle. Even where parents were very engaged it was challenging to identify the correct schedule to attract the greatest number of participants, allowing for work, family and other commitments. Making this a priority was very worthwhile.

Evidence Based Work - Happy Talk was firmly rooted in evidence-based practice both in speech and language practice and also community development. However, there was a dearth of data on the level of intervention, which would be required to affect change in a universal intervention like Happy Talk. Additional action research is required to identify the correct level of intervention to maximize impact for children.

Partners

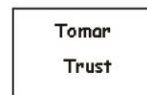
Happy Talk is a partnership and has emerged as a good working model of interagency working with a child centered approach.



NEYAI National Early Years Access Initiative
Promoting Better Outcomes for Children & Families

pobal
government supporting communities

The National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) is a collaboration between a number of funding partners namely, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), The Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Mount Street Club Trust, The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Board of Pobal. Happy Talk has also been kindly supported by Tom Cavanagh's Tomar Trust.



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Happy Talk Evaluation Summary and Recommendations November 2014

