



A National Literacy Trust survey in partnership with Nursery World

# Investigating communication, language and literacy development in the early years sector

Amanda Halden, Christina Clark and Fiona Lewis

National Literacy Trust

July 2011

*Transforming Lives*

Registered address:  
**National Literacy Trust**  
68 South Lambeth Road  
London SW8 1RL

☎ 020 7587 1842  
☎ 020 7587 1411  
✉ [contact@literacytrust.org.uk](mailto:contact@literacytrust.org.uk)  
[www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk)

National Literacy Trust is a registered charity, no. 1116260, and a company limited by guarantee, no. 5836486. Registered in England and Wales. VAT reg no. 919 3158 11.

♻️ Paper manufactured using 100% de-inked pulp recycled fibre. Produced at a mill which is ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and FSC certified.

This report is the property of the National Literacy Trust and is protected by Copyright law.

The National Literacy Trust will consider requests to use extracts or data from this publication provided that you:

- Acknowledge that the content is the work of the National Literacy Trust and provide appropriate references in any publications or accompanying publicity.
- Anonymise all data to protect the identity of any individual or organisation.
- State that any views expressed are yours and not necessarily those of the National Literacy Trust.

Suggested reference for this report is: Halden, A., Clark, C., and Lewis, F (2011). National Literacy Trust Survey in partnership with Nursery World: Investigating communication, literacy and language development in the early years sector. London: National Literacy Trust.

## Table of contents

Introduction ..... 3

Who participated? ..... 4

Working with parents ..... 5

Sources of advice ..... 6

Every Child a Talker ..... 6

Setting review.....	7
Children with communication, speech and language difficulties.....	8
Children interacting to promote communication and language development .....	9
Early Years Foundation Stage Review .....	9
National Literacy Trust support.....	9
Differences between responses from those working as childminders and those working in group settings.....	10
Discussion.....	15
A committed and aware sector .....	15
A need for support and information.....	15
Practitioners need more help to engage parents .....	15
The future.....	16

## Figures and tables

Figure 1: Type of setting.....	4
Figure 2: Levels of knowledge, tools and confidence in the sector to help parents to support communication, language and literacy in the home .....	5
Figure 3: Sources of advice on supporting children’s communication, language and literacy.....	6
Figure 4: Frequency of setting’s review .....	7
Figure 5: Areas covered in setting’s review .....	8
Figure 6: Types of National Literacy Trust support .....	10
Figure 7: Source of support by home versus group setting.....	11
Figure 8: Areas covered in setting review by home versus group settings.....	12
Figure 9: Types of National Literacy Trust support by home versus group setting .....	14
Figure 10: Types of involvement with National Literacy Trust by home versus group setting ....	14

Table 1: Early years practitioners’ confidence in identifying and supporting struggling children and supporting those who don’t have English as their first language.....	8
---	---

Table 2: Early years practitioners’ confidence in identifying and supporting struggling children and supporting those who don’t have English as their first language by home vs group setting	12
---	----

Note: The term “home setting” is used throughout this report to differentiate between practitioners working at home (usually on their own) with a few children, from teams of practitioners working with groups of children in early years settings. The term “home setting” was used to refer to both childminders and nannies, however since the response from nannies was very low it generally represents the views of childminders.

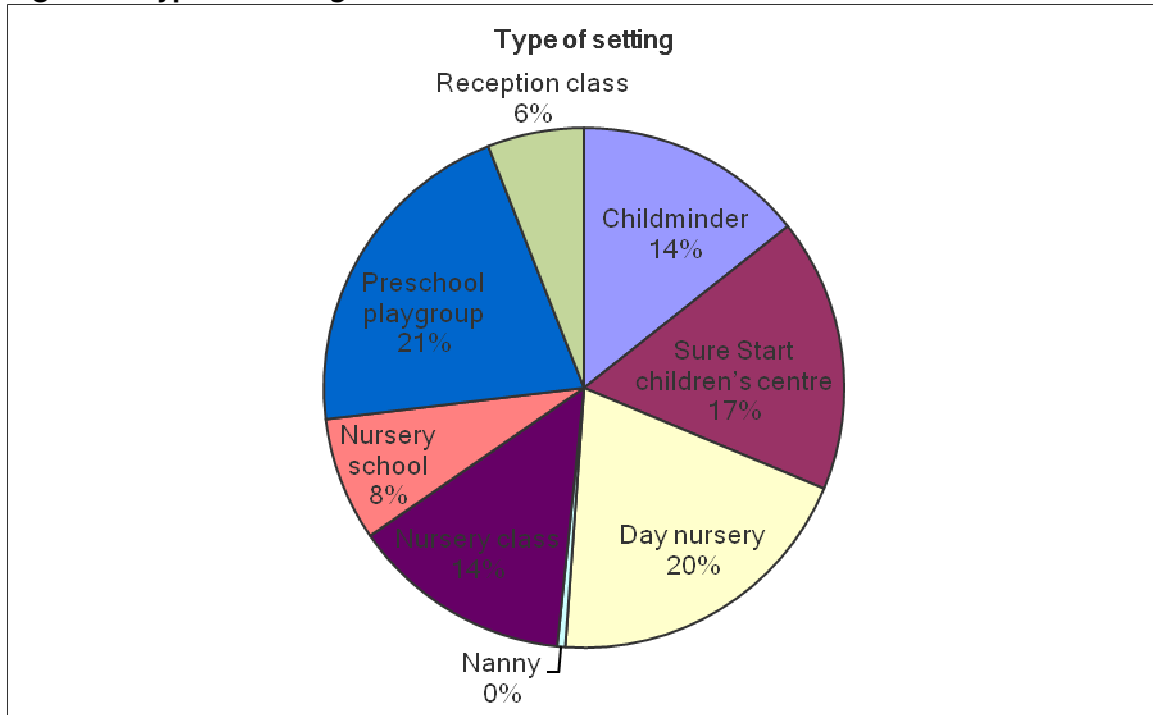
## Introduction

In May 2011 *Nursery World* and the National Literacy Trust launched its language development survey to celebrate Hello; the national year of communication. The National Literacy Trust teamed up with *Nursery World* to carry out research into the sector’s support for children’s language and literacy development.

## Who participated?

221 early years professionals participated in this survey, which was online from April to May 2011. **Figure 1** shows that a similar proportion of respondents worked in preschool playgroups, Sure Start children's centres and day nurseries, making up three fifths of the total. Nearly a third worked in nursery schools, nursery classes or reception classes. 14% worked as childminders. Only one nanny (0.5%) took part in our survey.

**Figure 1: Type of setting**



A similar proportion of respondents either work in the public/maintained sector (43.5%) or the private sector (43.1). 13.4% work in the voluntary sector. The majority of respondents (94%) come from England, only 2% come from Scotland, while another 4% work in settings outside of the UK.

When asked how many people work at their setting, the majority (35%) indicated they come from small settings with up to only 5 other colleagues. However, nearly a quarter indicated they worked with over 20 other people, while a fifth either worked in settings with 5 to 10 other people or with up to 20 other colleagues.

Respondents were also asked how many children in certain age categories come to their setting. Regarding those aged under 1 year, respondents reported a range from 1 to 300 children under 1, with a mean of 9.95 (SD: 32.48) children under the age of 1. The number of children aged between 1 and 2 in the settings ranged from 1 to 450, with a mean of 18.13 (SD: 43.02). The number of children aged between 3 and 4 ranged from 1 to 200, with a mean of 34.80 (SD = 29.94).

The respondents that reported numbers of 100 children or more were mostly working in children's centres, meaning the numbers reported reflect the number of children that come through the centre in the course of a week. A third of the respondents were working in reception

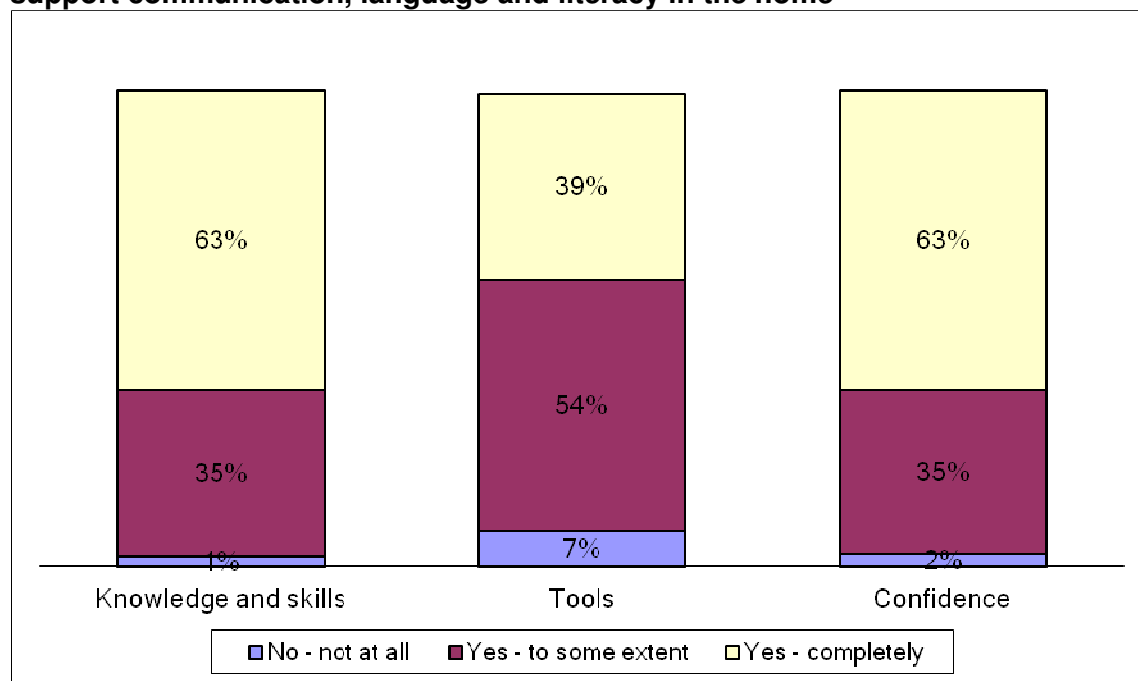
classes, nursery classes and nursery schools, meaning that the children they worked with were almost exclusively 3 and 4 year olds.

## Working with parents

There is unanimous agreement among the early years professionals who participated in this survey that parents and carers talking and reading to their children is very important (100% talking and 97% reading, respectively).

**Figure 2** shows that nearly two-thirds (63%) of the early years professionals in our survey feel that they have the knowledge and skills to help parents support communication, language and literacy at home. Over a third (35%) feel that they have the knowledge and skills to some extent, while only 1% feel that they do not at all possess the knowledge and skills to support parents at home.

**Figure 2: Levels of knowledge, tools and confidence in the sector to help parents to support communication, language and literacy in the home**



A similar proportion (63%) also feel that they have the confidence to help parents/carers support communication, language and literacy at home. Over a third also feel at least to some extent confident to support parents/carers, while only 2% declare that they do not feel at all confident to help support parents/carers in the home.

However, only two-fifths of early years respondents say they have the tools to help parents/carers support their children's language activities in the home. Indeed, over half (54%) say they have the tools to do so to some extent, while 7% don't feel that they have such tools at all.

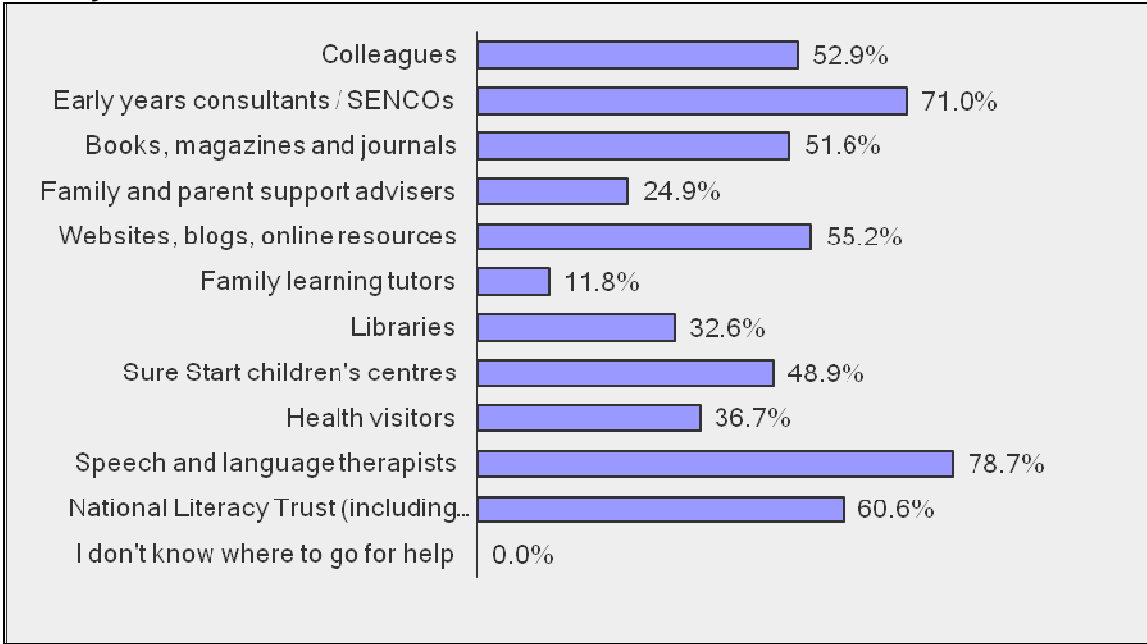
62% of early years respondents report that they talk to parents/carers at least once a month about how they can support their children’s communication, language and literacy at home. Over a quarter (28%) report talking to parents/carers a few times a year, while 7% only talk to parents once a year or less. 3% of respondents say they never talk to parents/carers about how they can support their children’s literacy at home.

Over two-thirds of respondents (69%) report that they know parents/carers who struggle with literacy themselves. When asked whether they know where to signpost parents/carers for further help and support, nearly three-quarters of respondents (72%) felt that they did. However, over a quarter (28%) did not know where they should signpost to.

## Sources of advice

What sources of advice do early years professionals use to inform their support for children’s communication, language and literacy? **Figure 3** shows that nearly 8 in 10 seek advice from Speech and Language Therapists (SALTs), followed by 7 in 10 who consult early years consultants/ Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs). 6 in 10 would also seek advice from the National Literacy Trust. Only 1 in 10 would seek advice from family learning tutors.

**Figure 1: Sources of advice on supporting children’s communication, language and literacy**



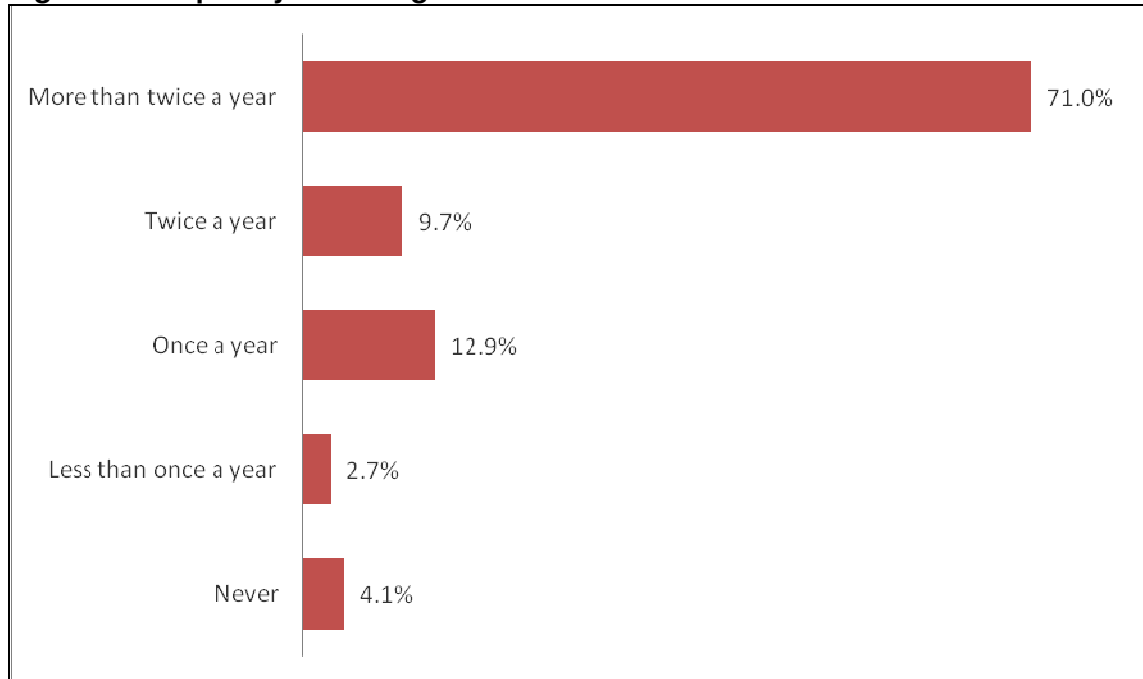
## Every Child a Talker

Half of the respondents (50%) were involved with Every Child a Talker (ECaT). Of those who had been involved, 85% felt that ECaT had a positive impact on their setting (13% weren’t sure whether it had had an impact). Nearly three-quarters (73%) would like to access further resources and support to help implement ECaT in their setting (15% would like to have more information first).

## Setting review

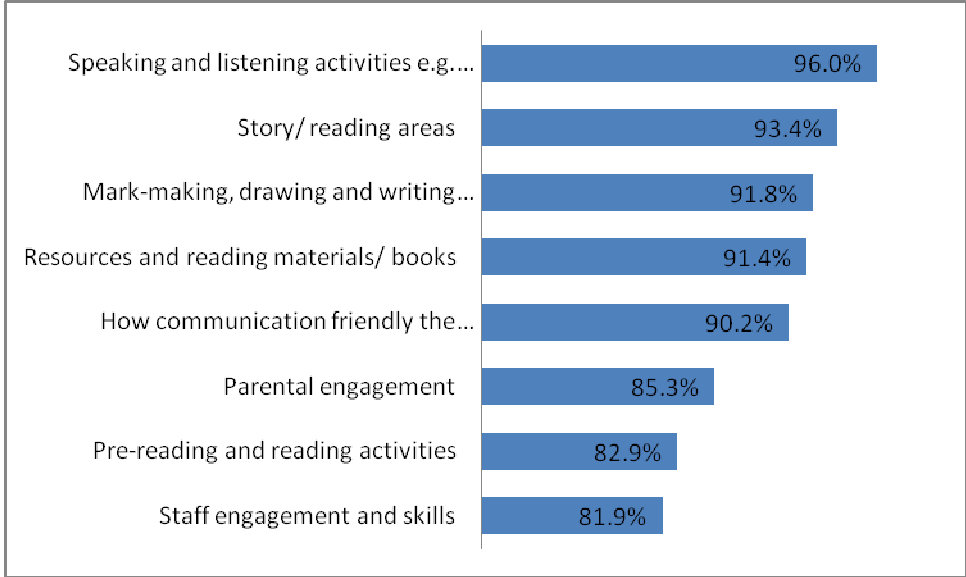
7 in 10 early years respondents report that they review their setting's support for children's communication, language and literacy more than twice a year (see **Figure 4**).

**Figure 2: Frequency of setting's review**



**Figure 5** shows that the areas covered by most respondents in their review are speaking and listening activities (96%), followed by story/reading areas (93%) and mark-making, drawing and writing activities (92%). By contrast, staff engagement and skills as well as pre-reading and reading activities were covered by the reviews of 8 in 10 early years respondents.

**Figure 3: Areas covered in setting’s review**



## Children with communication, speech and language difficulties

The survey respondents indicated that 17% of the children they work with have speech and language difficulties.

**Table 1** shows how confident respondents feel in dealing with various aspects of speech and language difficulties or with children who have English as an additional language (EAL). Fewer respondents feel confident in supporting children with EAL than feel confident in supporting the needs of children struggling with communication, speech and language and with identifying those who struggle with their communication, speech and language development.

**Table 1: Early years practitioners’ confidence identifying and supporting struggling children and supporting those who don’t have English as their first language**

	<i>Very confident</i>	<i>Confident</i>	<i>Not very confident</i>	<i>Not at all confident</i>	<i>Don’t know</i>
<b>Identifying children who are struggling with communication, speech and language development?</b>	41.7%	51.1%	5.9%	0.5%	0.5%
<b>Supporting the needs of children struggling with communication, speech and language?</b>	31.4%	53.4%	13.2%	1.5%	0.5%

	<i>Very confident</i>	<i>Confident</i>	<i>Not very confident</i>	<i>Not at all confident</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
<b>Supporting children with English as an Additional Language?</b>	21.7%	40.4%	30.5%	4.4%	3.0%

## Children interacting to promote communication and language development

95% of respondents think that it is very important and 4% feel that it is important children interact with each other to support their communication and language development. Despite the fact that nearly all respondents think that it is either very important or important that children interact with each other, only 8 in 10 allow children of different ages to mix together every day. 14% provide this opportunity several times a week, while 3% never provide such an opportunity for the children.

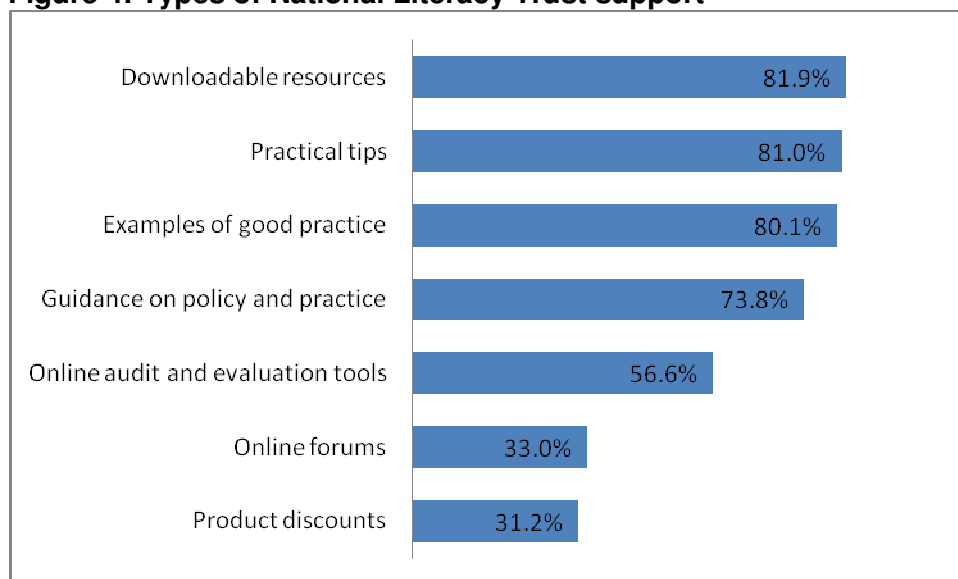
## Early Years Foundation Stage review

9 in 10 respondents (87.9%) are aware of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) review by Dame Clare Tickell. Of those who are aware of this review, three quarters are happy with the proposed focus on three prime areas of learning and development, namely communication and language; personal, social and emotion development; and physical development.

## National Literacy Trust support

When asked what support they would most value from the National Literacy Trust to help them prepare their setting to meet the requirements of the revised EYFS, **Figure 6** shows that 8 in 10 felt that downloadable resources, practical tips and examples of good practice would be of most value. 7 in 10 would also value guidance on policy and practice while 6 in 10 would most value online audit and evaluation tools. Only a third of respondents would value online forums or product discounts.

**Figure 4: Types of National Literacy Trust support**



## Differences between responses from those working as childminders and those working in group settings

There was no significant difference between professionals working in home or group settings in the importance they place on parents talking or reading to their children.

Those working in group settings were more likely to say that they have the knowledge and skills to help support parents at home compared with those working in home settings (63.4% vs. 42.3%, respectively). Similarly, those working in group settings are also more likely to say that they have the tools compared with those working in home settings (36.6% vs. 23.1%) and to have the confidence to help support parents than those working in home settings (63.4% vs. 50.0%).

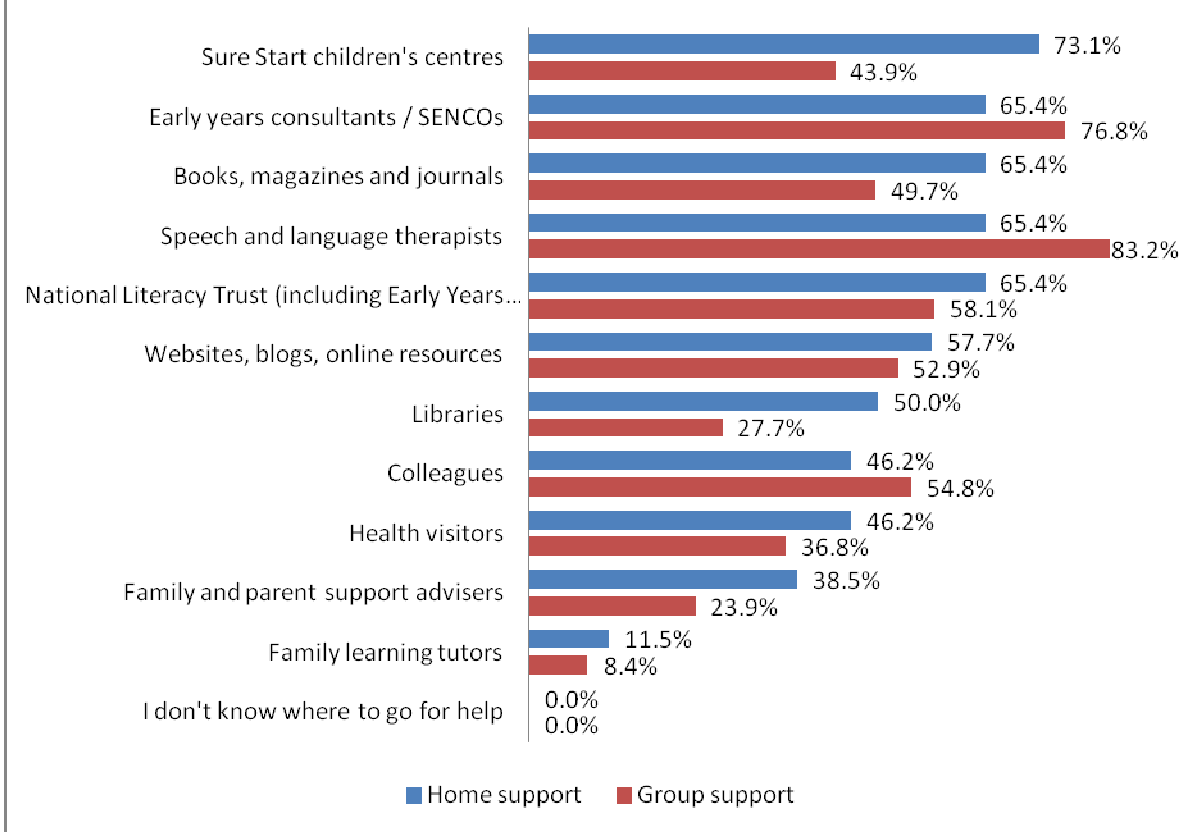
Professionals working in a home setting are more likely to talk to parents/carers about how they can support their children's communication, language and literacy at home at least once a month compared with professionals working in group settings (76.9% vs. 56.8%) who are more likely to talk to parents a couple of times a year (32.9% vs. 19.2%).

Professionals working in home settings are less likely to know parents/ carers who struggle with their literacy compared with professionals working in group settings (24% vs. 72.3%). Despite not encountering as many adults who themselves struggle with literacy, they are more likely to say that they know where to signpost for further help those who struggle compared with their peers working in group settings (76% vs. 68.2%).

Professionals working in home or group settings use different sources of advice on supporting children's communication, language and literacy in their setting (see **Figure 7**). Professionals working in home settings are more likely than those working in group settings to say that they would seek advice from Sure Start children's centres; books, magazines, and journals; the

National Literacy Trust; websites, blogs and other online resources; libraries; health visitors and family learning tutors. By contrast, those working in group settings are more likely to consult early years consultants/SENCOs/ colleagues compared with their peers working in home settings.

**Figure 5: Source of support by home versus group setting**

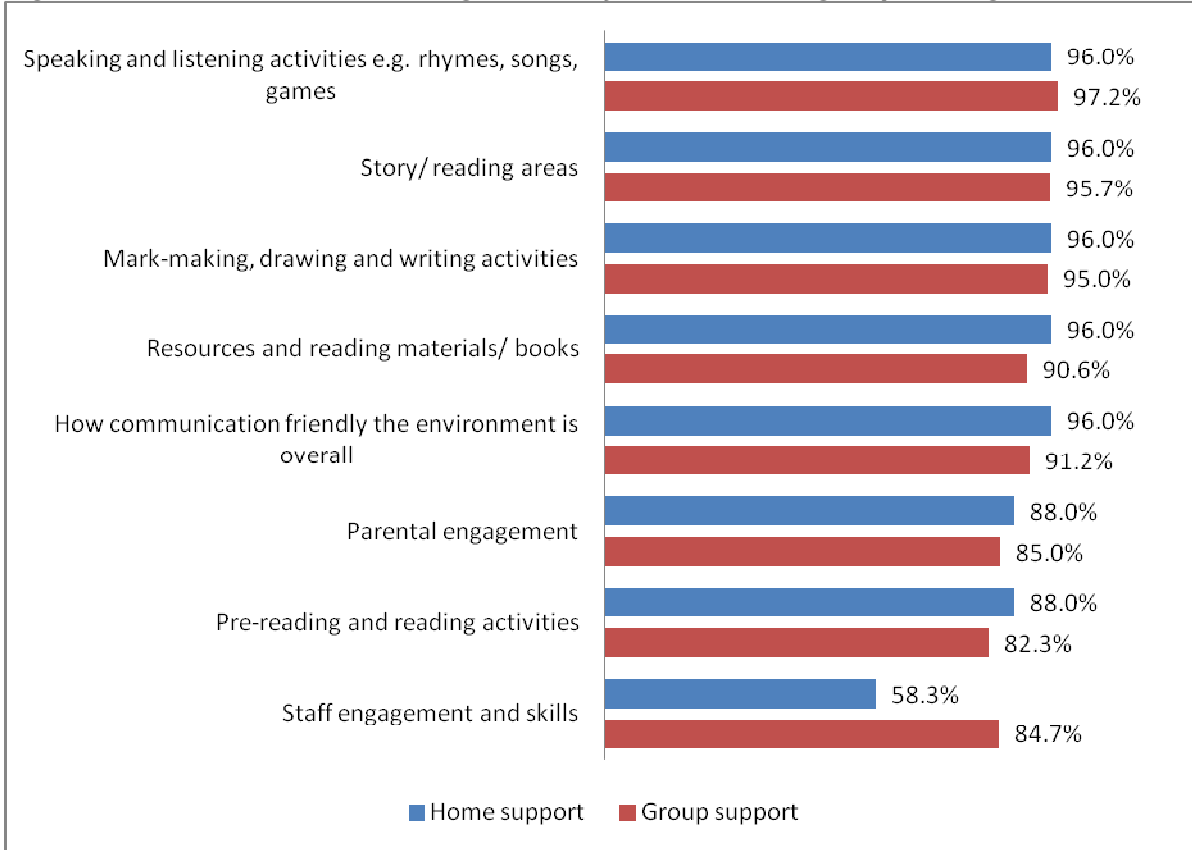


As would perhaps be expected, considerably more professionals working in group than home settings were involved in ECaT (52.6% vs. 18.5%). More professionals working in group than home settings also felt that ECaT had a positive impact in their setting (86.6% vs. 70%). However, more professionals working in home than in group settings would like to have access to further resources and support in implementing ECaT in their setting (90% vs. 74.1).

Roughly the same proportion of professionals from home and group settings conduct a review of their support for children's communication, language and literacy in their setting more than twice a year (73.1% vs. 71.9%). However, while more group settings say that they conduct a review twice a year compared with home settings (11.1% vs. 3.8%), professionals from home settings are more likely to say that they never conduct a review compared with those working in group settings (7.7% vs. 2%).

There were only a few differences between professionals who work in home versus group settings in the areas that their review covers (see **Figure 8**). Most notably, probably reflecting the fact that all of the professionals working in home environments either work alone or only with a handful of colleagues, they are less likely than their peers who work in group settings to say that their review covers staff engagement and skills.

**Figure 6: Areas covered in setting review by home versus group settings**



Overall, professionals working in home settings appear to be more confident in identifying and supporting children with language difficulties than professional working in group settings. However, professionals working in group settings feel more confident in supporting children with English as an Additional Language than do professionals working in home settings (see **Table 2**).

**Table 2: Early years practitioners’ confidence in identifying and supporting struggling children and supporting those who don’t have English as their first language by home vs. group setting**

	<i>Very confident</i> %	<i>Confident</i> %	<i>Not very confident</i> %	<i>Not at all confident</i> %	<i>Don’t know</i> %
<b>Identifying children who are struggling with communication, speech and language development?</b>	38.5	61.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
	41.4	52.4	5.5	0.7	0.0
<b>Supporting the needs of children struggling with communication, speech and language?</b>	34.6	53.8	11.5	0.0	0.0

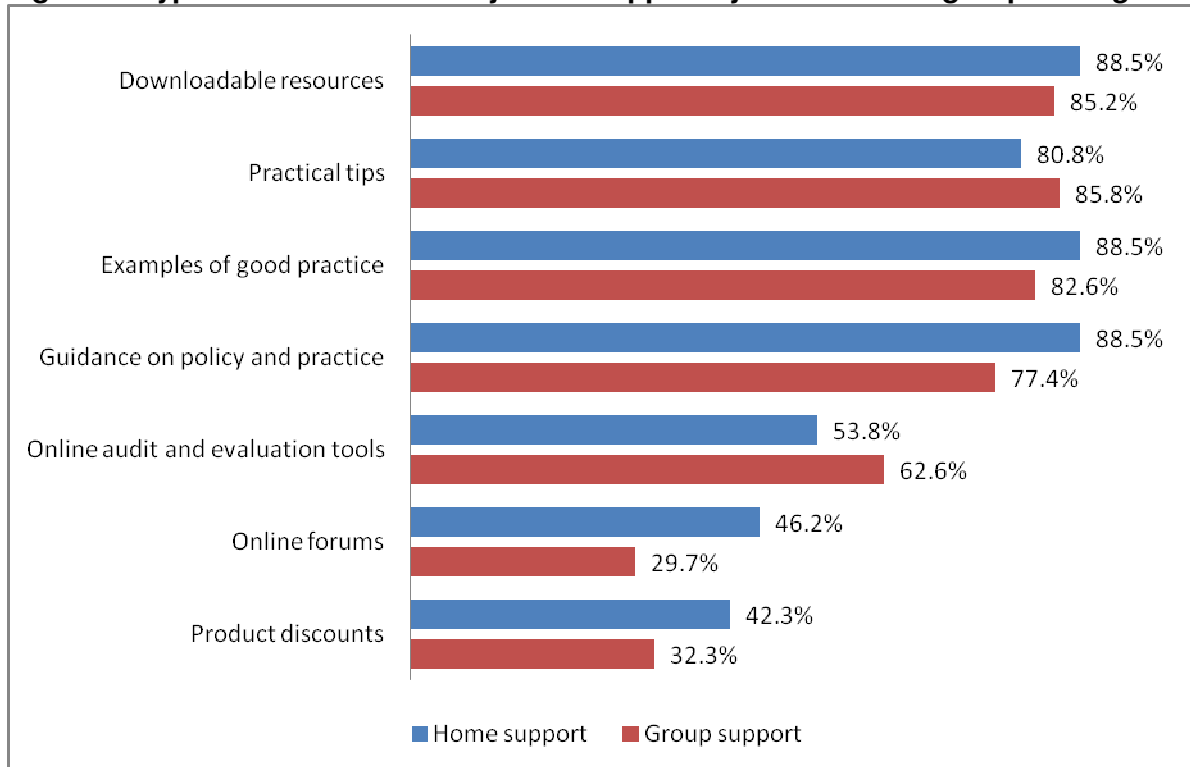
	<i>Very confident</i> %	<i>Confident</i> %	<i>Not very confident</i> %	<i>Not at all confident</i> %	<i>Don't know</i> %
	30.1	54.8	13.0	1.4	0.0
<b>Supporting children with English as an Additional Language?</b>	7.7	42.3	42.3	0.0	7.7
	22.8	41.4	29.7	4.1	2.1

100% of professionals working in home settings believe that it is very important for their communication and language development that children interact with each other compared with 95.6% of professionals working in group settings. Professionals from home settings are also more likely than their peers working in group settings to say that children of different ages get a daily opportunity to mix together (84.6% vs. 77.9%).

Slightly more professionals working in home settings are aware of the EYFS review by Dame Clare Tickell compared with those working in group settings (96.2% vs. 91.1%). More professionals working in home settings are also happy with the proposed focus on the three prime areas of learning and development compared with professionals working in group settings (88.5% vs. 71.9%). Nearly three times as many professionals working in group than in home settings say that they are unsure about these prime areas (22.6% vs. 7.7%).

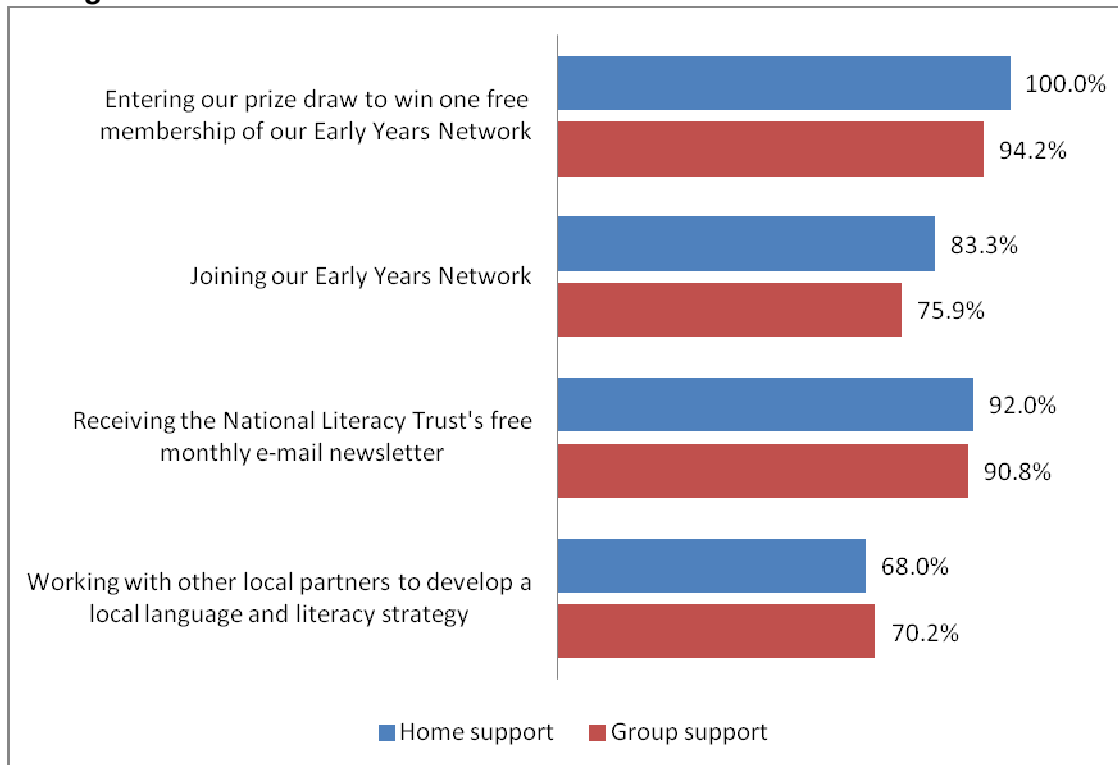
**Figure 9** shows that professionals from home vs. group settings would value slightly different kinds of support from the National Literacy Trust. In particular, more professionals from home than from group settings say that they would appreciate examples of good practice, guidance on policy and practice, online forums as well as product discounts. By contrast, more professionals from group than home settings said that they would value online audit and evaluation tools.

**Figure 7: Types of National Literacy Trust support by home versus group setting**



68% professionals from home settings and 70.2% of professionals from group settings said that they would be interested in working with other local partners to develop a local language and literacy strategy (see **Figure 10**).

**Figure 8: Types of involvement with National Literacy Trust by home versus group setting**



### **A committed and aware sector**

The research revealed a strong awareness of the importance of support for language and communication. In her review of the Early Years Foundation Stage, Dame Clare Tickell confirmed that children's learning was strongly linked to the competence and skill levels of staff, so it is heartening to see that practitioners are, on the whole, very confident in identifying those with difficulties and knowing what steps to take to help them.

The findings also highlighted a widespread commitment to supporting children's language and literacy, with nearly all providers reviewing their support at least once a year, and most reviewing it more often.

Practitioners surveyed reviewed all aspects of language support in equal measure, including speaking and listening activities; story areas; books and other reading resources; mark-making and drawing.

### **A need for support and information**

Practitioners' understanding of the skills and resources needed to support the communication and literacy of children under five has almost certainly increased over the last few years.

This is due in part to the training and advice provided to support the implementation of the EYFS and ECaT. Of the practitioners surveyed, the majority of those who were fortunate enough to be involved with ECaT said it had made a positive impact in their setting.

When seeking advice, the majority of those surveyed turn first to SALTs, followed by early years consultants and SENCOs. Over 60% look to the National Literacy Trust for help and advice. Less than half of those working in group settings say they would turn to their local children's centre or library, although more than half of childminders surveyed are likely to do so.

### **Practitioners need more help to engage parents**

The findings confirmed that virtually all practitioners recognise the importance of encouraging parents and carers to talk and read to their children. Nearly all respondents talked to parents about how they could support their children's language and literacy development, with only 3% admitting to never doing so.

However, a significant number of practitioners feel they need more knowledge, skills and confidence to encourage families to support literacy in the home: over half say they lack the necessary tools to do so. In fact, 7% don't feel that they have the tools they need 'at all'. Seven out of 10 participants in the research said they had parents with literacy difficulties, but over a quarter of these wouldn't know where to signpost them for support.

## The future

At a time when the sector is facing much uncertainty and imminent changes, it is interesting to see that the research shows both a high level of awareness of the EYFS Review and a broad agreement with its focus.

With seven out of 10 practitioners saying they would be interested in working with local partners to develop a local literacy strategy, there is also a general consensus on Tickell's statement of the importance of an integrated support network across services.

The new EYFS is timetabled to be implemented in autumn 2012, but there are many other changes afoot that could have an impact on how communication and language is supported by the sector. These include levels of local and national funding, the debate over the inspection of settings by Ofsted and cuts in funding for the Early Years Foundation Degree. The current climate suggests practitioners will not have the level of support and access to training they've had in recent years.