



Talk To Your Baby

Why do many young children lack basic language skills?

**A discussion paper prepared by the
National Literacy Trust's
Talk To Your Baby campaign**

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www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk

National Literacy Trust, 68 South Lambeth Road, London SW8 1RL

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Introduction

There is a growing body of opinion among professionals that an increasing number of children are suffering from communication difficulties. As yet there is no systematic research to support this claim but there is some circumstantial evidence suggesting that children's language and communication skills have declined. A joint survey by the National Literacy Trust and the National Association of Head Teachers revealed 74 per cent of the 121 heads polled felt young children's speaking and listening skills had deteriorated in the past five years (National Literacy Trust and National Association of Head Teachers, 2001). A survey by the Basic Skills Agency highlighted teachers' perceptions that children's communication skills have declined, especially the ability to speak audibly and be understood (Basic Skills Agency, 2002). And in a poll by I CAN, 89 per cent of nursery workers said they were worried about the growth of speech, language and communication difficulties among pre-school children. Ninety-two per cent of them attributed this decline to the lack of time adults and children spend talking together (I CAN, 2004).

There is no single factor that appears to be the main reason for the perceived decline in children's language and communication skills. Researching the details of life for young babies is not an easy task. Nobody is going to deny them any natural stimulation in order to assess the problems that might be caused; so much of what we hear is anecdotal or conjecture. Are dummies used more now than they ever used to be, or for longer? What kind of impact does the popular family weekend activity of going to the shopping centre have on the youngest family member, strapped for so long in a buggy? And what about those buggies, which face away from the pusher – unlike big old-fashioned prams with seats at the front, or cumbersome (but sociable) push chairs?

The problems may be caused by parents expecting that children will pick up the ability to talk because chatter is all around them, without realising that babies need the opportunity to babble and be heard in an interactive way. When homes were quieter, the baby's babbles might have been heard more easily. Perhaps we should also blame central heating in homes, a comfort in every other way, for encouraging family members to disperse to their own space to do their own solitary activities, instead of staying in a single, warm family-based room, with everyone congregating together.

Parents want to do the best for their children, and need information in order to make choices and decisions about how they will parent, and what their priorities should be. Research confirms the fundamental role that parents play as their child's first and most important teacher. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study in England has confirmed the importance for all children of a high-quality home learning environment where parents are actively engaged in activities with children and encouraging their intellectual and social development. In terms of child outcomes, such practices are more important than parents' social class and their levels of education. Professor Kathy Sylva explains:

“More important than the mother’s educational qualifications is what the mother does with the child. Education matters...but if the mother reads to the child, plays rhyming games, sings songs, talks about letters and sounds, and takes the child to the library, these behaviours at home are more important” (Evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment, First Report, 2000).

This paper is not intended to be a thorough review of the current literature but aims to outline some of the key findings in order to stimulate discussion on why early communication seems to be a problem for a number of young children. Talk To Your Baby wishes to hear from anyone who is interested in any aspect of this paper, or has ideas to add to the mix. Your feedback will help guide the focus of the campaign and will ensure that the campaign targets the right issues. With your help, we can facilitate a positive cultural shift so that all children receive from their parents and carers a stimulating language-rich start to life.

Contact:

Liz Attenborough
Manager, Talk To Your Baby
liz.attenborough@literacytrust.org.uk
Tel. 020 7587 1842

Edward Mather
Information and Communications Officer
talktoyourbaby@literacytrust.org.uk
Tel. 020 7587 1842

Why does it matter?

Children need to be confident communicators in order to lead happy, fulfilled and successful lives.

Verbal communication is the method used by the vast majority of us to communicate. We use it to have our needs met, to indicate our likes and dislikes, to request information, to refute something, to socialise, as well as to establish and maintain relationships. The ability to communicate is the basis of social and emotional well-being.

Children who have difficulty communicating often go on to develop behavioural problems, mainly due to their frustration at not being able to express their needs, participate in social exchange and achieve in education. These children do not ‘grow out’ of their difficulties as education progresses. The research shows a consistently poor outcome for children who do not receive intervention for their difficulties.

Children’s early communication skills are regarded as the single best predictor of future cognitive skills and school performance (Rosetti, 1996). Children who have speech, language and communication difficulties are significantly disadvantaged in their ability to access the national curriculum since “almost every educational skill presupposes the use of language” (Dockrell and Lindsay, 1998).

1. Levels of awareness

This section will explore whether the perceived decline in young children's communication skills can be attributed to a general lack of awareness among parents and some professionals of the importance and benefits of talking to children from birth.

1.1 Parents

Most parents do not really need to be told how or why they should interact with their baby. It is instinctive for most parents to start the moment their baby is born (although one in 10 mothers have some level of post-natal depression, which may affect interaction). But early communication is so important that all parents can be reminded from time to time to talk, listen and respond to their child, and can gain from information on how to enrich the experience for both parent and child.

Parents may not always recognise how much their child relies on them to learn to talk and communicate effectively. The following projects highlight a lack of awareness among some parents of the benefits of talking to babies from birth. (Early communication problems are not exclusive to any geographical area, and we are grateful to these projects for allowing us to include them as examples.)

Stoke Speaks Out

Stoke Speaks Out is a project in Stoke-on-Trent led by Speech and Language Therapist Janet Cooper, which aims to improve the language abilities of children under-seven who are not covered by Sure Start local programmes. The project has surveyed over 300 parents across the city to find out more about their understanding of child development and early communication. The survey has found that, overall, most parents have a good understanding of child development but there are some glaring misunderstandings relating to early communication among some parents. Some parents said:

- Children talk before they can understand.
- You shouldn't start talking to children until they can talk to you.
- Brain development occurs between the ages of three to five and/or six to eight.
- Children start hearing at six weeks old.
- Babies are "spoiled" if they are picked up too much.

Most parents identified the types of activities which help to develop children's language skills (none of the parents said unlimited television watching helps), and had a good understanding of why talking to young children is important. However many parents failed to see a link between talking to young children and the development of reading and writing skills.

Enhancing parent-baby communication

In the south Wales valleys of Rhondda Cynon Taff, midwives have taken part in a pilot study using cartoon picture cards with parents in the ante-natal and post-natal period to enhance parent-baby bonding and establish good patterns of parent-baby communication. The cartoon cards show parents how to communicate with their baby through touch and sound both pre and post birth.

To date, 30 mothers involved in the study have returned evaluation forms. Their feedback points to a lack of awareness before the study and the valuable learning that has taken place. The mothers were asked, "Did you learn anything new?"

- "I talk all the time to my baby since you said it can hear me. I really feel as though I know her or him already, it knows me."
- "I had a mobile phone for Christmas and I kept the tune on that calmed my baby's movements."
- "After I went home (from hospital) and spoke, my baby turned towards me. I felt really important and loved, special."

The mothers were also asked, "Has the information helped your baby?"

- "My baby looks right at me when I speak."
- "I always look at my baby when I speak."
- "I have found ways of calming my baby just by singing and touching – my mam says I will spoil him but I don't listen." (Bemrose and Lynch, 2004)

Question

- How common is it for young parents to be accused of "spoiling" their baby by talking, singing and playing with their baby?

(NB: The questions in this paper are just for guidance. Readers are not expected to answer these questions when responding to the paper.)

1.2 Midwives and post-natal tutors

A post-natal care adviser at the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) told Talk To Your Baby that NCT sessions with new parents are not based on a formal teaching programme, but respond to parents' immediate questions and concerns. It is unlikely that early communication is always covered in these sessions as more pressing parental concerns, such as breastfeeding and sleeping, are likely to take priority.

Consultant Midwife Lynn Lynch and specialist Speech and Language Therapist Sasha Bemrose became "passionate about improving children's communication" after moving to the valleys of Rhondda Cynon Taff. Both felt "amazed at the number of new babies that were

placed in front of the television.” Lynch says she became aware of “a lack of positive communication with babies – a lot of swearing and negative language with no eye contact.” Lynch and Bemrose worked together to create the evidence based cartoon cards for pregnant mothers and new families described in section 1.1.

Lynch believes that early communication is becoming a more “standardized” issue among midwives (there has been a great deal of interest in the cartoon packs from Sure Start areas) but generally it is not covered in midwifery training. The Royal College of Midwives has published a series of booklets called *Transition to Parenting* (1999) aiming to assist midwives in promoting secure nurturing relationships between parents and their babies.

1.3 Health visitors

Every family with children under five has a named health visitor, a qualified nurse or midwife, who advises on issues such as teething, sleeping and feeding.

Health Visitor Lee Mackinder suggests that early communication is not an area that health visitors generally prioritise as they must cover a range of topics with families in a very short period, and everyday difficulties tend to take priority.

The most recent edition of *Health for all Children* (Hall & Elliman, 2003), which recommends policy for health professionals including health visitors, says that “formal universal screening for speech and language delays...is not recommended...” (executive summary; page xviii). The importance of using some process to determine which children may need intervention is emphasised, but a review of a baby’s progress is only required up to six to eight weeks. Further reviews at eight to 12 months, 24 months and three to four years are still possible but the report states “it is expected that staff will take a flexible approach to the latter three reviews according to the family’s needs and wishes, and face to face contact may not be necessary with all families” (executive summary: page xix). These are just the ages when problems with language development will become apparent and clearly if this recommendation is followed to its logical conclusion, it will be down to parents to flag up concerns.

Mackinder believes that there is a shortage of resources on language development. She suggests that the amount of resources and information available and the priorities of the individual health visitor differ from region to region, depending on the policy of the health visitor’s Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the activities of local speech and language therapists. Most PCTs supply health visitors with a parenting book to give to parents, such as *The Red Book* or *Birth to Five*. Both include sections on learning to talk. However Mackinder believes that more information on communication is needed to support health visitors to raise parents’ awareness.

During the seven to nine-month health check, health visitors present parents and carers with a Bookstart pack, which includes free books, advice on sharing books, information about libraries and an invitation to join. This is an ideal opportunity for health visitors to discuss with parents how book sharing helps children learn to talk.

Many health visitors run post-natal groups where play and communication feature, but these sessions do not achieve the same level of reach as home visits.

Question

- Will early language and communication issues always have difficulty competing with other parent concerns such as sleep and feeding?

1.4 Early years education workers

Current evidence suggests that, on the whole, pre-school settings tend to be dominated by adult talk and do not always give children enough opportunities to use and practise language (Dockrell, Stuart and Kind, 2004).

A recent longitudinal study carried out by the Department of Human Communication Sciences at the University of Sheffield showed that children who began nursery with poor language skills had not caught up by the age of five, and the skills of some of the more able children had actually deteriorated. Ann Locke and Jane Ginsborg, the researchers, attributed their findings to the children's limited exposure to spoken language at home, but also in their subsequent early years education.

Locke and Ginsborg believe that the children's delayed language on entry to nursery and their subsequent failure to 'catch up' was not due to poor cognitive abilities, because their non-verbal skills improved significantly in relation to their language. Instead, they point to the fact that the teaching the children received did not offer them enough exposure to, or enough opportunity to use, spoken language (Locke and Ginsborg, 2002).

Another study in 12 inner-city London nurseries found that, while in many cases there were excellent small group opportunities that supported oral language development, many children did not have sufficient opportunity to develop their oral language competence. Frequently the children chose to spend large amounts of time in contexts where less supportive language was evident, such as playgrounds and free play. All nurseries offered exposure to books but this frequently occurred in large group settings where children did not have the chance to benefit from the teacher's language scaffolds (Dockrell, Stuart and Kind, 2004).

Training for early years education workers

There is evidence that teachers and nursery staff are not adequately trained to identify speech and language delay or disorder. One study of early years professionals' knowledge

about speech and language development, and their confidence and skills in assessing normal and delayed language development, revealed very limited training in speech and language difficulties as part of initial training, and low levels of post-qualification training in children's speech and language. Practitioners are aware of the need for early identification of children's communication difficulties but lack tools with which to perform this identification (Mroz et al., 2002).

Communicating Matters is a joint venture between Sure Start, the National Primary Strategy and the Department for Education and Skills Special Educational Needs division, which grew out of the need to improve the language and communication skills of young children aged three to five. Led by Nigel Hall at Manchester Metropolitan University, the project aims to improve practitioners' knowledge of early language and communication and to improve practice in early years settings. The project will provide training and resources to support Foundation Stage practitioners, which will be available from September 2005, and will fit in with the published *Curriculum Guidance for Foundation Stage*.

Question

- Are more children entering school with poor language skills, or are early years practitioners and teachers more aware now of problems that have always existed, especially as they are required to carry out more assessment?

1.5 Availability of early communication material

Talk To Your Baby called a sample of doctors' surgeries (19 in total) in Bradford and Chesham and in the London boroughs of Southwark and Fulham. Only three out of the 19 surgeries had information about early communication readily available to parents (i.e. in the waiting room). In Bradford local health visitors and speech and language therapists have created a birth pack called 'Welcome to your new baby', which is distributed to all new parents in the area via health visitors and covers the benefits of talking to babies from day one.

Many receptionists said that any early communication material on display would have been brought into the clinic by health visitors. They also suggested that early communication could be addressed by health visitors during baby clinics run at the surgeries. Our findings emphasise the importance of targeting and supporting health visitors to encourage parents to talk more to babies, as they seem to have the best access to the greatest number of parents.

Question

- Where should early language material be available for parents?

2. The role of speech and language therapists

This section will explore some of the issues surrounding the work of speech and language therapists (SLTs), looking particularly at whether they could play a more preventative role by improving language levels among young children.

Kamini Gadhok, Professional Director of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT), the professional association for SLTs in the UK, believes the core business of SLTs is to treat children with speech and language difficulties but they also have a role in working with others to prevent communication problems in children. The extent of early intervention is limited however by a number of factors, including a national shortage of SLTs.

At present there are approximately 6,300 SLTs working with children. The RCSLT estimates that there should be 1,890 more, an increase of 30 per cent. Because of the shortage of SLTs pre-schoolers in London, who have identified speech, language and communication needs, generally have to wait between six to 18 months to see a therapist. At best, children aged five and over have to wait six months; at worst they have no speech therapy at all (Survey of London SLT services undertaken by SLT Maria Luscombe).

Recent guidance from the Department of Health workforce planning team states there will be no further increase in the number of SLTs being trained. Instead health services will focus on retaining SLTs, as many have left the profession after five to 11 years, mainly due to poor pay and conditions. The National Service Framework, devised as part of the Every Child Matters programme, promises to improve speech and language therapy services for children over the next 10 years.

The Department for Education and Skills has recognised the importance of early intervention with the development of Sure Start and Children's Centres in the most deprived areas, which often employ SLTs to help improve the communication skills of under-fives. SLT Jessica Guerin, who works for Bilston and Ettingshall Sure Start, believes that SLTs and SLT departments could be "more proactive" as they are in Sure Starts, but this is "new territory for them".

Guerin states, "SLT provision is predominantly funded through the NHS. Like many other professions it operates under the 'medical model' approach, based on being reactive and treating symptoms and problems. If there was an influx of SLTs it is very likely they would be swallowed up in offering traditional services because there are so many children and adults with communication difficulties.

"Much of what mainstream SLT services currently provide is low-dosage intervention for children without speech and language difficulties, such as advice to parents and schools and a snapshot of the child every four to six months, sometimes even longer," Guerin says. "There is evidence that this type of low dosage intervention is ineffective. But most

mainstream NHS SLT departments are unable to offer more because of the huge caseloads that exist.”

Gila Falkus, Head of Early Years Speech and Language Therapy with Riverside PCT in London (covering Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea and Westminster), says SLTs in the area are “constrained by their duty of care” to meet the needs of the children who are referred to them, but there is a “well established service” where therapists go into selected early years centres to work jointly with staff to raise the language level in the centre for all children. These therapists do not carry a caseload of individual children.

Signing the way?

Baby signing enables normal-hearing children as young as six months to use simple symbols and gestures to communicate their basic needs and emotions with their parents. Signing has become very popular among parents, with classes springing up all over the UK. Advocates of the system claim it reduces babies’ frustration, strengthens the bond between child and parent and encourages a child to speak earlier than usual.

Tania Allen, head of paediatric speech and language therapy with East Kent Coast Teaching PCT, believes the current baby-signing craze has created opportunities for SLTs to develop preventative programmes for parents who would otherwise be hard to reach. Some SLTs run baby massage groups for the same purpose – it attracts new parents and can allow for longer discussions on communication generally.

Allen states, “I’m constantly amazed at the demand for baby signing in our Sure Starts. In Canterbury we had been running a drop-in Language and Play group for pre-verbal toddlers and attendance was extremely poor – more a case of drag-in than drop-in. However, as soon as we advertised the baby signing course we had 25 mums keen to come. We now use the Language and Play group as a follow-on group to keep parents’ interest in communication high.

“We have to see preventative work as a new client group. Our role extends beyond the pathological and we can have a real impact on the life chances of children who previously would have entered school with poor attention, vocabulary and comprehension.”

The RCSLT has concerns about parents using signing instead of talking to their children and believes it is not necessary for parents to learn formal signing for children with no identified risk of speech and language difficulties.

A shift in focus?

SLT Carolyn Letts, a lecturer in speech and language therapy at the University of Newcastle, suggests that a shift in emphasis in the way pre-school children with apparent needs are dealt with by SLTs, may be a factor in the perceived decline in young children’s language skills.

“In the past pre-school aged children were given priority, with the aim of identifying and treating children before they got to school,” says Letts. “This was not possible to achieve in every case, but there can be no doubt this provided a better start for many children at risk for language delay.

“Although the national picture is not at all clear, SLT services are now putting a lot of resources into work with school-age children, working in collaboration with education staff. While this has filled an enormous need, pre-school services may well have lost out. Pre-school SLT provision is increasingly in the form of group work, while some children, even at this early stage, benefit from a more individually targeted approach.”

Question

- Could speech and language therapists play a greater role in training early years staff to identify difficulties and improve language levels?

3. Lifestyle

This section will explore some of the lifestyle issues that may have contributed to the perceived decline in children’s communication abilities, particularly changing work patterns, the amount of time parents and young children spend together and the impact of television and other media.

3.1 Changing work patterns

More than half (55 per cent) of mothers of children under five are now employed, which may give mothers less time to communicate with their young children. The hours mothers work are also lengthening, though they still dominate the part-time workforce. From 1992, when only 15 per cent of mothers worked 31-40 hours a week, the figure increased to 32 per cent by 2001 (National Family & Parenting Institute, 2004).

3.2 Parent-child interaction

Studies show that despite the increase in women’s labour force involvement and the time pressures from work, today’s parents devote more time to children than before.

The time parents in Britain spend with their children has increased steadily since the 1960s, and has shown a particularly high rate in recent decades (Fisher et al, 1999). Analysing UK time-use studies, Fisher et al (1999) reported that the average time spent in child-related activities had risen from less than 30 minutes in the 1970s to more than one hour per day in the 1990s.

The survey also found that while women continue to devote twice as much time as men to caring for children under four (approx. four hours per day compared to two hours for men), men's involvement in child-related activities has increased from less than 15 minutes in the 1970s.

This is backed-up by a study which analysed time-use diaries in 16 industrialised countries (including the UK) since the 1960s, finding that parents now devote more time to childcare¹ than 40 years ago, and there has been a decrease in the differences between fathers and mothers in time devoted to children. The study reports that fathers' increase in housework and childcare has been financed from a reduction in paid work and time devoted to personal activities, mainly sleep. Interestingly results showed that both employed and at-home mothers have increased the time that they spend with children, suggesting some major behavioural changes in the population (Gauthier, Smeeding, & Furstenberg, 2004).

Another British study found that the time British parents spend playing, doing homework or reading with their children has more than quadrupled during the past 35 years for both working and non-working parents. The research is based on the analysis of weekly diaries from 3,000 British parents and 60,000 parents worldwide in 1961, 1975, 1985 and 1995. The research shows that although more women go out to work than at any time in the past 100 years, the average working mother spends more than twice as long reading and playing with her young children than mothers did in 1961 (Gershuny, 2000).

Reasons for this marked increase in parental involvement may include a reduction in the pressures of domestic work and changes in domestic technology (e.g. pre-cooked meals, washing machines and dish washers) (Fisher et al., 1999). Robinson and Godbey (1997) also speculated that this rise may be related to parents' increasing fear of the external environment (e.g. traffic and perceptions of increased threat of harm from adults), which may restrict the time children spend playing unsupervised.

Questions

- If parents are spending more time reading and playing with their children, why does there appear to be a problem with children's language and communication?
- If they are spending more time on such things anyway, is the advice to play and read more simply not good enough? Is *how* parents play and communicate more important than *how much*?

NB: A survey of over 600 parents and more than 1200 children aged seven to 12, commissioned by The Children's Society and the Children's Play Council, found that while most parents (72 per cent) say they play with their children daily, most children say they rarely or never play with mum or dad. Children said parents didn't know how to play

¹ 'Childcare' encompasses 'play' (playing, reading, talking etc), 'care' (general and medical) and 'travel'. The study found that activities that involve a higher degree of parent-child interactions, such as playing, appear to have mostly driven the overall increase in time spent on childcare.

children's games, were too bossy or too busy or tired to play.

3.3 Family structure

The fact that family units are becoming smaller and that more children now live in one-parent homes may impact on the amount of time babies spend interacting with adults and siblings. Between 1971 and 1991 there was a decline in the average size of household in Great Britain, from 2.91 persons to 2.48, falling to 2.32 by 1998. Of all households with dependent children, 22 per cent are lone-parent families. In London this figure is 26.2 per cent. More than nine out of 10 of these are headed by a woman (Census, 2001).

The loss of extended family surrounding babies may have reduced the time babies and toddlers spend engaging with other family members. The National Family and Parenting Institute told *Candis* magazine that it is becoming more common for families to live great distances from one another. Parents can travel great distances for their careers, taking their families with them (*Candis*, 2004).

But one UK study found that some 66 per cent of parents with adult children live less than an hours journey away from at least one of their sons or daughters, and about half of these live less than 15 minutes away (McClone, Park and Smith, 1998). An Age Concern poll in 2003 found that three-quarters of grandparents are involved in their grandchildren's lives and contribute to their upbringing, largely due to the fact that more mothers work and the high cost of childcare.

3.4 Television

Television is often blamed for the perceived deterioration of young children's language and communication skills. Research points to growing television consumption world-wide (Rideout, Vandewater and Wartella, 2003; Livingston, 2001). Research also shows an increase in viewing with age. Children under one watch 22 minutes of video and 53 minutes of television per day; one-year-olds watch 40 minutes of video and 73 minutes of television; two-year-olds watch 67 minutes of video and 97 minutes of television (Dalzell et al, 2000). Children aged two-and-a-half to three view approximately 1.5 hours per day (Huston et al, 1983), increasing to 2.5 hours by age three to six. There is a decline of about half-an-hour between age five-and-a-half and seven as children enter school (Huston et al, 1990).

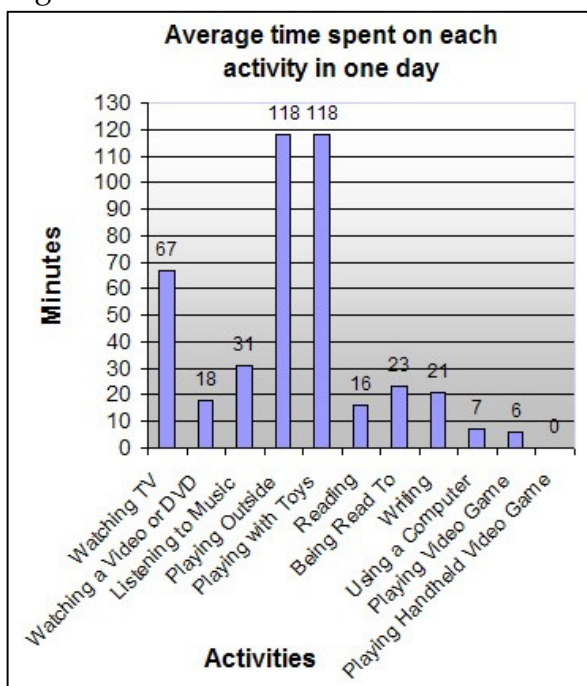
Parked in front of the TV for hours on end pre-schoolers absorb very little, especially if viewing general audience programmes like *EastEnders* – the most-watched programme among British 4-year-olds. Watching TV eats into the time children have available to socialise and play – activities that are far more beneficial for developing language and communication skills. And research has shown that in many homes where television provides a constant

background noise, adults get distracted from talking and listening to their children (Alston et al, 2003).

However, if well managed by adults, television is not bad for children. A research review on television and language in the early years, conducted by Robin Close on behalf of the National Literacy Trust, found that for children aged two to five, good-quality educational television can have a positive impact on attention and comprehension, receptive vocabulary, some expressive language, letter-sound knowledge, and knowledge of narrative and storytelling (Close, 2004). Other studies have shown that children’s interest in television can lead to imaginative play based on favourite characters, and can motivate them to read programme-related books (Marsh, 2005).

Many worry that television and computer games are taking over more traditional childhood pursuits like playing outdoors and sharing books – activities that may be more beneficial for the development of language and social skills. A BBC *Child of our Time* survey asked four-and-a-half-year-olds about their favourite activities and found that this group enjoyed a balanced social and cultural life, with traditional activities such as playing outside and playing with toys still being central to their daily activities (See figure 1).

Figure 1



It is important to note that the survey was completed in the summer months and, therefore, the figure for amount of time spent playing outdoors may have been higher than if the survey had been completed at a different time of the year. This would certainly explain the differences with the data collected in the Open2.net online survey, which revealed that

children stated that they liked playing with other children most of all, when in fact they spent the greatest proportion of their time with screen media (Marsh, 2005).

Question

- Children say they like playing outside best of all, but to what extent do parents' concerns about traffic or stranger danger limit their opportunities to play outdoors?

3.5 Family conversation

Talking happens naturally during daily activities like mealtimes when families gather together to relax and enjoy a meal, but research suggests that fewer families now eat meals together. In 2004 a survey of 2,000 parents for the *Mother and Baby* magazine found that nearly half (48 per cent) of all toddlers never eat with the rest of the family. Instead they often eat on their own while watching television.

The fact that so much communication is now done electronically may have impacted on the amount of one-to-one interaction or good examples of talk babies hear. Nearly a quarter of British teenagers text-message their friends more often than they talk to their families and a fifth claim never to talk to parents and siblings (*TES*, 8 February 2002)

Question

- With so much communication now done electronically, are we becoming less adept at both talking and listening? Is too much 'techno talk' making us uncomfortable with more intimate face-to-face conversations and stopping us from communicating effectively with each other?

4. Culture, class and language

A survey of London schools revealed that more than 30 per cent of all schoolchildren speak a language other than English at home, and there are more than 300 languages spoken (Baker and Eversley, 2000). This section will address the link between language, culture and class and the perceived decline in children's early language competence.

4.1 Bilingualism

Conversations with Sure Start workers and language specialists suggest that many parents and professionals do not understand the value of raising a bilingual or multilingual child. Case studies, such as the one below, reveal that parents with English as an additional language are often told by GPs or early years professionals in the UK to speak English to their children rather than their home language. As well as denying children the opportunity

to learn their family language – which may lead to problems with identity later on – this is especially problematic for children of parents who are not confident English speakers.

“I had two children...At that time I felt very isolated. In Iraq I would have had my Mum, aunties and friends...I was very worried about my children’s language problem, they are bilingual. My GP told me off when I went to him. He told me I must speak English to my children. Even the nursery teacher told us to speak English. So it was just English at home. I felt very sorry for myself and my children to lose our language. I joined the course and now I understand more about bilingualism and I’m more confident about myself and how to bring up my children in this country. I also changed my children’s school and am really happy with the new school. They encourage me to talk to the children in my language and sometimes they ask me to write something like the Arabic alphabet for the nursery.”

Sawsan, family learning participant, quoted in Fofou Savitzky (2003) *On the Road – Journeys in Family Learning*, London: South Bank University London Language and Literacy Unit.

Language specialists insist that children who are able talkers in any language will learn to speak English more easily at nursery or school than children who lack talking skills. Fofou Savitzky, Assistant Director and Head of the Family Learning Division at the LLU+ at London South Bank University says, “The best stepping stone for the development of English language skills, is language skills.”

Savitzky believes that hierarchical structures and traditions within some cultures do not allow children to address older siblings and adults as easily or readily as is culturally appropriate in the UK. In some west African cultures, for example, Savitzky says it is considered a great mark of disrespect for a child to ask a question of an adult, particularly a question which requires the adult to account for his or her actions, such as, “Daddy, why are you putting on your coat?”

Savitzky also points to the fact that many cultures do not have a model for chatting to children on a one-on-one, personal level. The language used by many west-African parents to address youngsters, for example, tends to be instructional rather than general chat, says Savitzky.

Question

- Is encouraging children’s chatter more culturally appropriate to some cultures than others?

4.2 Class and language

A comprehensive US study by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley showed that class and language development are clearly linked. Once a month for two-and-a-half years Hart and

Risley went into the homes of 42 professional, working-class and welfare families recording every single word that was uttered to the child concerned. They found that by the age of four the child from a professional family had had 50 million words spoken to him, the child from a working-class family 30 million, and the one from the family on welfare just 12 million. Hart and Risley also found that the vocabulary of a child of three from the professional class was greater than that of an adult from a family receiving benefits.

Summary

This paper has touched on some of the issues raised as possible contributors to the current perceived decline in early language skills in the UK.

At some level, the evidence is contradictory: if parents are spending more time reading and playing with their children (p. 12), how can there be a problem? If they are spending more time on such things anyway, is the advice to talk, play and read as much as possible simply not good enough? Does the message to parents need to be *how* to talk to their baby?

It may be that the kind of active, imaginative play that requires and leads to language input from the child is just not as regular in households as it used to be. Parents may have so many other noisy things to entertain them and their children that children are just not getting enough time to try out talking for themselves.

Experienced teachers are now reporting that where they used to note children arriving in their class with communication difficulties, they now highlight the ones without any problems, as they are in the minority. Is this due to increased awareness of the importance of early language among practitioners, and the fact that they are required to carry out more assessment to uncover problems? The RCSLT reports an increase in the number of children referred to speech and language therapy, due in part to a greater awareness of the link between communication and how well children do in school. The RCSLT also points to advances in technology which mean more babies are surviving difficult births with a level of disability that requires ongoing support.

The development of the Communicating Matters project (p. 9) confirms that early years practitioners need more support to create sensitive language learning environments and to identify children with speech and language difficulties. SLTs report that because of a lack of training and resources among early years education workers, children who are at risk for language difficulties are more likely to develop problems because they do not receive the immediate intervention they need. Often these children are referred to SLTs and can wait six months or more before an assessment. By then, minor problems that could have been easily fixed with a small amount of intervention by nursery or school staff have become more serious and difficult to treat.

As well as setting up Communicating Matters, the Government is tackling the problem of poor early language skills through Sure Start projects and Children's Centres. While the link between social deprivation and poor early language skills undoubtedly exists, this does not help children who do not happen to be in Sure Start areas or whose parents do not make use of the opportunities offered by Sure Start.

The way in which speech and language therapists' caseloads are currently managed may be a factor in the perceived decline of children's early language skills. A shift in emphasis from identifying and treating pre-schoolers to working with school-aged children (p. 11) and the national shortage of SLTs, which leads to considerable waiting times for appointments, may help explain why the language skills of young children seem to have got worse.

The problem of buggies facing away from the pusher has been mentioned. No research has been found on this, but it is one of the most-mentioned factors among early years professionals. There are a few high-priced buggies that allow a pusher-facing option, and there are now also some old-fashioned pushchairs available on the market, but with little collapsibility. Perhaps professionals lobbying retailers and manufacturers on the need for an affordable sociable buggy will bring about the necessary creative engineering? This would allow us to spread the message that young children need face-to-face communication to fully develop as sociable talkers and learners.

There is no real evidence at present that some of the factors outlined here, such as changes in parents' work patterns and increased exposure to television and other media, may have brought about a shift in language abilities nationally – although these factors will have an impact on specific children and groups of children. But the circumstantial evidence that does exist highlights a need for further research and discussion so that we can better understand the reasons behind the perceived decline in children's early language skills and the best way to help.

Talk To Your Baby would like to hear from speech and language therapists, health visitors, midwives, early years education workers, childcarers, children's groups, academics, parents and anyone else interested in any aspect of this paper or the subject in general. Please contact either liz.attenborough@literacytrust.org.uk or edward.mather@literacytrust.org.uk or call 020 7587 1842.

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Appendix 1

Talk To Your Baby

The National Literacy Trust created **Talk To Your Baby: Developing Language for Life** to provide a forum to facilitate national debate on the issue of children's early communication skills, to advocate the vital role of parents as their child's first educators, to encourage and support good practice, and to engage the media in creating a cultural change so that all parents and carers recognise the benefits of communicating with babies and talk to them more.

For more information visit www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk

"As with all the best initiatives, Talk To Your Baby is a simple message that has the potential to make a real difference to future generations of babies and young children."
Lesley Staggs, National Director of the Foundation Stage

Appendix 2

Recent press coverage on the perceived decline of young children's communication skills

Not on Speaking Terms: Why do many children lack basic language skills?

Daily Telegraph, 3 April 2004

Ann Jones is used to getting blank stares. As a primary school teacher of 20 years' standing, she has seen the communication skills of her classes deteriorate steadily. "Too many children are starting school lacking basic language skills," she says. "A simple request such as 'Go to the cupboard and get the pencils, please' is met with a blank look. Some of them simply don't know what I am talking about."

Nursery teachers agree with anecdotal evidence that children are less verbally advanced than at any time in recent history. "The hard research evidence isn't there as yet because it hasn't been done," says Gill Edelman, chief executive of I Can. "But there is a growing body of opinion among professionals that there are more children than there used to be with communication difficulties - and boys are three times more likely to have problems than girls. Early intervention is critical because by the time they get to primary school they may already have developed behavioural problems through frustration."

Edelman believes it is vital that parents talk to their babies right from the beginning. "Most parents do it automatically, but some need encouragement."

Liz Attenborough at the National Literacy Trust agrees and the charity is running a campaign called Talk To Your Baby. "One professional told me that, in the old days, you could look around a nursery and highlight the children with difficulties because they were unusual, but nowadays it's the other way round - you highlight the children without difficulties."

Blaming television is obvious, but Attenborough thinks it is only part of the story. Most households are much noisier, with a background din from a television or radio preventing people from talking to each other. The family unit is now smaller, with fewer adults around to talk to children, and busy lives mean that traditional mealtimes are becoming a rare occurrence. Attenborough also cites the move away from active play to what she calls solo toys, such as computer games. "Parents feel they have to give their children expensive presents and don't realize that children would rather have their time than something flashy."

Nurseries see more speech difficulties

Nursery World, 5 February 2004

The number of children who have speech and language difficulties in day nurseries across the UK is 'rising fast', according to a survey of nursery staff.

The results of the survey by I CAN, the charity that helps children who have speech and language difficulties, in conjunction with *Nursery World*, were published at the start of the charity's annual Chatterbox Challenge initiative. It found that 89 per cent of nursery staff were worried that speech, language and communication difficulties among pre-school-age children were growing.

Nursery staff reported more children having problems concentrating, speaking clearly and following instructions. Children often responded with monosyllabic answers or gestures rather than appropriate language. Almost all (96 per cent) of the respondents said they had at least one child with communication difficulties in their nursery, while 10 per cent said they had at least 10 children with such problems.

Respondents blamed several factors, including a lack of time spent by children and adults talking together, the use of television to pacify a child and the trend for parents to talk on behalf of their child instead of letting the child have a say. Some criticised the use of videos and computers in the home.

Gill Edelman, I CAN chief executive, said: "Despite the large numbers of children affected, there is still a low awareness of this hidden disability. It is imperative that parents and nursery workers understand the integral role they play. Both are critical in the development of the child. Early intervention is crucial so that we can ensure that children with speech and language difficulties have the same opportunities in life as other children."

I CAN poll blames TV for language deterioration

Daily Mail, 2 February 2004

Parents who sit their children in front of the television for hours are being blamed for an alarming rise in the number of youngsters who cannot speak properly. Adults should turn off the TV and talk more to their children to encourage verbal skills, according to a speech therapy charity.

Nursery teachers are faced with children who are struggling to develop their vocabulary, cannot speak clearly and have difficulty understanding instructions.

A poll by the charity I CAN, which helps children with speech and language difficulties, showed that 96% of nursery staff had at least one child with 'communication difficulties' in their care. Of those, 92% blamed the lack of conversation between adults and children.

More than three quarters of nursery staff said TV was a major factor, while 64% cited the habit of some parents of talking on behalf of their children. Ten per cent of those questioned said they had ten or more children in their classes who had difficulty talking.

I CAN chief executive Gill Edelman said: 'Despite the large numbers of children affected, there is still a very low awareness of this. Early intervention is crucial so that we can ensure that children with speech and language difficulties have the same opportunities in life as other children,' she added.

Head of Ofsted says parents have raised worst generation yet

Sunday Telegraph, 31 August 2003

Children are starting school less well prepared than ever because parents are failing to raise their youngsters properly, according to David Bell, the Government's chief inspector of schools.

David Bell told the *Sunday Telegraph* that too many children were receiving a "disrupted and disheveled" upbringing. As a result, the verbal and behavioural skills of the nation's five-year-olds were at an all-time low, causing severe difficulties for schools.

Mr Bell said that one of the key causes was the failure of parents to impose proper discipline at home, which led to poor behaviour in class. Another serious concern was the tendency to sit children in front of the television, rather than talking and playing with them. This meant that many were unable to speak properly when they started school.

"It is difficult to get hard statistical evidence on what is happening across the country," said Mr Bell, "but if you talk to a lot of primary head teachers, as I do, they will say that youngsters appear less well prepared for school than they have ever been before."

Mr Bell, whose comments coincided with the start of the new school year, said that although classroom standards were rising, parents were still not doing enough to support teachers.

"There is evidence that children's verbal skills are lacking. We should encourage parents to talk to their children and give them a whole range of stimulating things to do and not just assume that the television, or whatever, will do all that for them."

He added that the deficiencies of pupils starting school could have lasting effects, particularly where parents continued to fail to offer support to teachers.

Ignored and grunted at - TV toddlers have to be taught to talk

Sunday Telegraph, 1 June 2003

Youngsters aged from three to five will be given lessons on how to speak and listen properly under government plans to tackle a decline in children's language skills.

Serious concern was expressed at a recent ministerial meeting about the growing numbers of pupils starting school unable to talk clearly or pay attention to the teacher. A decision was made to introduce special tuition.

Education researchers, who blame increased television viewing and the decline of family conversation for the trend, say that teaching such children the 3Rs is a waste of time because they have not yet grasped the basics of language.

Liz Attenborough, the coordinator of the Talk to Your Baby campaign, run by the National Literacy Trust, said: "Unbelievable as it seems, some children starting nursery do not seem to have ever had a one-to-one conversation with anyone."

The Department for Education and Skills asked officials from the National Primary Strategy, the Sure Start Unit and others working in early-years education to draw up proposals for improving verbal and aural ability. As a result, an "early language and communication project" is being set up. This will make the study of speaking and listening a priority in the classroom. Guidance will be given to teachers and nursery staff on how to improve children's capabilities in both areas. One suggestion is that formal education should be postponed for at least a year for children who lag behind their age group.

A department spokesman confirmed that action to tackle deficiencies in young children's speaking and listening was being prepared after a government "think-tank" considered the problem. "The think-tank grew out of recognition of widespread concerns about language and communication in pre-school children," she said. "All those working with the youngest children need to have the appropriate knowledge and understanding of the development of language. The aim of the project is to improve that knowledge."

Research published earlier this year by the Government's Basic Skills Agency found that head teachers believed that - compared with five years ago - fewer pupils now had basic language skills such as speaking audibly and talking voluntarily to others. Less than half of those starting school could recite songs or rhymes. The findings prompted Alan Wells, the agency's director, to give warning that a "daily grunt" phenomenon was being created by parents, including some well-educated, who were not devoting enough time to their

children. He said that an increasing number adopted a "leave it to the school" approach, which was failing their offspring.

"In some families, parents seem to lack the skills to develop the language of children," said Mr Wells. "In others, parents with lots of money, but little time, buy themselves out of giving attention to their children by using computer games that children play themselves without the interaction of the parents." Mr Wells said that as well as parental neglect, excessive television viewing was a cause of the decline in linguistic skills. Other academics have blamed the use of computers and schools' over-emphasis on reading and writing at a very early age for some young children's poor grasp of language.

The I Can charity, which promotes speech and language in children, has estimated that one in 10 children in Britain struggles to understand what people are saying and has difficulty conveying thoughts and feelings. Pressure for changes to teaching methods has been heightened by a recent Sheffield University study which found that children's language skills did not necessarily improve once they were in school or nursery. It disclosed that the speech development of 240 three-year-olds from deprived areas actually deteriorated after they had attended nursery for two years. Ann Locke and Jane Ginsborg, the researchers, attributed their findings to the children's limited exposure to spoken language at home, but also in their subsequent early-years education.

Under current government guidelines, three- to five-year-olds in schools, nurseries and playgroups are supposed to reach goals in "communication, language and literacy". Very young children are expected to be able to make eye contact and express themselves with body language. By the time they have reached five, they should have progressed from simple statements and questions to the ability to talk to others, initiate conversation, take account of what people say and take turns in conversation.

However, many teachers and nursery staff are not adequately trained in speech and language, says Maria Mroz, an early-years researcher at Newcastle University. "It is clear that talking and playing are not as prominent as one might wish in developing children's language. Early-years professionals recognise their responsibility. However, they lack the tools and the knowledge to assess speech and language development specifically and to identify delay or disorder."

Liz Attenborough, of the Talk to Your Baby campaign, welcomed the new government project and said that language was the key to learning and behaviour. She added: "Many people believe that if you haven't tackled [language problems] by the time children start formal school it is too late - or at least much harder to do anything about."

Nearly 90 per cent of three-year-olds have some state-funded early-years education and the majority of four-year-olds are in school nurseries.

Government backing for talk

Times Educational Supplement, 31 January 2003

A campaign to persuade parents to chat to children in order to improve toddlers' speaking skills has received initial backing from government officials.

Liz Attenborough, former director of the National Year of Reading, is being funded by the Department for Education and Skills to develop the Talk To Your Baby campaign for the National Literacy Trust. The campaign follows a joint survey by the Trust and the National Association of Head Teachers which revealed 74 percent of the 121 heads polled felt young children's speaking and listening skills had deteriorated in the past five years.

But fears that toddlers' speaking skills are getting worse are unfounded, say researchers. A TES investigation of objective evidence has discovered little to support the view that children begin school less able to listen and speak than five years ago.

The Pips assessment of child's abilities, developed by Durham University, shows that children's vocabulary and ability to spot rhymes has improved in the 722 schools which have used the test over the past five years.

Mrs Attenborough said: "Even if language skills have not got worse, there is certainly room for improvement. There is no question that the whole communication skills area is incredibly important and the more we can do to help children develop language and communications skills has to be good."

The kids are not as dumb as you think

TES, 31 January 2003

Modern toddlers brought up in front of the box have poorer speech skills, right? Wrong, says Karen Gold.

THINGS are getting worse. It is a cosy, familiar idea, and when applied to young children's speech and language it offers ample opportunity for bemoaning the pernicious effect of television, dummies and single parenthood. There is only one thing wrong with it. It's not true.

There is absolutely no evidence that the speech and language of children entering nursery and reception classes has declined in the past five years. In fact, The TES has uncovered a small amount of evidence suggesting that pre-school speech and language is actually improving. So why do heads, teachers, politicians and newspapers all believe the opposite?

The most recent outbreak of "things are getting worse" was prompted by Alan Wells, director of the Basic Skills Agency. In a widely-reported speech earlier this month he said that whenever he visits a school, heads tell him that their three and four-year-olds are less able to speak clearly, express themselves coherently and understand instructions than children of the same age five years ago.

Mr Wells told The TES his agency's survey of 700 Welsh primary heads, due out in the spring, will show that nearly two-thirds of heads believe children speak less audibly now than in the past and 61 per cent say children know fewer rhymes and songs than in the mid 1990s.

Those figures are almost identical to those from a survey by the National Literacy Trust and the National Association of Head Teachers, reporting that 74 per cent of heads believe three-year-olds' speaking and listening have deteriorated. This has prompted a new NLT early language campaign - likely to be titled "Talk to your baby" - to be launched in a year's time.

But do heads' beliefs fit the facts? What is surprising, in the midst of widespread belief that children's language has deteriorated, is that no one until now has looked at the evidence which does exist. In the past five years - exactly the period when heads identify a decline in children's skills - all children have been given so-called "baseline" tests at the start of their reception year. The TES asked Britain's biggest baseline test provider, the Centre for Curriculum, Evaluation and Management at Durham University, which produces the Pips test used in thousands of primaries, to compare children's scores in the "language" elements of its test over the past five years.

There were two relevant elements: a vocabulary section, in which children are asked to name pictures, and a phonological section, in which children are asked to identify rhyming words. Between them, they should give

some indication of what has been happening to both language and listening skills over time.

What the figures for 722 schools and 20,000 children show is that, since 1997, children's vocabulary knowledge has marginally improved, and their phonological skills have improved considerably. Of course, that overall averaged figure disguises different changes in different local authorities and schools, says professor Peter Tymms, Pips director. But there is no apparent pattern to the differences: deprived intakes are as likely to show an improvement as a decline. In any case, most schools are clustered around the average no change/slight improvement state. A mere handful show the big decline that heads say they have seen.

To ensure that this is not just a Pips effect, The TES contacted Birmingham local education authority, the second-biggest baseline author with its Signposts tests. It has results for speaking and listening for 14,000 reception children in Birmingham. Over the past five years, they have improved too.

Finally, we contacted Reading University, where Dr Susan Edwards is senior lecturer in clinical linguistics. She is the author of the Reynell test, a complex screening used by speech therapists and psychologists for young children with serious delays in speech development. Four years ago, Dr Edwards restandardised the Reynell. This involves creating a "normality" benchmark against which children with abnormal speech can be tested. She asked teachers to pick out 1,074 children aged two to seven with "normal" speech and language, and then extensively tested what they could do. Their results set the standard for normal development.

Since then, she says, speech therapists have frequently, though only informally, told her that children with speech delay find the new Reynell test too difficult. There are three possible explanations for this. First, "abnormal" children have got worse. This is highly unlikely, given that this group of children included those with the most severe disabilities including no speech at all. Second, "normal" children's speech has got better. This would concur with the Pips and Birmingham results. But there is a third explanation: that teachers' idea of "normal" speech skills has changed.

That last explanation, say experts, could be a credible one. In the past 10 years, schools' awareness of speech and language - now identified as separate skills in the national curriculum and used as predictors of future literacy ability, has grown immensely. Inclusion of children with speech and language difficulties in mainstream schools means that teachers have become both more conscious and more skilled at identifying language problems. Speech therapists, though in short supply, are now often found in mainstream schools when they once would have been confined to special units.

"Teachers have become sensitised to speech and language difficulties" says Geoff Lindsay, professor of special needs at Warwick University. "There has been a redefinition of children, rather like what has happened with autism. There's a positive aspect to this, but it does also change our view of children."

Teachers' view may also be changed by the increasing focus on children's performance and the need to get good national test results. In the past, says child psychology lecturer Dr Marion Farmer of Northumbria University, parents and teachers would be happy to wait and see whether a four-year-old was a late developer. Now, they panic about how far that child has to travel to reach Level 2. She says: "People are thinking 'My goodness this child can't do X, Y and Z and these are really important predictors of what they are going to achieve.' It is easy to see how such fears might have raised anxiety about standards of speech and language."

Even Alan Wells, who did not denounce TV or poor parenting in his speech, admits that the debate over language may have been coloured by the age-old tendency to think that things ain't what they used to be that "Everybody thinks summers in their childhood were more summery than they are now." His soon-to-be published survey shows that Welsh heads believe that only 50 per cent of children start school with the speech and language they need to embark on the curriculum. It does not show that five years ago more of them did.

Young children's speech has not slipped back. This does not mean we should not set targets or allocate time and money to making it better. But we cannot justify doing so on the basis that things have got worse.

Straight talking on toddler speech

Sue Palmer

TES, 14 February 2003

It's good to read that reception children's speaking and listening skills have improved over the past five years (*TES*, January 31), a fact I ascribe to the dedication of early-years practitioners.

However, the tests on which this progress was measured started from a lowered baseline - the damage to early language development was done before they came into use. The social and cultural changes which adversely affected the listening and language skills of the nation's pre-schoolers happened in the 1980s and early 90s. This period saw, among other things, the arrival of all-day TV, the decline of family mealtimes, and changes in work patterns which left parents less conversationally-inclined. We stopped talking to little children as much as we had in the past.

Between 1985 and 1998, speech and language therapist Dr Sally Ward recorded a disturbing deterioration in the listening skills of young children. I wrote about her work in *The TES* in 1997 and was bombarded with alarming reports from infant teachers around the country about decreasing language skills in new entrants. This was not just a case of "everybody thinks summers were more summery in their own childhood" but real concern.

I do not think it is coincidence that national panic about literacy standards swelled to a crescendo as this language-poor generation of children hit the schools. Nor that the same decade saw a rise in behavioural problems, especially attention deficit disorder.

Early-years specialists have ever since been dealing with children whose language and listening skills are less well-developed than in the past, and it's a tribute to them that they have made improvements. But unless we acknowledge how things have changed, and start helping parents provide a more language-rich environment for little children, universal literacy will remain beyond our grasp.