



*Early Reading Connects*

# **Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Early Reading Connects Approach: A six-month study of 16 early years settings in Dudley**

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## Executive summary

### Introduction

The Early Reading Connects approach has been shown to be an incredibly important framework for early years settings, particularly in its strong impact in supporting family involvement and making the development of a language-rich environment a priority for both setting and home.

### Key successes

Developing the Early Reading Connects approach has hugely helped settings to support parents in sharing books and related material with their children from low initial levels by providing accessible, non-patronising ideas and methods.

Even where existing levels of awareness and confidence in encouraging children to love language, stories and reading were largely high, the Early Reading Connects approach does provide opportunities for the small numbers of staff who are unsure to gain in confidence and understanding.

The Early Reading Connects approach is seen to help settings to create richer environments, with wider ranges of resources to support the development of children's love of language, stories and reading.

Practitioners individually have further developed their consideration for children's interests through their adoption of the Early Reading Connects approach, although setting practice was already largely good. There is evidence that children's interests, in terms of stories, have become less narrow, with greater reported levels of enjoyment and greater numbers of children able to state their favourite kinds of stories.

Families' reported enjoyment of language, stories and reading has tripled to over 90% as a result of settings' adoption of the Early Reading Connects approach.

Family use of reading areas in settings has increased, and story areas are being increasingly taken outside.

91% of settings felt that they had a better understanding of how to encourage children and families to love language, stories and reading as a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach. This is the area in which the approach has had the largest impact.

Reading event ideas on the Early Reading Connects website have been hugely successful in involving families and supporting their understanding in fun and approachable ways.

Under a third of settings reported that language, stories and reading featured on their setting development plan before they began planning as part of their involvement with Early Reading Connects. Fewer, by half, made mention of family involvement in this area. It now features on the plans of all 16 settings.

Practitioner understanding of the importance of language, stories and reading, and family involvement in this area have both greatly increased as a result of their adoption of the Early Reading Connects approach.

## **Key challenges**

Over half of all practitioners were not previously confident in supporting children with English as an additional language (EAL) to love language, stories and reading. Although that figure has halved, both parents and staff still exhibit signs of uncertainty in how best to support their children's bilingualism, Around a third of these settings currently have children with EAL on roll.

Settings are increasingly linking with their local library service, however concerns over out-of-setting events are a real barrier to furthering work with other local services, with practitioners citing risk assessments, insurance and costs as prohibitive factors.

Supporting specific groups of parents still proves problematic for settings, but awareness of their needs is growing as a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach, with targeted work with dads seen as the most approachable.

Supporting young parents is seen as particularly difficult, with worries of being seen as discriminatory a particular barrier.

Supporting adults with basic skills needs is an area in which practitioners have low levels of confidence, and one for which the Early Reading Connects model could do more to support.

External training needs can be difficult for settings to meet, but being part of the project is seen as a valuable opportunity to focus on internal professional development.

Although staff are more confident, there is little evidence that the Early Reading Connects resources currently have a specific impact in supporting children with special educational needs to develop their love of language, stories and reading.

## **Practical implications**

### **...for local authority advisers**

Where possible, provide a small amount of funding to support settings adopting the Early Reading Connects approach with resources, reviewing their project plans as part of the process.

Organising training or networking meetings to support settings is a great way to develop the local network of settings adopting the approach and to signpost other local authority support. Paying cover where possible would help support those in schools to attend.

## ...for settings

Before starting to develop the approach, ensure that language development and reading is agreed upon as a strategic priority for the setting, with full senior manager or setting owner support.

Self assess using questionnaires and the Early Reading Connects evaluation grid to identify which areas to focus on.

Survey your families to find out more about their needs and target your practice.

Use the Early Reading Connects website to gather lots of tried and tested ideas to use once you have worked out the areas to focus on (e.g. dads' involvement, bedtime stories).

Form a local networking group, particularly if you struggle with internet access, to share your ideas once every month or so.

Do not be disheartened if staff changes or heavy schedules of work around Christmas and starts of term mean that your plans get disrupted. Building families' and children's love of reading stories and language as a key part of your setting strategy takes time – just keep going!

## Outline of the project

### Introduction

Early Reading Connects is a national project funded by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) and delivered by the National Literacy Trust (NLT).

Early Reading Connects supports all settings working with children from birth to five years to develop a whole-setting reading culture. Key elements of this include raising the profile of language and literacy, and increasing parental involvement in order to:

- Encourage a love of language, stories and reading among the babies, toddlers or young children in their care.
- Engage and involve the children's families in this process.
- Share good practice and resources and build practitioner confidence in supporting children and families.

Over 3,000 early years settings are part of our network of Early Reading Connects members, representing a wide range of practitioners including children's centre managers, crèche leaders, childminders and early years teachers.

Members contribute practical ideas and case studies which are showcased on [www.earlyreadingconnects.org.uk](http://www.earlyreadingconnects.org.uk) and through regular email newsletters. Members also

each have access to their own blog to share their thoughts, photographs and progress with their setting and other members.

A range of strategies related to developing a whole-setting reading culture have been identified as a result of gathering good practice in this area from network members. It was therefore agreed that an action research project with a group of settings would be a useful opportunity to test the effectiveness of an approach which brought these strategies together.

The strategies that form the approach are detailed below and have all been embedded into the framework for this project:

- Greater impact is achieved when developmental activity is identified as a strategic priority for the setting and is integrated into the settings' strategic policy documents. Activity is therefore planned, monitored and evaluated as part of this process.
- Development of language development and reading activity is structured around the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework.
- Engaging staff members and families in the project and developing a language rich environment are essential core areas of development.
- Other areas of development within the EYFS framework are identified through using the Early Reading Connects self-evaluation grid and developed accordingly.
- Practical ideas and case studies from the Early Reading Connects website and other resources are used to inspire settings as they develop the approach.
- Early years settings benefit from working as a cluster led by a local adviser, sharing good practice and experiences at regular intervals.

The term Early Reading Connects approach is used throughout this report. It refers to the global impact of all of the strategies described above.

## Aims: an evaluation of the Early Reading Connects approach

In using a six month study focused on 16 early years settings in Dudley, the aim is to evaluate whether the Early Reading Connects approach is successful in developing whole setting reading cultures in order to make a difference to the lives of children and their families.

The process of developing a whole setting reading culture is a journey which can last many years. However, six months was felt to be long enough for participating settings to evidence strong foundations and progress towards this goal. This evidence was considered against the aims of the project, delineated in **Table 1**, which details these key aims and outcomes for each of the EYFS stages:

**Table 1: The aims of the project by EYFS stage**

	<i>Key aim</i>	<i>Evidence outcomes</i>
<b>1. A unique child</b>	Practitioners in participating settings are more aware of the importance and more equipped with the skills and confidence they need to encourage children to love language, stories and reading.	1a) Practitioners are developing their knowledge of suitability of stories for children's ages and needs 1b) Practitioners are developing their consideration for children's interests when buying and sharing resources 1c) Practitioners are developing their understanding of English as an additional language and provision of appropriate resources 1d) Practitioners are developing their understanding of Special Educational Needs (SEN) with appropriate support
<b>2. Positive relationships</b>	Participating settings are more aware of the importance of family involvement and are more confident in their work with families. Families are more involved in supporting their child's enjoyment of language, stories and reading.	2a) Practitioners are increasing the number of opportunities to support family involvement in language, stories and reading 2b) Families are increasingly able to be involved in their children's experience of language, stories and reading 2c) Practitioners are developing their support for dads and male carers leading to increasing involvement 2d) Practitioners are increasingly aware of the needs of young parents and are developing support 2e) Practitioners are increasingly aware of the needs of parents who may have difficulties with basic skills and are developing support

	<b>Key aim</b>	<b>Evidence outcomes</b>
<b>3. An enabling environment</b>	Participating settings are more communication friendly than at the start of the project. The profile of language and reading is being raised through the physical environment. Resources available to the children and activities and events are being run.	3a) Practitioners have attended and implemented new training to add to their practice in supporting language, stories and reading 3b) The setting is developing its range of resources and increasingly widening opportunities for family use 3c) The setting is developing interesting and comfortable story areas and increasingly widening opportunities for family use 3d) and 3e) Practitioners are making increased use of facilities offered by local facilities and libraries and encouraging families to make use of them independently 3f) Practitioners running more reading events to involve families in promoting and supporting their understanding of language, stories and reading
<b>4. Learning and development</b>	Participating settings have moved further in developing a culture that values language, stories and reading, with plans for future developments.	4a) Promoting a love of language, stories and reading is increasingly central to the setting's learning and development plan 4b) Practitioners' appreciation of the importance of developing a love of language, stories and reading as a key to development is increasing

## Project structure and delivery

This pilot was based on three levels of support – the national project manager advising partners in local authorities, who then encouraged settings to adopt the approach and signposted to other local stakeholders. This structure is outlined in **Table 2**, below:

**Table 2: Stakeholders**

<b>National level</b>	Rebecca Green, National Literacy Trust Lucy Hawkins (maternity cover), National Literacy Trust
<b>Local authority level</b>	Ceris Crum, Early Years Advisory Team, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
<b>Setting level</b>	One coordinator in each of 16 early years settings (varied types of settings) situated within Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council.
<b>Others</b>	Library service, Ethnic Minority Achievement Service in Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

This structure was adopted fully by the stakeholders for the Dudley study. The settings were guided and supported by their local authority Early Years Adviser, who in turn worked in partnership with the NLT Project Manager.

Settings who took part were asked to make a commitment to achieving the outcomes of the project through using the Early Reading Connects toolkit, evaluation grid and website to develop their practice. In addition, settings were required to:

- Participate in a launch event.
- Participate in two local networking meetings - one in the Autumn and one in the Spring term.
- Complete a staff survey at the beginning and end of the project.
- Complete a setting survey at the beginning and end of the project.
- Gather evidence by keeping a log of activity and taking photos to create a portfolio of success - either by using their Early Reading Connects blog facility, or in a paper folder.
- Volunteer, where possible, to host focus groups for staff and parents and the end of the project.
- Volunteer, where possible, to grant access for informal child interviews at the start and end of the project.

The role of the NLT project manager was to manage the project in the following ways:

- Planning and delivery of a launch event in June 2009.
- Attendance and input at two local authority-led training meetings - one in November 2009 and a final meeting in March 2010.
- Regular contact with the Local Authority Early Years Consultant to discuss the progress of the project.
- Provision of packs of Early Reading Connects materials for settings (as available to all Early Reading Connects members: including the Family Involvement Toolkit and evaluation grid).
- Management of settings' individual project plans (in consultation with the Local Authority Early Years Consultant).
- Planning, delivering and analysing staff surveys.
- Planning, delivering and analysing opportunities for parent feedback.
- Management, dissemination and analysis of setting audit.
- Management of wider communications and PR relating to the project.

The role of the Local Authority Early Years Consultant was to support the progress of the local settings in the following ways:

- Recruitment of 15 to 20 settings
- Participation in a launch event in June 2009
- Planning and delivery of two meetings: one in November 2009 and a final meeting in March 2010
- Contact with the NLT project manager to discuss the progress of project monitoring and encouraging setting progress
- Engagement with the library and any other local partners

## Evaluation methods

The project was evaluated using:

- Setting audit surveys at the start and end of the projects (July 2009 and February 2010)
- Practitioner surveys of all staff at the start and end of the projects (July 2009 and February 2010)
- Child interviews (sampling five children in three settings) in September 2009 and February 2010
- Parent focus groups (sampling seven to eight parents in three settings) in February 2010
- Staff focus groups (with all setting staff at each of three settings) in February 2010
- An overview of each setting's activity (either through their blog or as a paper-based record)

### Setting survey

This summary draws upon both the Time 1 and 2 surveys, used before the full start of the project in July 2009 and at the end of the project, in February 2010.

All percentages are based on the number of active respondents: those who did not complete a question, section, or the one of the surveys, were discounted. The term “reading and language resources” in this survey refers to all resources that support language development other than books, for example, story sacks, puppets, word games, magazines and audio books.

Out of 16 settings, 15 completed the Time 1 survey as instructed and 13 completed the Time 2 survey.

### Practitioner survey

This summary draws upon both the Time 1 and 2 surveys, used before the full start of the project in July 2009 and at the end of the project, in February 2010.

All percentages are based on the number of active respondents – those who selected “not applicable” or did not complete a question, section, or the one of the surveys, were discounted. The term “reading and language resources” in this survey refers to all resources that support language development other than books, for example, story sacks, puppets, word games, magazines and audio books.

All 16 settings completed the Time 1 survey as instructed and 12 completed the Time 2 survey. Varying numbers of staff were surveyed in each setting – Time 1 surveys represent 50 practitioners' opinions and Time 2 surveys represent 40 practitioners' opinions.

Only 19 practitioner surveys could be matched between Time 1 and Time 2, out of the 71 individual respondents in total, and so Time 1 findings have been included for comparison in broad percentages only. Change has been charted using the 40 Time 2 survey responses which asked practitioners to think first about their feelings before the

project, and then about their opinion “now, as a result of implementing the Early Reading Connects approach”.

### **Child interviews**

17 children were interviewed in September (at Wallheath Preschool, Thorns Pre-school and St Joseph’s Preschool) and 14 children were interviewed in February (at Amblecote Preschool, St Joseph’s Preschool and Busy Bees Kindergarten). On each occasion these were the settings who volunteered to host the groups.

Each child was given a picture of a character reading to colour in, and whilst they were doing so, the interviewer chatted to them about what the character was doing in the picture, whether they were having a good time, their own favourite stories and who and where they share them with. The full findings are in [Appendix 1](#).

### **Parent focus groups**

Focus groups were held in mid-February at Amblecote Preschool, St Joseph’s Preschool and Busy Bees Kindergarten. These settings volunteered to host the groups. Seven to eight parents attended each one incentivised by a promised “thank you” of £20 in cash.

The focus groups lasted around 30 to 40 minutes each, and were audio recorded and later transcribed. Each followed a broad structure around five key questions, asking them about their experiences of reading, what their child likes to do at home, their involvement with the Early Reading Connects project at the setting, their opinions on encouraging language, stories and reading, and their current practice relating to language, stories and reading at home.

### **Staff focus groups**

Staff groups were held in mid-February at Amblecote Preschool, St Joseph’s Preschool and Busy Bees Kindergarten. These settings volunteered to host the groups, at which all members of setting staff present on the day attended.

Lunch was provided and the staff focus groups lasted around 30 to 40 minutes each, were audio recorded and later transcribed. Each followed a broad structure around five key questions, asking them about the impact of the Early Reading Connects approach on their setting, on their work with parents, on the way they share books and stories and their plans for future setting development.

## **Challenges**

As part of the project, some contextual challenges have been noted by settings.

### **Staff leadership**

Initially 17 settings signed up to take part. However, one setting unfortunately had to withdraw early as the project coordinator’s external studies became too time-intensive. The initial project leader found that in addition to a new foundation degree course, her

workload was too heavy for her to adequately lead the project. With a lack of volunteers to take on coordination of the project, the setting unfortunately had to withdraw.

### **Staff turnover**

This was a particular challenge faced by the project coordinators in two settings. The first was unaware of her setting's plans to adopt the Early Reading Connects approach when she returned from maternity leave in September 2009:

*"This project was started by the previous Foundation Stage Manager in July 2009. I was on maternity leave and returned in September as the new FS Manager. The project was not mentioned to me until a week before the November meeting and the team had never heard of it. Since the meeting we have begun to introduce ideas but we have only had two months (December and January) so feel as though we haven't put the Early Reading Connects approach into place. I have enclosed what I have done but we would like to be part of the project again, if possible, to introduce it properly and make it valued."*  
(Setting audit comment, February 2010)

Despite the late start, the setting has made some progress through a shortened project plan, and intends to re-launch the project in the future.

A steeper challenge was faced by a second setting, where the project coordinator was succeeded much later into the project, in January 2010, just a month before the final evaluations were taking place:

*"It has been very difficult taking over half way through a project. I've not been on any training: I'm struggling to blog [sic]. I will try my best to keep project going and encourage LS&R [Language, stories and reading] at every opportunity."*  
(Setting audit comment, February 2010)

Without either the July launch meeting, or the November training this setting is much less confident in adopting the approach, and has only evidenced a small part of their initial project plan. Despite this, these two settings have both remained with the project, and therefore their feedback has been included in full.

One further setting coordinator highlighted staff changes as a challenge in their setting audit, although by drawing upon the support of a team has continued the project admirably:

*"This project has been disrupted by significant staff changes, however, other members of staff have offered their support to ensure the Early Reading Connects project is completed."*  
(Setting audit comment, February 2010)

Busy times of year were more of a minor challenge, as noted by one setting:

*"We, as a setting, have very much enjoyed being part of this project. We are looking forward to the events that we have got planned over the next few months. We have found the action plan very useful and the new books we were able to purchase were enjoyed by staff, children and families. We did find it a little*

*difficult during Autumn 2 to keep it going due to Christmas etc but as a team we will place more emphasis on encouraging our children and families to love language, stories and reading.”*

(Setting audit comment, February 2010)

## Support provided

Support for developing the Early Reading Connects approach was provided by the NLT and the local authority early years consultant.

The local authority was kind enough to meet cover costs and venue costs for meetings, as well as £100 per setting to spend on new resources.

The vast majority of settings, 82%, found the support on average either “very useful” or “useful” (see **Table 3**, below). The features that were identified as not useful included the three that relied on computers. The two negative responses came from two particular settings which suggests that this might be a feature of their ability to connect to the internet, although inadequate access to computer technology in general was picked up in staff focus groups, with one preschool manager mentioning “our computer plays up here and my computer’s dreadful at home” and the majority of setting leaders relying only on personal email addresses.

The support given by the local authority to facilitate the project (the £100 to spend on new resources and the payment of supply cover to attend the launch and training meetings) was rated highly. This is clearly an excellent model for local authorities in a position to support the project in this way. However in purely considering the remaining areas of support, which Early Reading Connects would offer to any of its member settings, 84% of respondents found this standard level of support either very useful or useful.

**Table 3 – Evaluation of the Early Reading Connects approach project support<sup>1</sup>**

	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very useful	Did not use / receive / attend
July launch day	58.3%	25.0%	0.0%	16.7%
November meeting	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Payment of supply cover for July and November events	60.0%	0.0%	0.0%	40.0%
The Early Reading Connects toolkit	54.5%	45.5%	0.0%	0.0%
The Early Reading Connects website	58.3%	25.0%	8.3%	8.3%
The Early Reading Connects e-newsletter	33.3%	33.3%	8.3%	25.0%
Being part of a network of settings all encouraging a love of LS&R	25.0%	58.3%	8.3%	8.3%
Having the support of the Early Reading Connects	50.0%	33.3%	0.0%	16.7%

<sup>1</sup> Source: Time 2 setting survey

	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very useful	Did not use / receive / attend
<b>project manager</b>				
<b>Having the support of Dudley Early Years Adviser</b>	33.3%	50.0%	0.0%	16.7%
<b>Having £100 to spend on resources for the project</b>	75.0%	8.3%	0.0%	16.7%
<b>Access to your own Early Reading Connects blog</b>	33.3%	41.7%	8.3%	16.7%

In the Time 2 setting survey, project leaders were also asked if there were any other areas of support from the project that they would have appreciated. Only four settings responded to this, two to confirm that the level of support was fine:

*“No, contact has been great.”*

*“I feel the support has been good, [I] really enjoyed looking at the website and the e-newsletter.”*

Two other settings offered constructive ideas, below, to improve the model. These will be taken into consideration to inform future model development.

*“Maybe a visit by the Early Reading Connects project manager or adviser to support myself in a presentation to parents and carers about the Early Reading Connects project.”*

*“No, we have been actively supported throughout the project and have received access to additional support when required. All staff have played an important role in the process working as a team, maybe an avenue for SEN support in the future attached to the project.”*

Although the sustainability of the NLT project manager visiting individual settings is not really viable with over 3,000 currently members in the Early Reading Connects network, both points of feedback, in terms of support for presenting to parents and reviewing SEN support, have been taken on board for the future.

## Outcomes by EYFS framework: 1. A unique child

**Key aim:** Practitioners at participating settings are more aware of the importance and more equipped with the skills and confidence they need to encourage children to love language, stories and reading.

**Key finding:** As a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach settings were 2.5 times more likely to report that their children enjoyed language, stories and reading as much as possible.<sup>2</sup>

### 1a) Child development

**Aim:** Practitioners are developing their knowledge of suitability of stories for children's ages and needs

**Key finding:** Although existing levels of awareness and confidence were largely high, the Early Reading Connects approach does provide opportunities for the small numbers of staff who are unsure to gain in confidence in encouraging children to love language, stories and reading.

Confidence in professional practice in this way was already high. In all three staff focus groups, practitioners' high level of pre-existing knowledge came out in the discussion:

*"I think relatively we've all been quite confident in terms of storytelling."*

*"Yes I feel it was fairly good practice that we were delivering anyway."*

*"I think as a setting, we're very much into a language-rich environment anyway."*

These kind of comments confirm quantitative findings from the survey of 40 practitioners at the end of the project (see **Table 4**). Although 88% were previously confident in some way, the proportion of "very confident" practitioners using books has now risen four fold when considering their confidence "Now, as a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach".

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<sup>2</sup> See Table 9

**Table 4: How confident did you feel to use books to encourage children to love language, stories and reading?<sup>3</sup>**

% of active responses	“Before”	“Now”
Very confident	11.43%	42.50%
Confident	77.14%	55.00%
Unsure	11.43%	2.50%
Not very confident	0.00%	0.00%
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

If confidence in using suitable books has improved from an already strong base, using other reading and language resources has followed a similar trend. For both, the level of practitioners who previously felt “unsure” has fallen: the remaining small percentage at the end of the study represents just one response from a setting, which has faced the greatest staff change challenges.

The conversation between two members of staff in one of the staff focus groups below illustrates the journey of a relatively new member of staff who had initially been given the task of reading the stories at an event run as part of developing the Early Reading Connects approach:

*“I think you did lack confidence. Yes you did a bit, didn’t you?” (member of staff)*

*“But you see, it has helped me control the children on the carpet... So that was a knock-on effect of doing the story time and then [I] felt more confident and felt yes, let’s start reading stories on a regular basis. And singing songs as well.” (newer member of staff)*

It is interesting to see that books seem to be, for this newer practitioner, an important initial resource she had used to gain confidence as a practitioner in the wider sense.

Using other resources found a slightly higher level of practitioners initially “unsure”. However for both books and other resources, practitioners’ confidence at the end of the project was similarly high: the level of practitioners “very confident” in using other resources has risen by the same proportion as for books. Levels of practitioners “unsure” about using other resources have dropped to a seventh of their former figures (see **Table 5**).

**Table 5: How confident did you feel to use reading and language resources to encourage children to love language, stories and reading?<sup>4</sup>**

% of active responses	“Before”	“Now”
Very confident	10.00%	40.00%
Confident	72.50%	57.50%
Unsure	17.50%	2.50%
Not very confident	0.00%	0.00%

<sup>3</sup> Source: Time 2 practitioner survey

<sup>4</sup> Source: Time 2 practitioner survey

% of active responses	“Before”	“Now”
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

## 1b) Children’s interests

**Aim:** Practitioners are developing their consideration for children’s interests when buying and sharing resources.

**Key finding:** Practitioners individually have developed their consideration for children’s interests through their involvement of in the project, although setting practice was already good. Children’s interests are also seen to become less narrow, with greater reported levels of enjoyment and confidence in stating their favourite kinds of stories.

As a general trend, most of the staff focus groups found a generally high level of confidence in professional practice in most respects. (see extracts featured under [A unique child 1a](#))

For over half of the settings there was little change, with only 16.6% of settings who completed both surveys reporting an increased level of agreement (findings from all settings are detailed in **Table 6**, below).

Although there is little change to the settings’ agreement with the statement shown in Table 6, there does seem to be a clearer picture by setting leaders on their work. The small amount of uncertainty seen in Time 1 has disappeared by Time 2.

This is reiterated in the staff focus groups, where the concept of progress being made is voiced, but tempered with new awareness that there is more still to do, particularly after only six months:

*“We’ve had the action plan out on a regular basis and I think it has had an impact, but I think we could do more.”*

*“The Early Reading Connects approach has highlighted that we were already doing that. But it’s sort of put it on a pedestal and... therefore we’ve been able to evidence what we’ve already done. So we’ve already seen what we’ve achieved in that area but also achieved more.”*

Disagreement with the statement in Time 2 is the result of just one outlying value from one setting, who stated that in Time 2 that their practice strongly disagreed with the statement. This setting has faced challenges with leadership change since January 2010.

**Table 6: “The setting encourages children to love language, stories and reading (LS&R) using knowledge of children’s interests.”<sup>5</sup>**

% of active responses	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Time 1	40.0%	53.3%	6.7%	0.0%	0.0%

<sup>5</sup> Source: Time 1 and Time 2 setting surveys

% of active responses	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Time 2	38.5%	53.8%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%

Considering the settings' use of their knowledge of children's interests in more detail, it is interesting that in one of the staff focus groups, resourcing had expanded to incorporate children's interests more. One setting mentioned that in the past they would have only bought classic book titles, but that as a result of this project, that they had "managed to get the classic stories and then we managed to get the children's interest stories too".

*"The Princess which meets the girls' needs. They were very much into that and then we've got a few that like The Dinosaurs, like Harry and the Dinosaurs, that was great. But then we've got the nice classical [sic] Owl Babies there [too]."*

Consideration of children's interests does seem to have improved, with over half of all settings now considering that they use knowledge of children's interests 'as much as possible', although there is clearly some way still to go.

For the settings investing in new children's audiobooks, digging deeper in the focus groups found that no or limited funding would have otherwise removed these resources from consideration:

*"Which one would you have bought if you had had limited funds?"  
(Early Reading Connects project manager)  
"I'd probably [have] bought the sort of general books."  
(Project coordinator in setting)*

Inevitably, limited funding encourages settings to focus more on "long lasting [themes] that all of the children would enjoy", focus groups found. Thus barriers to fully tailor to children's interests are at least partly inevitable where there is not additional funding from external partners.

However, reassuringly, in grading how much their setting is using children's interests, 85% of settings reported improvement along the scale (see **Table 7**), perhaps as a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach, ideas to use current interests in other ways outside of budget expenditure (e.g. editable story games, guides to home-made resources etc).

**Table 7: How much did your setting encourage children to love LS&R using knowledge of children's interests?<sup>6</sup>**

% of active responses	1 (not at all)	2	3	4	5 (as much as possible)
Before	0.0%	15.4%	30.8%	38.5%	15.4%
Now, as a result of the Early Reading	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%	38.5%	53.8%

<sup>6</sup> Source: Time 2 setting surveys

% of active responses	1 (not at all)	2	3	4	5 (as much as possible)
Connects approach					

In terms of individual practitioner confidence, all reported that “now, as a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach” that their levels of confidence in using children’s interests had been maintained or improved (again building on already high levels of good practice). 16 out of 40 respondents saw an increase in their confidence levels (see **Table 8**).

However, it is interesting to note that of the 16 who felt their confidence had improved, five of these were setting managers, and two were deputies, suggesting that confidence in this area is something that practitioners can gain at various points in their professional career.

**Table 8: How confident did you feel to use children’s interests to encourage them to love language, stories and reading?<sup>7</sup>**

% of active responses	“Before”	“Now”
Very confident	15.0%	37.50%
Confident	67.5%	60.00%
Unsure	15.0%	2.50%
Not very confident	0.0%	0.00%
Not at all confident	2.5%	0.00%

With regards to the impact of the settings increasingly using their knowledge of the children’s interests to promote reading and language development, there is some qualitative evidence from the evaluation that shows that this awareness and resulting activity is having a positive effect.

Child interviews conducted after the project (although with the inevitable increase in child age and development) showed that the vast majority (93%) spoken to in February 2010 were able to talk about stories they liked, up from 69% in September 2009.<sup>8</sup>

In the parents focus groups there was much discussion of children’s interests and in two of the three groups parents had mentioned children exploring their interests more:

*“And then he came home from here the other day and he’s going on about ‘Is the room on the broom for me mummy?’ And I thought ‘Oh my daughter’s got that book.’ And he was talking about it and I said ‘Do you want Room on the Broom?’ and I got it out and read it to him and I thought ‘Oh I must.’ I should not just get him that Thomas and Mr Men, I should do some more’.”*

<sup>7</sup> Origin: Time 2 practitioner survey

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix for child interview data.

*“For me it’s a wider variety, she’ll pick up a wider variety of things. Before it was all Topsy and Tim or all Dora.”*

*“...he’s not so mind set on his trains and he’s started talking about other things.”*

This was seen again in the staff focus groups, with one setting leader reporting:

*“I think it’s just given them [the children] more confidence to speak up what about what they want to do and what books they want us to read.”*

*“I think it’s given them more inspiration. ... They’re actually taking it in to their areas of play, especially role play.”*

In terms of children’s responses, it is reassuring that settings reported significant increases in child enjoyment in their setting as a result of the project (see **Table 9**), with now two and a half as many reporting the highest levels of enjoyment.

**Table 9: How much do you think children in your setting enjoyed language, stories and reading<sup>9</sup>**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>1 (not at all)</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 (as much as possible)</b>
Before	0.0%	0.0%	23.1%	46.25	30.8%
Now, as a result of the Early Reading Connects approach	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	15.4%	84.6%

<sup>9</sup> Source: Time 2 setting survey

## 1c) Cultural diversity

**Aim:** Practitioners are developing their understanding of English as an additional language (EAL) and provision of appropriate resources.

**Key finding:** Over half of all practitioners were not previously confident in supporting children with EAL to love language, stories and reading. Although that figure has halved, both parents and staff still exhibit signs of uncertainty in how best to support their children’s bilingualism.

As a result of changing children on roll, many settings responding had fewer EAL children at the end of the study (see **Table 10**). However, of the six settings who had EAL children at both points, two reported no change, and four reported improved agreement with the statement.

**Table 10:** “In the setting, children with English as an additional language (EAL) are encouraged to love language, stories and reading.”<sup>10</sup>

% of active responses	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No EAL
Time 1	16.7%	58.3%	8.3%	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%
Time 2	38.5%	15.4%	8.3%	0.0%	0.0%	46.15%

With contribution from the Dudley Ethnic Minority Achievement Service at the November training event, confidence has grown slightly for those practitioners working with EAL children, with over 65% now confident in some way (see **Table 11**). However, very few consider themselves to be “very confident”, and around a quarter still do not feel confident or are still unsure.

It is concerning that over half of all practitioners working with EAL children did not consider themselves confident before their work in developing the Early Reading Connects approach. In addition, these figures are based on the 31 of 40 practitioners who actively responded to the question (i.e. who did not select “not applicable” or leave all options blank). If those that were already working with EAL children had such low levels of confidence, what of those who have not yet welcomed any EAL children in to their setting?

**Table 11:** How confident did you feel to encourage children with EAL to love language, stories and reading?<sup>11</sup>

% of active responses	“Before”	“Now”
Very confident	3.23%	15.63%
Confident	45.16%	59.38%
Unsure	38.71%	18.75%
Not very confident	12.90%	6.25%
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

<sup>10</sup> Source: Time 1 and 2 setting surveys

<sup>11</sup> Source: Time 2 practitioner survey

Only one of the three staff focus groups was at a setting which currently had EAL children on roll. However, one of the other two groups did suggest that they would like greater understanding of EAL issues, as they may have bilingual children on roll in the future. As a result of this and still relatively low levels of confidence, a second session on bilingualism using presentations previously delivered at NLT conferences was added to the final half day meeting in March 2010.

Key messages around EAL and bilingualism still, in February, need reinforcing.

*“They’re very good. And parents are saying when we’re giving out the treasured boxes and I will say, ‘Do you want this in Punjabi?’ and they say ‘No in plain English please.’....”*

(Setting lead practitioner in focus group)

Although involvement with EAL families from the setting is “very good”, the attitude of the parent above to primarily support English is interesting, and it was not felt in the focus groups, with either staff or parents, that key ideas such as building strong foundations in the mother tongue to provide for further bilingual literacy were present.

In the parent focus group at which two EAL families were represented, one parent summarised her routine in reading in English every evening to her child, who then had to retell the story to his grandparents in Urdu. This is an interesting activity which is supporting her child’s literacy development.

However, in general parents prioritised English over their mother tongue, which is worrying as strong foundations in their mother tongue will better prepare their child for their literacy development. Similarly, another key message that needs to be reinforced is that parental confidence in sharing stories is far more natural, fluid and engaging in their mother tongue.

## **1d) Children with special educational needs (SEN)**

**Aim: Practitioners are developing their understanding of SEN with appropriate support.**

**Key finding: Although staff are more confident, there is little evidence that the Early Reading Connects approach currently has a specific impact in supporting children with SEN to develop their love of language, stories and reading.**

As with other areas of internal practice, settings reported high levels of good practice before the project began. As a result of changing children on roll, many settings responding had fewer SEN children by the end of the study.

**Table 12**, on the next page, suggests that developing the Early Reading Connects approach currently has a more limited impact for children with SEN, although it may lead to greater awareness of their needs in the area, as seen in one leader’s suggestion on their setting survey, that future developments should consider “maybe an avenue for SEN support in the future attached to the project”.

This is not necessarily due to a lack of setting action when they were developing the Early Reading Connects approach. Although only nine settings responded to the question below at Time 2, five reported no change in how much their setting encouraged SEN children to love language, stories and reading, and four reported a increase.

**Table 12: “In the setting, children with special educational needs are encouraged to love language, stories and reading.”**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>No SEN</b>
Time 1	46.2%	46.2%	7.7%	0.0%	16.7%	15.4%
Time 2	40.0%	40.0%	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%	30.0%

Practitioners themselves were uncertain about their previous confidence levels at the end of the project, with over half previously “unsure” or “not very confident”, shown in **Table 13**, below. Although improvement can clearly be seen in their opinion of their confidence, the setting data above tempers their enthusiasm with consideration of its impact, which appears to be more modest.

**Table 13: How confident did you feel to encourage children with additional educational needs to love language, stories and reading?<sup>12</sup>**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>“Before”</b>	<b>“Now”</b>
Very confident	9.09%	18.75%
Confident	36.36%	59.38%
Unsure	45.45%	15.63%
Not very confident	9.09%	6.25%
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

<sup>12</sup> Source: Time 2 practitioner survey

## Outcomes by EYFS stage: 2. Positive relationships

**Key aim: Participating settings to be more aware of the importance of family involvement and are more confident in their work with families. Families are more involved in supporting their child's enjoyment of language, stories and reading.**

### 2a) Effective communication

**Aim: Practitioners are increasing the number of opportunities to support family involvement in language, stories and reading.**

**Key finding: 91% of settings felt that they had a better understanding of how to encourage children and families to love language, stories and reading as a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach. This is the area in which developing the Early Reading Connects approach has the largest impact.**

Family involvement is certainly the area of the project where settings reported the most significant impact, with a phenomenal 91.7% of settings reporting a better understanding in this area than they had previously held (see **Table 14**, below).

**Table 14: Do you think you have a better understanding of how to encourage children and families to love language, stories and reading now than before the start of the project?<sup>13</sup>**

Yes	91.7%
No	8.3%

All three staff focus groups reiterated this, showing the opportunity to develop parental involvement as the biggest area of impact from the project. One telling comment came from a setting leader and illustrates the theme perfectly. The leader worked in a typical setting, was confident in their good level of internal practice, but for whom working with families was definitely a new area to work on:

*“Because when I filled in the first form [the Time 1 setting survey] there were lots of ticks in the ‘Do you do...?’, ‘How do you feel?’ When it came to the links with the families that was where we were very much in the negative and it shocked me actually... But luckily everybody seemed to be pretty much in the same...”*

This same setting also reported great success in their new efforts in this area, particularly in events for children and parents and carers:

*“Unbelievable support and fantastic feedback [from parents after their events]. We will do that now every year.”*

<sup>13</sup> Source: Time 2 setting survey

In addition, the setting commented upon the wider impact of increasing parental involvement:

*“...you’re building relationships with parents which then means if you need to discuss anything else with them you can do it on an informal...in an easy and relaxed and comfortable manner because the parents are willing to talk.”*

Over half of responding settings are shown in **Table 15** to have reported improvement in how much their setting encouraged children and families to love language, stories and reading, and now, as a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach, double as many, 61%, feel that they are encouraging children and families to love language, stories and reading “as much as possible”.

**Table 15: How much did your setting encourage children and families to love language, stories and reading?<sup>14</sup>**

% of active responses	1 (not at all)	2	3	4	5 (as much as possible)
Before	0%	7.7%	38.5%	21.3%	30.8%
Now, as a result of the Early Reading Connects approach	0%	0%	15.4%	21.3%	61.5%

This finding is reiterated in the setting surveys completed by setting leaders before and after the project (**Table 16**), where now half of all settings “strongly agree” that their setting communicates with families in this way. The only setting who was still “unsure”, faced challenges and delays as a result of staff change in September and so this might be the cause of their uncertainty.

**Table 16: “The setting communicates with families about encouraging children to love language, stories and reading.”<sup>15</sup>**

% of active responses	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Time 1	20.0%	80.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Time 2	50.0%	41.7%	8.3%	0.0%	0.0%

In terms of exactly how settings are involving parents, from Table 16 we can propose a summary of key methods of communication in use before and after the project. Communications with families have largely improved using these methods, with change building gradually from previous levels of use. Already well used methods such as one-to-one parental consultations and newsletters have increased, with more settings using them on three to five occasions during the six months of the project.

Family events and sessions have increased too, which is particularly encouraging given that these events tend to take more time and planning than a consultation or newsletter. With over half of settings reporting that family events and sessions previously took place

<sup>14</sup> Source– Time 2 setting survey  
<sup>15</sup> Source– Time 1 and 2 setting surveys

at most only once in six months, it is great news that now over three quarters of settings have run them twice or more, with a mode of around two-three times every six months (see **Table 17**).

Even the previously unexplored home visits were tried by three settings who have each used them once during the course of the study.

**Table 17: How frequently has the setting communicated with families over the past six months in the following ways?<sup>16</sup>**

% of active responses	Number of occasions											
	Never		One		Two		Three		Four		Five+	
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
One-to-one parent consultations in the setting	0.0	0.0	33.3	23.1	33.3	30.8	6.7	15.4	6.7	0.0	20.0	<b>30.7</b>
Home visits	92.9	<b>75.0</b>	7.1	25.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Family session or event	21.4	<b>15.4</b>	35.7	7.7	14.3	30.8	7.1	30.8	7.1	7.7	14.2	7.69
Newsletter	0.0	0.0	6.7	7.7	13.3	7.7	6.7	15.4	20.0	0.0	53.3	<b>69.2</b>

In considering the family events, these certainly seem to have been the most successful method of communication with families, particularly the “bedtime stories” idea (dressing up for a pyjama party with stories and bedtime drinks) which had been held at two of the focus group settings. Parents’ feedback was really supportive:

*“And the bedtime stories, that was nice.”*

*“And they had all like cushions and stuff didn’t they on the floor for them, and they all read stories.”*

*“I hope they do the bedtime stories again because they really enjoyed that.”*

Staff too reported back enthusiastically on the success of this event, which many settings had held twice (often themed around events like Halloween or Christmas). All stated that it was definitely something they would do again, and one practitioner commented in a focus group on its impact on parents:

*“I think you can see that when we told the bedtime stories, actually seeing their children’s faces light up and sit still completely and taking in story in front of them and it may be something that they’ve never actually seen before. Because if they haven’t been reading for their children at night-time or anytime during the day [then this is] the first time when you’re able to see the child completely focused on this story.”*

<sup>16</sup> Source– Time 1 and 2 setting surveys

The use of the newsletter too was praised by parents in focus groups at two of the settings, particularly for informing parents of opportunities, but also for one setting, in including stories and ideas to use at home:

*“Yeah it was on the back of the newsletter wasn’t it, just a story to share. ... It taught me something.”*

Another excellent method of communication was as a result of the parental questionnaire settings used to learn more about their parents and how they could support them. One staff member commented:

*“It’s nice to get more feedback specially through the questionnaire. That was a great resource really to get good feedback from them.”*

Individual practitioners also reported that they have a better understanding of why effective communication with families is important, as shown in **Table 18**. Worryingly, under 10% of practitioners previously felt that families were “very important” in encouraging their children to love language, stories and reading previous to the project. That figure has now tripled. Those practitioners “unsure” in their understanding is also ten times less.

**Table 18: How important did you feel families were in encouraging their children to love language, stories and reading?<sup>17</sup>**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>“Before”</b>	<b>“Now”</b>
Very important	8.57%	34.29%
Important	62.86%	57.14%
Unsure	22.86%	2.86%
Not very important	5.71%	5.71%
Not at all important	0.00%	0.00%

It is clear that after only six months, that there is still a way to go (particularly in supporting the practitioners who still feel that families are “not very important” in encouraging early love of language). However, encouraging progress in this area has clearly been achieved.

<sup>17</sup> Source– Time 2 practitioner survey

## 2b) Supporting families in sharing books and other reading material with their children

**Aim:** Families are increasingly able to be involved in their children’s experience of enjoying language, stories and reading.

**Key finding:** Developing the Early Reading Connects approach has hugely helped settings to support parents in sharing books and related material with their children from low initial levels, by providing accessible, non-patronising ideas and methods. Family enjoyment in language, stories and reading has tripled as a result to over 90%.

The key finding above states that communication and involvement with parents is an area of key impact for the project. However, using that increased involvement and understanding its importance in order to effectively support families in sharing language, stories and reading seems to have been difficult in the past. Many setting leaders have been anxious not to patronise parents:

*“It was difficult getting the balance between giving them ideas and patronising. Because I know that a lot of the parents read books anyway to the children because we get lots of children that bring books into playschool to read. It’s kind of...you don’t want to patronise them by telling them the obvious.”*

This concern is reflected in **Table 19**, with over half stating that before the project they felt either unsure or not confident in this area.

**Table 19: How confident did you feel to share with families the importance of language, stories and reading?<sup>18</sup>**

% of active responses	“Before”	“Now”
Very confident	2.50%	32.50%
Confident	45.00%	60.00%
Unsure	45.00%	7.50%
Not very confident	5.00%	0.00%
Not at all confident	2.50%	0.00%

Regarding practitioner confidence, not just in talking to families about the benefits of sharing stories, but also the importance of their involvement as a parent, a similar set of responses are seen in **Table 20**, again with nearly half unsure or not confident.

<sup>18</sup> Source– Time 2 practitioner survey

**Table 20: How confident did you feel to share with families the importance of family involvement in language, stories and reading?<sup>19</sup>**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>“Before”</b>	<b>“Now”</b>
Very confident	0.00%	27.50%
Confident	55.00%	65.00%
Unsure	37.50%	7.50%
Not very confident	5.00%	0.00%
Not at all confident	2.50%	0.00%

Although this lack of confidence was previously a barrier to working with parents in this way, when completing the first setting survey one practitioner was struck by the importance of this work and the need to improve:

*“I think it brought it definitely home to us as a setting that we really need to be really proactive with the parents with it and encouraging them to read the stories with the children.”*

Although there were, for some, concerns about patronising parents, all commented that using the Early Reading Connects approach had given them “ideas of how to encourage parents to do it without patronising them”, and it is this that presumably led to the improvement in practitioner confidence in this area. Those who were “unsure” or “not confident” in sharing the importance of stories message fell from 52.5% to just 7.5% over the course of the project. There was a significant rise in confidence across the board (**Table 19**, above) and 92% of practitioners are now confident in sharing the importance of family involvement to make this happen, up from 55% (**Table 20**, above).

This same, newly confident, setting quoted above evidenced the popular “bedtime stories family event” as the kind of enjoyable activity at which key messages about family reading could be communicated via:

*“But then by doing the bedtime stories we felt we weren’t patronising them because it was an activity that they all loved. But because we included the pyjamas which made it bedtime stories it might then have encouraged them that if they didn’t read bedtime stories they would then read bedtime stories. But we weren’t doing it as ‘this is what you should be doing’: it was a party.”*

At another setting too, this modelling approach was highlighted as a benefit of the family events they had been running as part of the development of the Early Reading Connects approach:

*“One comment that I had from next door, that was a grandma. It’s the use of expression.... And she says, ‘If I read the story and he gets fed up, he likes mummy to read them’ and she said that’s probably what I’m not doing, it’s like expression. I really must. She’s carried on because she was good.”*

Parents too were commenting on the effectiveness of the settings’ events, with one mum remarking on how she has been encouraged to copy the activities seen at home:

<sup>19</sup> Source– Time 2 practitioner survey

*“That sort of came out of the bedtime things as well. Because each of the staff read them a different story and they went around. And we were in the library and Lucy goes ‘Oh look that’s the book Mrs Taylor read’. So she associated that particular title with the thing that had gone on at night. I mean they can’t read so. I think it’s working quite nicely because it’s something that we see them do here and you want to kind of encourage them to do at home as well.”*

Despite the parents’ hesitation over sharing stories with children when “the [children] can’t read”, the event successfully modelled good practice in sharing stories with children of this age.

Using these kind of practical ideas to gradually model good practice to parents, is seen too in small changes to existing setting practice, such as for one setting where parents have taken a greater role in some activities the staff were previously doing for them:

*“...the children used to bring their book bags in and we’d change the book with the child. Encourage just the child to choose a book whereas the parents didn’t get involved... I think that’s helped hasn’t it?”*

In order to quantify the ways in which settings are supporting families, the setting survey was fully completed in Time 1 and 2 by 10 settings, and a comparison of change between these points largely shows increase in all areas (**Table 21**). Particularly reassuring is the increase in sharing information about the importance of family involvement, which has the potential to back up other activities with parents. Bookstart notwithstanding, the negligible increase in free books given to families is hardly surprising, given that the £100 budget from the local authority was specified to be spend on resources for the setting rather than to be passed directly to parents.

The limited increase in lending books to families is more concerning. However, on investigating the surveys more closely, we can see that this average is brought down by just one setting lending only once rather than three times during the project period. The majority of the remaining settings had continued lending at an existing high rate (both in Time 1 and 2, selecting that they lent books on five or more occasions), and the remaining two settings had both improved from lending on just one occasion to now lending on five or more.

**Table 21: In the past six months, how frequently has the setting supported families in the following ways?**

0 to 5+ occasions	
Shared with families the importance of LS&R	Average increase of 1.67 occasions
Shared with families the importance of family involvement in LS&R	Average increase of 2.11 occasions
Showed families how to share books	Average increase of 1.56 occasions
Showed families how to share reading and language resources	Average increase of 2.00 occasions
Given free books to families, for example Bookstart packs	Average increase of 0.10 occasions
Lent books to families	Average increase of 0.60 occasions
Lent reading and language resources to families	Average decrease of 0.90 occasions
Signposted families to other local services	Average increase of 0.78 occasions

It seems that it might be existing high levels of confidence in supporting families in physically sharing books and resources that may be responsible for a less marked change here. As with other areas, this was found in focus groups to be an existing area of good practice.

The concept of sharing books with their child was already well understood by parents and so it is predictable that change here has come from simply supporting largely confident practitioners into becoming very confident (**Table 22**): the highest category has grown tenfold to accommodate 27.5% of respondents as a result of the project.

**Table 22: How confident did you feel to support families to share books with their child?**

% of active responses	“Before”	“Now”
Very confident	2.50%	27.50%
Confident	62.50%	67.50%
Unsure	35.00%	5.00%
Not very confident	0.00%	0.00%
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

As with supporting families to share books, confidence to share other resources has also risen, but from a slightly lower initial level (**Table 23**), possibly as a result of lower parental familiarity with ideas such as story sacks, reading cases, reading games etc, than with the bedtime story (mentioned heavily in the parents focus groups as the time that they share stories with their child). Here, a quarter of practitioners now consider themselves “very confident”: which no-one previously rated themselves as.

**Table 23: How confident did you feel to support families to share reading and language resources with their child?**

% of active responses	“Before”	“Now”
Very confident	0.00%	25.00%
Confident	60.00%	60.00%
Unsure	37.50%	15.00%
Not very confident	2.50%	0.00%
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

All of these ideas and experiences gathered as a result of their development of the Early Reading Connects approach, have led to reassuring quantitative findings in **Table 24**. 84.6% of settings reported an increase in family enjoyment in language, stories and reading for the families of their setting, from a relatively low initial basis. Now over 90% of settings report family enjoyment at levels 4 and 5, triple the number of settings that did so previously.

**Table 24: How much do you think families who use your setting enjoyed language, stories and reading?<sup>20</sup>**

% of active responses	1 (not at all)	2	3	4	5 (as much as possible)
Before	0.0%	7.7%	61.5%	23.1%	7.7%
Now, as a result of the Early Reading Connects approach	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%	46.2%	46.2%

## 2c) Supporting dads and male carers

**Aim:** Practitioners are developing their support for dads and male carers leading to increasing dad involvement.

**Key finding:** Supporting specific groups of parents still proves problematic for settings, but awareness of their needs is growing as a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach, with targeted work with dads seen as the most approachable.

Supporting specific groups of parents has been a difficult area for some settings, with concerns over patronising and discriminating present.

*“And I think you’ve got to be a bit careful about gearing towards, and I know this is what’s been talked about. You know if you’re just sending a letter out to say, we want ... I mean I think dads would be okay.”*

The concept of targeting dads elicits the greatest confidence, and this has risen from 51% previous confidence to 89% (**Table 25**).

<sup>20</sup> Source- Time 2 setting survey

**Table 25: How confident did you feel to support dads and male carers to encourage their children to love language, stories and reading?<sup>21</sup>**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>“Before”</b>	<b>“Now”</b>
Very confident	0.00%	20.00%
Confident	51.43%	68.57%
Unsure	31.43%	11.43%
Not very confident	17.14%	0.00%
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

It is interesting in investigating the work done in this area by settings to find that there are very different approaches to specifically support dads. Whereas two of the focus group settings noted dads’ attendance at events, the third setting is working on a more individual basis to target specific dads:

*“But I think S is probably the success story with dad in a respect because he never [previously] got involved. And this was through mum we’d had chats and whatever and he didn’t become involved at home with you know anything really. And he was always ‘Mum’ll do it, mum’ll do it’. And then we personally invited him along [and] it suddenly gave him a focus and you know he had to get more involved at home. And mum’s saying it’s made a very big impact.”*

In working with specific dads, the setting is using the relationships which come from greater parent involvement more generally in [2a\) Effective communication](#). The same setting also used new resources to target work with dads, by including a contact book in a story case given to the dad as “his homework”.

*“But he was obviously then put in, you know in a situation that he had to get involved with it. So he could actually report back to us on how he’d got on with the story case.”*

*“But he took it on board. Obviously you couldn’t do that with all parents and there are, you know. But that is our relationship with the parents.”*

## **2d) Supporting young mums and dads**

**Aim: Practitioners are increasingly aware of the needs of young parents and are developing support.**

**Key finding: Supporting specific groups of parents still proves problematic for settings, and working with young parents is particularly difficult, with worries of being seen as discriminatory a particular barrier.**

Even more so than for dads, there is a broad reluctance felt in targeting young parents, although in the focus groups, settings were aware to monitor their involvement more generally:

<sup>21</sup> Source– Time 2 practitioner survey

*“I don’t think we’ve thought ‘Right those are the young mums. They’re the only ones we’re going to concentrate on this week.’ But you know our activities are inclusive and I think they have got involved haven’t they.”*

As previously seen, concerns about discriminating, patronising or offending were voiced in focus groups:

*“It’s where you draw the line isn’t it. Where do you draw the line at who is young?”*

*“...because there is the diplomacy angle in there, the equality angle that is tricky. That’s sort of in the background, that idea.”*

Confidence levels are similar to those for supporting dads, with only around a fifth of practitioners “very confident” even after the project (**Table 26**).

**Table 26: How confident did you feel to support young parents to encourage their children to love language, stories and reading?<sup>22</sup>**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>“Before”</b>	<b>“Now”</b>
Very confident	0.00%	20.00%
Confident	57.14%	65.71%
Unsure	31.43%	11.43%
Not very confident	11.43%	2.86%
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

## **2e) Adult basic skills provision**

**Aim: Practitioners are increasingly aware of the needs of parents who may have difficulties with basic skills and are developing support.**

**Key finding: Supporting adults with basic skills needs is an area in which practitioners have low levels of confidence, and one for which Early Reading Connects could do more to support.**

Unlike plans to support dads, working parents or young parents, work in supporting parents with basic skills needs is an area which presented much lower initial levels of confidence (**Table 27**). Only 38% of respondents felt that they were confident in any way in this area before the project, rising to 67% following the development of the Early Reading Connects approach. With a third of practitioners still feeling unsure or not very confident, this is an area to target more support towards.

It should be mentioned that this result was largely expected, as signposting support for adults with basic skills needs has not historically been part of the culture of work for early years settings.

<sup>22</sup> Source– Time 2 practitioner survey

**Table 27: How confident did you feel to support parents who have difficulties with basic skills?<sup>23</sup>**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>“Before”</b>	<b>“Now”</b>
Very confident	0.00%	16.13%
Confident	38.71%	51.61%
Unsure	45.16%	29.03%
Not very confident	16.13%	3.23%
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

## **Outcomes by EYFS stage: 3. An enabling environment**

**Key aim: Participating settings to be more communication friendly than at the start of the project. The profile of language and reading is being raised through the physical environment. Resources available to the children and activities and events are being run.**

### **3a) Training**

**Aim: Practitioners have attended and implemented new training to add to their practice in supporting language, stories and reading.**

**Key finding: External training needs can be difficult for settings to meet, but developing the Early Reading Connects approach is seen as valuable internal professional development opportunity.**

Uptake of professional development opportunities has remained fairly static during the six months of the project (**Table 28**), potentially due to a wide range of external factors (cover, funding, availability of courses, course dates beyond six months ahead, etc).

**Table 28: In the past six months, have staff been given professional development opportunities in the following areas?<sup>24</sup>**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>Time 1</b>	<b>Time 2</b>
Language development	61.5%	69.2%
Reading and stories	30.8%	30.8%
Family involvement	7.7%	7.7%
Other	-	-

<sup>23</sup> Source– Time 2 practitioner survey

<sup>24</sup> Source– Time 1 and 2 setting surveys

However, the project as a whole was viewed as a professional development opportunity by setting leaders in the staff focus groups, who had given their staff new challenges as part of their plan for the project:

*“... you had the opportunity to read two stories ... in front of the children with the parents there. So sort of professional development for you, that was really good for it”*

One staff focus group generated discussion around the appropriateness of some previous training, where basic messages about the importance of using stories were felt to be too basic:

*“I mean if you’re in a room with some sort of teenagers you feel it’s more relevant to them whereas we’re sort of parents and work with children.”*

However, with perhaps greater understanding now of different areas relating to language, stories and reading, the setting is actively looking for more appropriate courses to continue their professional journey:

*“I think we would actually go to more things [training courses] that are now to do with books and reading because we’ve developed this area.”*

All 16 settings attended training as part of their work to develop the Early Reading Connects approach, facilitated by their local authority early years consultant. However, this was for the project leaders rather than all staff at the setting: a further opportunity would benefit settings.

### **3b) Promoting reading**

**Aim: The setting is developing its range of resources and increasingly widening opportunities for family use.**

**Key finding: Developing the Early Reading Connects approach has helped settings to create more language rich environments with wider range of resources to support children’s love of language, stories and reading.**

73% of settings have used new or different resources during the six months of the project (Time 2 setting survey) and there is evidence that this is creating a more diverse range of resources available at each setting.

**Table 29** shows lower use of some initially heavily used resources (fiction and non-fiction books and magazines) following the project, whereas the proportion of respondents using puppets, role play, listening games, audio books, word/letter games and treasure baskets is increasing. The trend is most clearly seen in the “never” category, with sizable drops in the amount of settings who have “never” explored resources like story boxes, sacks and treasure baskets.

**Table 29: In the past six months, how frequently have the following been used to encourage children to love language, stories and reading?<sup>25</sup>**

% of active responses	Every day		2 -3 times a week		2 -3 times a month		Once every few months		Never	
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
Fiction books	86.7	61.5	13.3	38.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Non-fiction books	53.3	38.5	26.7	38.5	20.0	15.4	0.0	7.7	0.0	0.0
Magazines	30.8	16.7	0.0	25.0	23.1	33.3	46.2	16.7	0.0	8.3
Catalogues	35.7	33.3	7.1	8.3	42.9	41.7	14.3	16.7	0.0	0.0
Audio books	6.7	<b>16.7</b>	13.3	16.7	33.3	41.7	40.0	16.7	6.7	8.3
Story sacks	7.1	7.7	7.1	15.4	35.7	46.2	35.7	23.1	14.3	7.7
Story boxes	9.1	7.7	0.0	7.7	9.1	23.1	9.1	23.1	72.7	30.8
Puppets	20.0	<b>38.5</b>	26.7	23.1	26.7	30.8	26.7	7.7	0.0	0.0
Dressing up / role play props	53.3	<b>76.9</b>	26.7	15.4	6.7	7.7	13.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Listening games	20.0	<b>30.8</b>	40.0	15.4	20.0	53.8	20.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Word / letter games	14.3	<b>25.0</b>	35.7	41.7	35.7	25.0	7.1	8.3	7.1	0.0
Treasure baskets	13.3	<b>25.0</b>	13.3	0.0	26.7	41.7	0.0	8.3	46.7	16.7

In the staff focus groups too, consideration of a wider, more diverse range of reading resources is reiterated:

*“I think it has raised awareness to the parents that we do a lot more than just sitting down reading a story to individual children. And I think that it’s helped us maybe take reading into different areas.”*

*“And I think maybe the main thing is that it’s given you the enthusiasm to do that little bit, you know to offer that little bit more. To just take and try new things.”*

Another setting who were planning to buy story boxes, which they were more familiar with, decided to branch out:

*“Well we were going to buy those and then we decided on the audio books instead. But we’ve been doing that haven’t we, we’ve been making our own.”*

In terms of reasons as to why new resources were used, the £100 funded by the local authority consultant was cited as a reason by five settings in the Time 2 setting surveys. However, others noted different reasons, particularly the use of feedback from parental questionnaires, work with libraries and homemade resources.

Other resources outside of this list were mentioned in focus groups, most commonly using items brought from home to enrich language all around the setting:

<sup>25</sup> Source– Time 1 and 2 setting surveys

*“For instance I’ve bought in quite a lot of my son’s train magazines...and tickets as well because we go on lots of train journeys. So I’ve brought all the tickets in. So they’re there alongside the train track.”*

Opportunities for parents to use resources also were increasingly mentioned in focus groups, with many settings mentioning that they had not been accustomed to lending resources to parents in this way previously:

*“They loved the big books that we purchased. And they actually take those home now. We sort of ummed and ahhed about whether they should be taking those big books home, but we’re quite happy for them to share those with the parents.”*

*“And I think [there has been an impact] as well with the story cases because there’s a diary in there that the parents complete with their children and they can add photos. So that’s been a good way of communicating feedback. And you’re also getting that feedback all the time.”*

*“...just setting up and maintaining the lending library we wouldn’t have had that without this project.”*

### **3c) Reading or storytelling area**

**Aim: The setting is developing interesting and comfortable story areas and increasingly widening opportunities for family use.**

**Key finding: As a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach, family use of reading areas has increased, and story areas are being increasingly taken outside.**

In general, the settings’ environments already displayed a high level of good practice in setting surveys at the start of the project, with some improvements by the end (**Table 30**). With small number of settings replying in full at Time 1 and 2, individual challenges are shown here. The setting working with leadership change challenges is the only setting currently without a reading area at Time 2 (although they did confirm that “there is more than one reading corner/area” in the second category, which suggests that perhaps there was miscomprehension of the first question). A small dip in the number of reading areas is as a result of two settings possibly reducing resources in this area in order to fulfil some of the other ideas using these resources.

The availability of reading and language resources outside is a success, with half as many settings again using this idea by the end of the project. It is unsurprising that the use of books outside has remained at a similar level, likely to be as a result of the limited weather-resistance of the resource!

The use of displays has also improved, with all settings now using these to promote language, stories and reading.

**Table 30: In what ways does the setting encourage children to love language, stories and reading?**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>Time 1</b>	<b>Time 2</b>
There is a reading corner / area	100.0%	91.7%
There is more than one reading corner / area	64.3%	53.8%
Books are part of other displays in the setting	85.7%	100.0%
Reading and language resources are part of other displays in the setting	71.4%	100.0%
Books are available in the outside area	85.7%	83.3%
Reading and language resources are available in the outside area	64.3%	91.7%
There are displays that promote a love of language, stories and reading	71.4%	91.7%
None of the above	0.0%	0.0%
Other – One setting is also using a story puppet theatre, story sacks and bags and another cited their placement of books alongside all toys and activities		

Family use of reading and storytelling areas is also increasing, with some positive comments from parents in their focus groups on the subject:

*“Jack likes to come into the story tent and choose a book, he’ll sit and choose one and then he’ll take it home and then bring it back and do it again. He likes doing it so we do that. I think it’s really good.”*

The setting also sees the story areas as helping to improve parental involvement more generally too:

*“It’s taken the barrier down, inviting them into the story tent and getting them more involved.”*

### **3d) and 3e) Community and library links**

**Aim: Practitioners are making increased use of facilities offered by local facilities and libraries and encouraging families to make use of them independently.**

**Key finding: Settings are increasingly linking with their local library service, however fears about out-of-setting events are a real barrier to furthering work with other local services.**

There is a decrease in the number of settings reporting that activities with their local library service are something that they are **not** involved with (**Table 31**). However, there

still remains a high number of settings not working with their local library, particularly when considering family links (to sustain children’s contact with libraries). Although no settings visited the library with families before the project, 80% had not organised an event like this by the end of the project..

**Table 31: In the past six months, how frequently has the setting worked with the local library in the following ways?<sup>26</sup>**

% of active responses	“Never”	
	Time 1	Time 2
Children visited the library	64.3%	50.0%
Children and families visited the library	100.0%	80.0%
Librarian visited children in the setting	21.4%	23.1%
Librarian visited children and families in the setting	83.3%	66.7%
Setting borrowed books from library	0.0%	7.7%
Library advised setting (on book stock, storytelling or family involvement)	53.8%	38.5%
Children introduced to / started Bookcrawl scheme	61.5%	23.1%
Setting took part in local library initiative, competition or event	71.4%	36.4%

Difficulty in organising library visits for the children and their families was seen to be as a result of larger contextual issues when raised at staff focus groups, due to a combination of logistical issues (working parents) and health and safety insurance issues (for those without parents to escort them).

*“We don’t tend to have outside visits unless the parents accompany us and that’s basically down to risk assessments, insurance and costs and... You know unfortunately the restrictions that have been put on us or any early years or any sector really.”*

*“And even in the planning when we planned for this project and we did the monthly, the activities I have to be honest I didn’t put library and museums. I’m not sure why I didn’t. Maybe there’s an inner fear coming out....We do one trip in the summer to a place where I’ve been for 16 years.... But I know all the risks.”*

*“And it’s that...just I do have a concern about taking them off the premises. But I could invite the library in and every time we go on a course and they say it I do think ‘I must do that’.”*

It seems that for the majority of settings, there simply was not previously a culture of working with the library services.

<sup>26</sup> Source– Time 1 and 2 setting surveys

Confidence in working with the library service increased for 17 of 40 practitioners whose broad responses are tabulated in **Table 32**, below, although for the majority (21) there was no change and for two settings, they felt they had less confidence at the end of the project. These findings come despite a presentation from the local library service as part of the project launch training, and the limited amount of confidence change is likely to be due to whole-setting plans for work involving libraries.

**Table 32: How confident did you feel to work with the local library service to encourage children to love language, stories and reading?<sup>27</sup>**

% of active responses	“Before”	“Now”
Very confident	7.50%	22.50%
Confident	47.50%	50.00%
Unsure	35.00%	27.50%
Not very confident	10.00%	0.00%
Not at all confident	0.00%	0.00%

Working with libraries even for those confident in the practice seems to be impeded by logistical issues:

*“I think we’ve always had really good links with the library service. We had a library that was on our doorstep that was down the road and every week we were down there weren’t we? Every week and so were reception. Fantastic resource. They moved it and we were unable to access it and now we have the librarian come in to visit us.”*

It may be these kind of issues, coupled with concerns over taking children and families out of the setting that lead to limited work with libraries, rather than practitioner confidence. However developing the Early Reading Connects approach does seem to have had some impact in encouraging practitioners to reconsider their relationship with their library:

*“But we’ve always had the library come to us but we’ve never actually gone to them which was a new experience...”*

Linking with local services more generally however, remains at a very low level in **Table 33**, with hardly any settings having explored opportunities with local museums, leisure facilities or family learning.

**Table 33: In the past six months, has the setting engaged with any of the following local services to encourage children to love language, stories and reading?**

% of active responses	Time 1	Time 2
Local museum	0%	0%
Local leisure facilities	14.3%	7.7%
Family learning team	6.7%	15.4%

<sup>27</sup> Source- Time 2 practitioner survey

At the launch session arranged by the local authority early years consultant, staff were given the opportunity to visit the Looking Glass Centre in Dudley, however no settings have reported following up on this with a visit for children and families yet.

**3f) Reading events**

**Aim: Practitioners using more reading events to involve families in promoting and supporting their understanding of language, stories and reading**

**Key finding: Reading event ideas provided by Early Reading Connects have been hugely successful in involving families and supporting their understanding in fun and accessible ways.**

Holding events to encourage children to love language stories has been a key success, with no settings having failed to run an event in this way (see **Table 34**). For nine settings who responded fully to the question in both Time 1 and 2 they had increased the number of occasions for these events by two on average, a great achievement in only six months considering the amount of organisation involved.

**Table 34: In the past six months, how often has the setting held events to encourage children to love language, stories and reading?**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>Time 1</b>	<b>Time 2</b>
Never	46.2%	0.0%
On 1 occasion	46.2%	9.1%
On 2 occasion	0.0%	18.2%
On 3 occasion	0.0%	36.4%
On 4 occasion	0.0%	0.0%
On 5+ occasion	7.69%	36.36%

The success of these events is discussed in more detail in this report in the context of family involvement and communication of key messages around language, stories and reading (in the [2a\) Effective communication](#) section).

## Outcomes by EYFS stage: 4. Learning and development

**Key aim: Participating settings have moved further in developing a culture that values language, stories and reading, with plans for future developments.**

### 4a) Whole-setting strategy

**Aim: Promoting a love of language, stories and reading is increasingly central to the setting's learning and development plan.**

**Key finding: Under a third of settings reported that language, stories and reading featured on their setting development plan before they began planning as part of their involvement with Early Reading Connects. Fewer, by half, made mention of family involvement.**

As a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach, all settings produced and submitted their setting's plan for the six month project and identified their individual strategies to develop language, stories and reading.

Looking back to their initial setting surveys before the project began (**Table 35**), it is interesting to note that under a third of respondents stated that this was already a feature of their plans for the setting.

**Table 35: Did language, stories and reading feature in the setting development plan before adopting the Early Reading Connects approach?<sup>28</sup>**

% of active responses	
Yes	30.8%
No	15.4%
Don't know	53.8%

With regards to family involvement, half as many settings confirmed before the project began that this was already a part of their plans for the setting (**Table 36**).

**Table 36: Did family involvement in language, stories and reading feature in the setting development plan before adopting the Early Reading Connects approach?<sup>29</sup>**

% of active responses	
Yes	15.4%
No	53.8%
Don't know	30.8%

<sup>28</sup> Source– Time 1 setting survey

<sup>29</sup> Source– Time 1 setting survey

All settings were also supported by the Local Authority Early Years Consultant at their final meeting in March 2010 to begin to develop their plans for the next six months to continue to develop the approach.

**4b) Practitioner understanding**

**Aim: Practitioners’ appreciation of the importance of developing a love of language, stories and reading as a key to development is increasing**

**Key finding: Practitioner understanding of the importance of language, stories and reading, and family involvement in this have both greatly increased as a result of developing the Early Reading Connects approach.**

Although the majority of respondents already felt before the project that raising the profile of language, stories and reading was “important”, for just around half (19 out of 40 respondents) there has been an increase in their consideration of this area (Table 37). As a result of the project, now over half now feeling that this is “very important”.

**Table 37: How important did you think it was for your setting to raise the profile of language, stories and reading?<sup>30</sup>**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>“Before”</b>	<b>“Now”</b>
Very important	15.38%	51.28%
Important	69.23%	48.72%
Unsure	15.38%	0.00%
Not very important	0.00%	0.00%
Not at all important	0.00%	0.00%

Following similar trends as the outcomes related to the importance of raising the profile of language, stories and reading in general, family involvement was generally considered “important” by two thirds of respondents before the project began (Table 38), but now is felt to be “very important” by over half.

**Table 38: How important did you think it was for your setting to raise the profile of family involvement in language, stories and reading?**

<b>% of active responses</b>	<b>“Before”</b>	<b>“Now”</b>
Very important	17.95%	53.85%
Important	66.67%	43.59%
Unsure	12.82%	2.56%
Not very important	2.56%	0.00%
Not at all important	0.00%	0.00%

<sup>30</sup> Source– Time 2 practitioner survey

## Conclusions

### The effectiveness of developing the Early Reading Connects approach

After only six months developing the Early Reading Connects approach has had a real impact on settings in improving their support for children's early enjoyment of language, stories and reading, with the potential for more to come.

The greatest strength of developing the Early Reading Connects approach is in meeting a real need for greater family involvement in their children's love of language, stories and reading. This has the potential to make such a difference the child's future performance in school (Jeynes, 2005), and parental involvement leads to greater problem-solving skills, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance, fewer behavioural problems at school, and greater social and emotional development (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons et al., 2001).

Early Reading Connects supports settings in involving parents at an incredibly powerful point in their child's education. We know that the earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer lasting the effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille et al., 2004).

There are areas of the Early Reading Connects approach which could be further developed, particularly supporting local partners to develop information networks for settings, communicating key messages on bilingualism and EAL where appropriate and reviewing resources and practical ideas for settings keen to promote a love of language with children with additional educational needs.

The National Literacy Trust will use this evaluation in conjunction with a major national survey of all our settings in order to inform future developments of the project. We would like to express our sincere thanks to all settings and stakeholders involved, and welcome our sixteen Dudley project settings' expertise into our network of over 3,000 members.

### Practical implications for local authority advisers

Dudley settings benefited from excellent support from their Local Authority Early Years Consultant and there are a number of practical implications which those in equivalent roles may be able to consider adopting.

#### Provide funding

Particularly valuable in practical terms was the small sum of funding given through the local authority to each participant setting (as shown in **Table 3**). This allowed the settings to purchase extra resources to support the project, and a limited amount of funding was held centrally to provide payment for cover for those settings who needed it to be able to attend the three meetings during the six month period. As an additional point, the Dudley Early Years Consultant required project plans to be completed before any funding was released: an excellent model to help motivate settings to think fully about what adding development of the Early Reading Connects approach into their

development plans would mean practically, and what resourcing they would need to support this.

### **Host seminars**

Meetings organised by the Early Years Consultant, with a venue provided by the local authority, were incredibly valuable in supporting the project settings, particularly in providing a venue at which other local authority services could speak in order to explicate their services (such as the local library service, EMAS service, adult basic skills provision and so on).

### **Host networking meetings**

From the final meeting at the end of the study at which settings created displays to showcase ideas and resources which had worked well for them, it was clear that there was value in creating this local group. Settings commented on how difficult it can be to visit each other, and how sometimes internet problems mean that it is difficult to access blogs. It is clear that having a local authority staff member coordinating training or networking meetings (and paying cover where needed) is a model that works well to build ongoing support into the model. Ideas generated from this final meeting were submitted to the Early Reading Connects Project Manager to be included online, and so an additional value in hosting these local group meetings is also to gather and pass on best practice more efficiently, the local authority advisor functioning as a conduit to the wider Early Reading Connects network.

## **Practical implications for settings**

### **Self-assess**

Completing a self-assessment proved to be illuminating for the majority of settings, as seen in focus groups comments, “When it came to the links with the families that was where we were very much in the negative and it shocked me actually...”. It is clear that this self assessment is an integral part of developing personal motivation towards adopting the approach. This self assessment used the questionnaires given to settings to record Time 1 responses, and so perhaps a similar exercise could be adopted in conjunction with the evaluation grid.

### **Learn more about your families**

Many of the settings sent out questionnaires to their families to try to find out more about existing reading practices at home and to gather their ideas as they developed their setting’s project plan. This is an excellent way to pinpoint where support is needed most: for example, if few of your families do bedtime stories, the event which models this is even more valuable. If many children live with their dads, but few of them tell their children stories, a dads’ reading challenge may become important to fit in at an early stage.

### **Use tried and tested ideas from the network**

Settings reported that they appreciated using tried and tested event ideas from the Early Reading Connects website and toolkit, such as the bedtime stories event. Additionally, the final meeting provided a number of new ideas from the local group of settings, which settings were able to explore in person, asking questions from fellow practitioners in terms of how they were used. With over 3,000 Early Reading Connects settings, the collective of knowledge of our network is incredibly valuable. If settings struggle to access online information and do not currently have any externally organised events,

they may like to form their own local network group to share their ideas once every few months.

### **Keep going!**

A few settings found that staff changes and heavy schedules of work around Christmas and starts of term meant that their plans to develop new ideas for this project were sometimes disrupted. The key message here, is just to keep going! Re-drafting project plans at the start of the second term gave many settings the opportunity to identify elements that they had not managed to deliver, and plan more realistically with a greater awareness of their capacity. Building families' and children's love of reading stories and language as a key part of your setting strategy takes time, with lots of opportunities to learn new ideas, and re-plan how to use them for new audiences and new needs. All the settings at the final meeting in Dudley agreed that it had been genuinely enjoyable getting to try out new ideas, and seeing the great reactions of the children and families to all the stories they'd enjoyed and all were planning to keep going.

## Appendix 1 – Child interviews summary

	<i>Time 1</i>	<i>Time 2</i>	<i>Change</i>	
<b>Number of children</b>	16	14		
<b>% male</b>	50%	43%	-7%	fewer boys
<b>% female</b>	50%	57%	7%	more girls
<b>Average age when interviewed (years)</b>	3.77	4.16	11%	increase
<b>% who knew what child in picture was doing</b>	69%	86%	17%	increase
<b>% who thought child in picture was having fun</b>	63%	93%	30%	increase
<b>% who could tell me what stories they liked to share</b>	69%	93%	24%	increase
<b>% who liked to share stories with member of their family</b>	75%	93%	18%	increase
<b>% who liked to share stories with mum</b>	50%	79%	29%	increase
<b>% who liked to share stories with dad</b>	56%	79%	22%	increase
<b>% who liked to share stories with a friend</b>	13%	0%	-13%	decrease
<b>% who liked to share stories at home</b>	44%	100%	56%	increase
<b>% who did not respond to where they liked to share stories</b>	50%	0%	-50%	decrease