



## Early Words Together in Glasgow: An evaluation

April 2019

*"I just liked the fact that I was coming in and mixing. She had a wee smile on her face and I had a smile on my face too. We were doing something different in the nursery. It was really good".*

Parent

*"It's about getting that personal, close bond between the parent and the child reading and enjoying words."*

Practitioner

*"I think it's spot on actually. Seeing the parents and the children during a session, it's magical"*

Glasgow Life

*"It's improved my confidence and all. I feel as if my confidence has grown".*

Community volunteer

*"Doing this has made me realise that I can probably do other types of things as well. You know, using my passion for books, do more voluntary work with kids"*

Harper Collins volunteer



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## Executive Summary

Early Words Together is a targeted family learning programme designed to develop young children's communication, language and literacy (National Literacy Trust, 2018). Drawing on the support of peer volunteers to engage parents/families with their child's language and literacy learning, it is particularly concerned with reaching families from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or with low-quality home learning environments. Early Words Together was introduced across a number of literacy hotspots in Glasgow (calculated using SIMD data) and has been running in 25 settings since 2017. This evaluation was undertaken between September 2018 and January 2019 and features survey and termly report data from 18 settings and qualitative insights from 6 settings.

Findings from the evaluation indicated that the majority of parents felt that participating in EWT had had a positive impact in their confidence to support their child's language and communication (e.g., sharing books, singing) and reported changes in their home learning environment (e.g., more talking, sharing stories, singing and visiting the library). The majority of parents also reported that their children enjoyed books, rhymes and mark making more following participation and that their children were more engaged during story time. Volunteers supporting with the delivery of EWT were very positive about participating in the programme, with reported benefits to both themselves and the families they worked with. Practitioners also felt more confident interacting with, and supporting, parents and carers after running the programme.

In interviews, parents and practitioners reported a wide range of benefits; in particular EWT helped to develop and build positive relationships between families and practitioners working in the different educational settings. Indeed, benefits shared were not restricted to language and literacy, but often focused on parents and children developing confidence in general. Furthermore, while practitioners felt they understood parents and families better, parents were very positive about the opportunity to spend time with their child in nursery/school and learn more about their educational environment.

Overall, positive findings were reported for the majority of parents participating; however, approximately 35-45% of parents reported few or no changes to language/literacy outcomes following participation in the programme. Based on the qualitative insights, it is possible to speculate about possible reasons for this. For example, families likely to benefit most may not have been recruited from the outset or may not have fully engaged with the programme. In addition, EWT in Glasgow possibly had a very positive impact in areas not identified in the questionnaire (i.e., general confidence, building relationships between families and nursery/school settings), with literacy and language benefits being secondary. Recommendations drawing upon the key findings are discussed in the evaluation.

## Key findings

Following this evaluation of Early Words Together, key findings are summarised. These findings are based on survey data and termly reports from 54 parents, 27 volunteers and 18 practitioners across 18 settings, in addition to interviews with 2 key individuals, 12 parents, 9 volunteers and 7 practitioners across 6 settings.

- Approximately 60% of the parents reported that EWT had helped them to be more confident and active in supporting their child's development in relation to books, stories and talking to each other.

- Over 50% of parents reported changes in their home environment, with particular increases in mark making and drawing, listening and paying attention to stories and their child asking to look at or read stories at home.
- All volunteers had a positive experience of volunteering and 96% felt it had made a positive difference for the families they worked with. Volunteers also reported specific benefits themselves, with approximately 60% reporting increased empathy, teamwork, self-confidence, adaptability and communication skills.
- Practitioners reported greater confidence in interacting with parents and carers (52-78%), in addition to giving advice to parents about their child's home learning environment (24-44%) and child's language and communication (19-44%).
- Qualitative insights highlighted the benefits of EWT to develop and build positive relationships between families and nursery/school settings and staff.
- Parents and practitioners believed that the benefits of EWT were not restricted to language and literacy, but included more general benefits, such as enjoyment, confidence, opportunities to socialise and, for parents, an opportunity to spend time with their child and learn more about their child's nursery/school environment.
- Effective approaches to parental engagement included being flexible, tailoring content to suit families, drawing upon past experiences of running EWT, developing familiarity with parents and advertising EWT appropriately.
- Possible barriers included recruiting and retaining families and volunteers, finding appropriate parent-volunteer matches, time, resources, staffing and space.
- As a programme, EWT aligns closely with Glasgow's literacy related goals and current key priorities of the Scottish Government.

### **Acknowledgements:**

We would like to thank the parents, volunteers, practitioners and key individuals who participated in this evaluation.

## Background, context and research questions

Early Words Together is a targeted family learning programme designed to develop young children's communication, language and literacy (National Literacy Trust, 2018). It aims to:

- ❑ **Increase children's language and literacy** development and contribute to their wider development and school readiness
- ❑ **Empower parents** to improve the home learning environment and support their child's learning and development
- ❑ **Engage volunteers** to support families and promote good home learning behaviours within their own communities
- ❑ **Change community norms** to raise expectations for child development

Delivered through six 1.5 hour sessions over a period of six consecutive weeks, trained volunteers are encouraged to support parents with their child's language and literacy, focusing on: building literacy into everyday life, encouraging positive interactions and praise, making sharing books fun, learning through play to encourage talk, supporting children's communication through songs and rhymes, helping parents appreciate what their children are able to do and helping parents realise they can make the difference (NLT, 2019).

Prior to its introduction in Glasgow, Early Words Together had been delivered across numerous local authorities in England, specifically in disadvantaged communities. An external evaluation of this programme found statistically significant increases in children's receptive vocabulary (i.e., understanding of spoken language) using a standardised assessments, and increases in the quality of the children's home learning environment, following participation in the programme (Wood et al., 2015). Furthermore, volunteers and other professional involved in the programme reported very positive experiences themselves, in addition to seeing changes in parents' confidence, skills and understanding (OPM, 2015).

Early Words Together was introduced in Glasgow in 2017 and aligns closely with the priorities outlined in Glasgow's Improvement Challenge. More specifically:

- Raise attainment in literacy and numeracy through targeted support and interventions (in primary schools)
- Support families to be better able to support their child's learning and development

Glasgow is the largest, most densely populated city in Scotland and has the most ethnically diverse population in Scotland. Almost half (47.3%) of Glasgow's residents reside in the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland and in 2016, 34% of children in Glasgow were estimated to be living in poverty. (Understanding Glasgow, 2018). Early Words Together was introduced across a number of literacy hotspots in Glasgow (calculated using SIMD data) and has been running since 2017.

Using a mixed methods approach, the evaluation aimed to answer the following research questions:

**Question 1.** Has Early Words Together Glasgow achieved the intended outcomes that were agreed with the Scottish Government?

The outcomes were:

- a) Parents are confident and active as child's first and ongoing educator
- b) Create positive relationships between families, communities, nurseries and schools to increase parent involvement in their child's learning

**Question 2.** What has been the experience of participation for families, volunteers, practitioners and settings?

Specifically:

- a) the benefits gained from participating in Early Words Together Glasgow
- b) the drivers/barriers to engagement in the programme

**Question 3.** Which have been the most effective approaches to parental engagement?

With a focus on the following contexts:

- a) schools and nurseries
- b) library and community support services

**Question 4.** How effective is the programme within the Glasgow context?

In particular:

- a) The relation to other sources of support for parents within Glasgow and existing Early Intervention projects
- b) The fit with the literacy-related goals for Glasgow

## Research literature

While parents are ideally placed to be children's first language and literacy teachers, many lack the confidence or ability to do this effectively. Family learning programmes and parent-mediated interventions aimed specifically at developing young children's language and literacy have been found to show statistically and educationally significant benefits in children's receptive and/or expressive vocabulary (Sloat et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2015). However, while some studies have found gains, a meta-analysis (type of statistical analysis which combines the results of multiple studies) examining the effectiveness of family literacy programmes (30 studies with 4,326 children/families) found only a small contribution to children's literacy skills (van Steensel et al., 2011).

To ensure family learning programmes are effective, they need to be optimal to have the best chance of success for children and their families. Resources, training, level of engagement, implementation quality and treatment fidelity (i.e., whether the programme activities are carried out in the way intended) are all likely to impact on the success of a family learning programme. It is important to note that often in family learning programmes, sustained improvements in language, literacy, confidence etc are typically not measured. It is critical that family learning programmes do not only have a positive impact immediately following participation, but lead to continued improvements in children's language and literacy, home learning environment, parent confidence etc, through changes in parents and children's attitudes and behaviour resulting from the programme.

Furthermore, it may be the case that explicit teaching of optimal shared reading styles is necessary to improve young children's acquisition and development of language through shared book reading with parents. For example, a recent meta-analysis (Flack et al., 2018), examining the effects of shared storybook reading on word learning (38 studies with 2,455 children, reflecting 110 effect sizes) reported that 'how you read' was very important: reading style and use of dialogic techniques (such as pointing, providing definitions or asking children questions as you read) significantly influenced the number of new words children learnt from shared storybook reading (for an introduction to dialogic reading, please see Appendix 9). Furthermore, a second recent meta-analysis (Noble et al., under review; 54 studies, 5,569 participants, reflecting 316 effect sizes) has

found that while there is an effect of shared reading on language, this effect is small and actually negligible in studies with an active control group. The researchers suggest the duration of shared reading interventions (6 - 8 weeks) is possibly insufficient to result in measurable long-lasting changes to language. Combined, these studies suggest that longer-term family literacy interventions, with explicit sharing/opportunities to build confidence in evidence-based reading styles (e.g., dialogic reading) is necessary to have the greatest chance of success and positive impact on children's language.

Finally, it is well established that children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds start school with poorer vocabulary and language skills than children from more affluent backgrounds. For example, using the Growing Up in Scotland data, Sosu and Ellis (2014) report that by age 5, there is a 13-month gap in vocabulary between children from high- and low-income households. This has been echoed more recently by Noble et al., (under review) as they report of a "social gradient in language development [which] increases over the preschool years". Interestingly, they point to research suggesting that a child's vocabulary at age five is the best predictor of whether a child from a socially disadvantaged background will "buck the trend" and escape poverty in adult life (Blanden, 2006). Therefore, focusing on language in the early years is crucial. However, there is also research to suggest that socio-economic status influences the effectiveness shared reading interventions, with smaller effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Manz, 2010; Mol et al., 2008). Targeted family literacy interventions have an important role to play in closing rather than increasing the language gap; but it is not easy. There is much work to be done and, we hope, this evaluation of Early Words Together in Glasgow represents a starting point to consider next steps.

## Evaluation

### Method:

Specific details pertaining to the quantitative and qualitative components can be found below.

### Quantitative component:

As part of EWT Glasgow, questionnaires were distributed to the volunteers, parents and practitioners involved to gain their feedback about the programme (see Appendix 10). While volunteers and parents completed the questionnaire after participating in EWT, practitioners were given the questionnaire both before and after participating in EWT to assess the effect of the programme more formally. The National Literacy Trust distributed and collected all questionnaires and inputted data. The evaluation team carried out all data analysis.

### Parent sample

There were 59 completed questionnaires<sup>1</sup>, but for 4 of these questionnaires technical difficulties appeared to have resulted in answers being lost or misaligned in the online submission and there was 1 group submission. Therefore, the data presented is based on a sample of 54 parents (89% female). The majority of the sample spoke English at home (69%) and the other parents reported either bilingual input at home (4% English/Yoruba, 2% Punjabi/English) or else a language other than English (7% Polish, 6% Mandarin, 4% Arabic, 2% Bahasi, 2% Dari, 2% Greek, 2% Tamil, 2% Yoruba).

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<sup>1</sup> No figures were available concerning the return rates of completed questionnaires by parents, volunteers or practitioners.

The majority of the parent group consisted of Mums (83%), however other family members were also represented: Dads (9%), Dad/Mum (2%), Foster mum (2%), Gran (4%).

### Participating children

Overall 57% of the children in the sample were female and most of the children were aged 5. Noticeably, the sample did not reflect a strict 3-5 age range, with 15% of children being either younger or older.

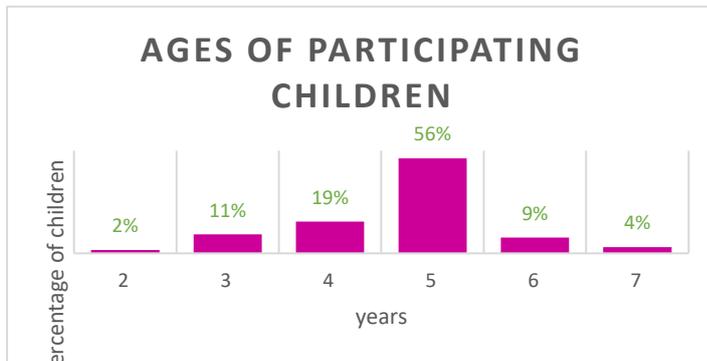


Figure 1: Bar chart showing age distribution of the children participating in EWT (parent report).

### Volunteer sample

Of the 30 questionnaires completed, 3 had been affected by technical difficulties and the responses had not been recorded. Therefore, the data analysis was based on a sample of 27 volunteers, which was 93% female. The majority of the sample spoke English at home (89%) with three individuals speaking other languages (Urdu/Punjabi, Mandarin and Polish). The age range of the volunteers were as follows: 26% (aged 26-35), 37% (aged 36-45), 30% (aged 46-55) and 7% (aged 55-64). Furthermore, the volunteers came from a range of backgrounds (community, business) and this was reflected in the range of educational backgrounds - the majority of the sample (60%) had qualifications at or above Scottish Higher Certificate/A-level.

### Practitioner sample

Before beginning the EWT Glasgow programme (pre-test), questionnaires were circulated to practitioners and 22 questionnaires were completed. Due to technical difficulties, the responses from 1 questionnaire were not recorded and so the analysis is based on data from 21 participants. These practitioners came from either Primary School (29%) or Nursery (71%) settings. After completing EWT (post-test), the practitioners were asked to complete the same questionnaire again and 9 questionnaires were returned. This time 44% of the sample were from Primary School settings and 56% from Nursery settings.

### Qualitative component:

#### Recruitment:

Emails were sent to 57 practitioners, based across 23 settings in Glasgow. All practitioners were invited to participate in the evaluation. All unanswered emails were followed up with a further email one week later. Following this, phone calls were made to settings until six settings agreed to take part in the evaluation.

## **Final sample:**

In total, six settings participated in the qualitative aspect of the evaluation. Details are as follows:

Setting 1: One interview with 1 practitioner (completed 3 instances of EWT at time of interview).

Setting 2: One interview with 1 practitioner (completed 3 instances of EWT at time of interview) and one interview with 1 parent (completed 1 instance of EWT at time of interview).

Setting 3: One interview with 1 practitioner (completed 2 instances of EWT and in 5<sup>th</sup> session of 3<sup>rd</sup> instance at time of interview), one interview with 1 HC volunteer (5<sup>th</sup> session of 1<sup>st</sup> instance) and one phone interview with 1 parent (completed 1 instance).

Setting 4: One interview with 1 practitioner (completed 2 instances of EWT and in 3<sup>rd</sup> session of 3<sup>rd</sup> instance at time of interview), one interview with 2 HC volunteers (3<sup>rd</sup> session at time of interview) and one interview with 2 parents (3<sup>rd</sup> session at time of interview, not recorded).

Setting 5: Two interviews with 2 practitioners (completed 3 instances of EWT and in 5<sup>th</sup> session of 4<sup>th</sup> instance at time of interview), one interview with HC volunteer (in 5<sup>th</sup> session at time of interview) and one interview with 2 parents (in 5<sup>th</sup> session at time of interview).

Setting 6: One interview with 1 practitioner (completed two instances of EWT, in 5<sup>th</sup> session of 3<sup>rd</sup> instance at time of interview), one interview with 5 volunteers (in 5<sup>th</sup> session at time of interview) and two interviews with 3 parents in each (in 5<sup>th</sup> session at time of interview).

In addition, phone interviews were carried out with two key individuals based at Glasgow Life and with responsibility for overseeing the programme.

Total number participating in interviews: 2 key individuals, 7 practitioners, 9 volunteers, 12 parents.

## **Procedure**

All interviews were conducted in the settings, with the exception of interviews with key individuals and interview with one parent (setting 3) which were conducted over the phone. All interviews were audio recorded, with the exception of one interview with parents (setting 4), as the researcher did not feel it was appropriate. All participants were given full information about the project verbally (i.e., content of the participant information sheet was covered verbally). Furthermore, participants were explicitly told that it was the programme, not the participants, that were being evaluated. Further details of information covered can be found in Appendices 1-4.

## **Findings**

**Question 1. Has Early Words Together Glasgow achieved the intended outcomes that were agreed with the Scottish Government?**

**The outcomes were:**

- a) Parents are confident and active as child's first and ongoing educator**

## **Quantitative data**

Responses from the parent survey showed that over 50% of the 54 parents reported that EWT had helped them to be more confident and active in supporting their child’s development in relation to books, rhymes, stories and talking to each other. Activities in which over 60% parents noticed a positive change were increased confidence in sharing books and stories with their child, greater understanding of how important it is to talk with their child and more frequent reading or sharing stories together with their child.

EAL parents reported a greater increase in their understanding of the importance of talking with their child compared to the rest of the group,  $U=225.50$ ,  $p=.048$ . A more detailed picture of the results can be seen in Figure 2.

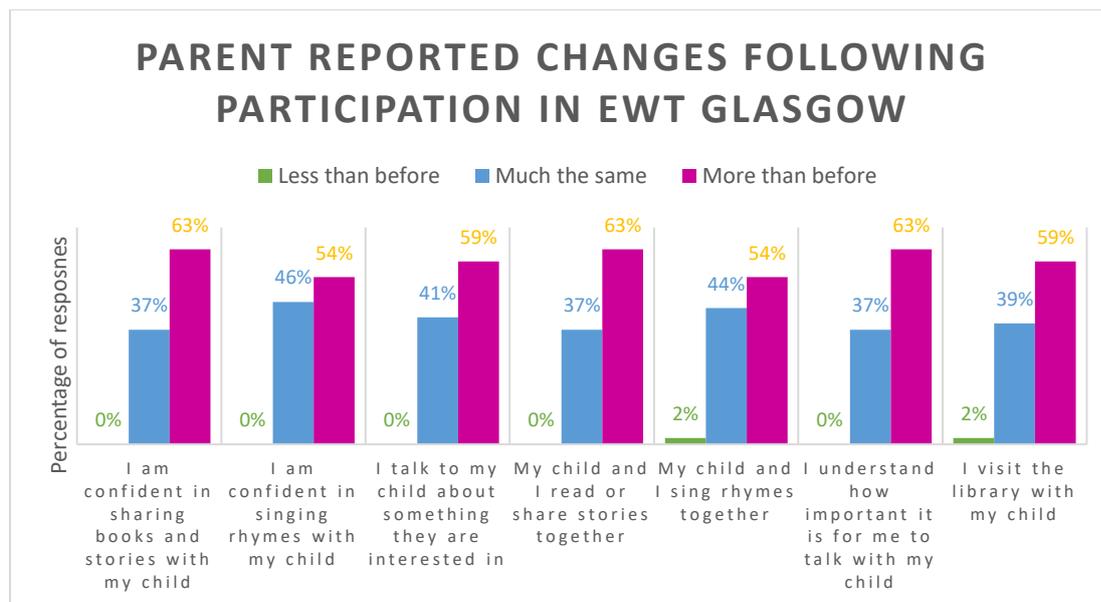


Figure 2. Parents’ report of changes in their behaviour after participating in EWT (n = 54).

### Qualitative insights

Indeed, during the interviews, parents spoke positively about the programme and the changes in themselves or children resulting from it. With regards confidence specifically, parents reported increases in confidence as a result of taking part in Early Words Together. For example:

Parent: *“It makes you, I don’t know, confidence..... it helps you with your wee ones”*

Parent: *“It was very, very good, and I have also learned so many things for myself... because of this you could say, ah, I’ve got some experience, and I’ve got some confidence”*

However, despite positive reports from parents, practitioners and volunteers did have to work hard to build up confidence in the parents and encourage active engagement:

PRACTITIONERS: *“I tend to kind of model reading a story, and although some of the parents do not need that at all, I think for the parents who aren’t so confident, they can see it’s okay to put on a silly voice”.*

Volunteer: *“A few parents have been quite hesitant... they let us do all the work, with the kids. But that comes with time”*

To develop confidence, practitioners highlighted the importance of the volunteers and other parents as sources of support:

*PRACTITIONERS: "And I think some of the parents, especially some of the parents who have English as an additional language, have that little bit more confidence; they're sitting next to a volunteer, if they're not sure of the word, the volunteer can help them"*

*"because they (parents) could come together, they could support each other as well."*

**b) Create positive relationships between families, communities, nurseries and schools to increase parent involvement in their child's learning.**

Survey questions did not tap into this research question; therefore, conclusions are drawn from the qualitative findings only.

Based on the interviews, Early Words Together was consistently described as an excellent programme to develop and build positive relationships between families and their child's educational settings (nursery or school). Practitioners recognised that in some instances, creating positive relationships could be difficult, due to parents' own educational experiences:

*PRACTITIONERS: "I think a lot of people, if they've not had a great experience at school, are very anxious about coming in and joining in with things, and I think it's kind of helped them get over that part of it, and it's been a bit easier for them to come in".*

Practitioners frequently highlighted that they had developed better relationships with families as a direct result of EWT. This was recognised as particularly important in contexts which had not managed to achieve parent engagement before. For example:

*PRACTITIONERS: "we got parents in, and that's been the big thing for us".*

Furthermore, practitioners gave examples of how EWT had led to families to engage in a broader range of education-based activities:

*PRACTITIONERS: "That's been a massive thing. Like, a lot of families – one of the families coming today, actually, this was one of the first things they came to here. And now they're at everything. So for us, and for the Head Teacher, and the whole school – it's been a way in"*

*PRACTITIONERS: "And that mum now comes to everything I've got in nursery – it's no just EWT, it's every parent course. This mum now is involved in everything.....which is great for her confidence."*

Parents echoed the points made by the practitioners:

*Parent: "I'm joining in everything now. My wee boy was here a few years ago and I wouldnae go up to anybody and now I'm talking to everybody so it's actually quite good for myself as well".*

Staff at one primary school commented on the benefits of EWT as a way of establishing relationships with parents as their child starts in a new setting (i.e., start of primary school):

*PRACTITIONERS: "It's a fantastic start to school. They come in, the parent feels comfortable, the child feels comfortable, they get to know the staff..."*

Indeed, in some ways, EWT together was a driver to starting parental engagement and provided a helpful structure to begin parent engagement in their setting:

*PRACTITIONERS: "I think the school has been trying to improve their parental engagement, but not in such a kind of structured way.... I think Early Words provided us with a set framework to do that"*

Practitioners also recognised that parent engagement/involvement was not simply about 'getting parents into the school', but that it was about developing relationships, not only between practitioners and parents, but also among parents. Parents felt like they got to know the staff and school better from engaging in the programme:

*PRACTITIONERS: Yes, so they just feel more comfortable coming to the school. They've gotten to know me better, so I'm a good point of contact now."*

*PRACTITIONERS: "[Name]'s not really speaking any English yet, you know. But just having the time in the school, with her (parent), she asks quite a lot questions, you know, just about the way the school is run, or what we're doing or what's happening, so it's quite nice for her to have that time."*

These points were echoed by parents:

*Parent: "But also it means that I hear quite a lot about stuff that I wouldn't have heard about – I feel a lot more comfortable and confident about what's happening at school, because I kind of see it, without it being something that's kind of sold to me, it's just a conversation that's happened. I think it's nice".*

*Parent "And you're communicating with people that ye would no normal talk tae"*

*Parent: "And it is true, though. I mean, you see people in the playground and ye would no necessarily have a conversation, but when you're sitting in here, you get a conversation."*

Practitioners also commented that EWT provided an opportunity for them to share information with parents:

*PRACTITIONERS: "A hundred percent, it's helped us, yes. Because when we get the parents in, it's also allowed us to introduce them to other things that they need help with"*

Through developing closer relationships with parents, practitioners felt they better understood families' issues, concerns and contexts, and could provide support or direct them to support (if appropriate):

*PRACTITIONERS: "The first time around, we were able to identify there was a mum that was really suffering from bad anxiety, which we might not have known about... it's given us an insight into what they're going through, and we're able to offer some supports. Some other parents last time were struggling with behaviour with their children, so we were able to signpost them to triple-P, which we wouldn't have been able to do before. So, I think it's been fantastic"*

In interviews with key individuals associated it was recognised that there was variation between settings with regards to their existing levels of parental engagement/involvement. EWT was seen to provide a good start for settings not current engaging closely with parents:

*KI: "Parental engagement (how it is seen) varies from school to school. Some schools have a parent council and parent meetings and think that is enough. Other schools are doing a lot more – so they*

*are all at different ages and stages in terms of the parental engagement journey. For those settings that have done very little, EWT has been a good start for them."*

Key individuals and practitioners were also acutely aware of the importance of developing relationships and the time and effort that goes into doing it and that this was particularly difficult for some practitioners and for hard to reach parents:

*KI: "This is crucial, families won't come, open up to you, work with you unless you do have a good relationship built already and that all takes time. Raising attainment in literacy and numeracy goes well beyond just delivering programmes – it's understanding where these parents are coming from."*

*PRACTITIONERS: "but we've had issues with some children, and probably those are the children you want to reach, whose attainment levels across the board... trying to bridge that gap. And those are the parents that you find it difficult to get engaging and staying with the programme. They either turn up for one week, or they miss two or three weeks, or they don't come at all, and then it's a volunteer who's then guiding the child through. But it's about getting that personal, close bond between the parent and the child reading and enjoying words."*

Finally, while parent engagement was made, practitioners recognised that this could be quite difficult:

*PRACTITIONERS: "The first week, ooh, it's all a bit awkward and nobody talks to each other, and emmm! Week two's a bit better, and then by week five when you're going to the library or you're doing a celebration everybody's pals, and it's a nice way to finish it off. You just need to pretend that everything's okay. You just need to be, "Ah, we're all best friends and it's all great!" And then eventually everybody just matches your level of enthusiasm!"*

*PRACTITIONERS: "We've had other mums who come in and, you know, they kind of take a back seat sometimes, and they're maybe waiting for a volunteer to sort of lead it off. It can be quite hard."*

Finally, practitioners recognised that some aspects of the programme could potentially make parents feel uncomfortable, if they felt they were being observed. For example:

*PRACTITIONERS: "As a parent myself, I would probably feel under pressure, a bit, because we're in quite a small, confined space and everybody can hear everybody else reading stories or talking or whatever, and then you're very aware of what you're saying. I would imagine that would put people off".*

Indeed, some parents already felt quite confident in reading at home with their child and supporting their language and literacy, it was just in 'performance' reading that they lacked confidence:

*Parent: "[It's given me] more confidence to do things together in front of people, just doing it between me and her, I was doing that anyway."*

## **Question 2. What has been the experience of participation for families, volunteers, practitioners and settings?**

### **Specifically:**

#### **a) the benefits gained from participating in Early Words Together Glasgow**

### **Quantitative data**

## Parents

As well as the benefits to parents detailed above (see Figure 2), the majority of parents noticed changes in the behaviour of their child after participating in EWT (see Figure 3). With the exception of time spent making marks and drawing at home, all of the behaviour assessed were reported to have increased by over 50% of the parents. Areas of particular improvement for over 60% of the parents were an increase in their child asking to look at or read stories at home, their child showing better listening and attention to stories and their child experiencing greater enjoyment from mark making and drawing.

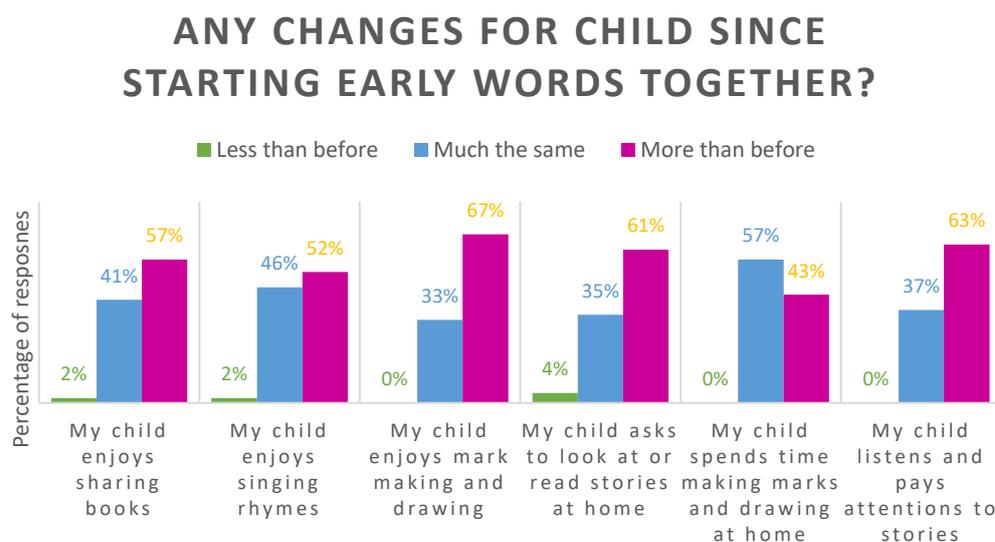


Figure 3. Parents' report of changes in their child's behaviour after participating in EWT (n = 54).

## Volunteers

The survey data showed that the volunteers were very positive about their EWT experience with all of the volunteers indicating that they would recommend this experience to a friend. All of the volunteers rated their EWT volunteering experience as Excellent (78%) or Good (22%). Indeed, this enthusiasm among volunteers could potentially be used to help sustain Early Words Together in settings, with experienced volunteers playing a crucial role in reaching and engaging families who may be harder to reach. Indeed, 96% of the volunteers reported that they thought their volunteering had made a positive difference for the families they worked with.

In terms of the benefits for the volunteers themselves, 70% of the volunteers thought that volunteering had developed their skills a lot, 22% somewhat and only 7% thought that there had been no effect on their skills.

A more detailed picture of the specific benefits can be seen in Figure 4. The survey results show that 78-93% of the volunteers reported a moderate ('quite a lot') to large ('very much') increase in each of the skills assessed. The particular benefits identified were empathy, team work and an appreciation of literacy as a social issue, where over 60% of volunteers stated that their skills had improved 'very much'.

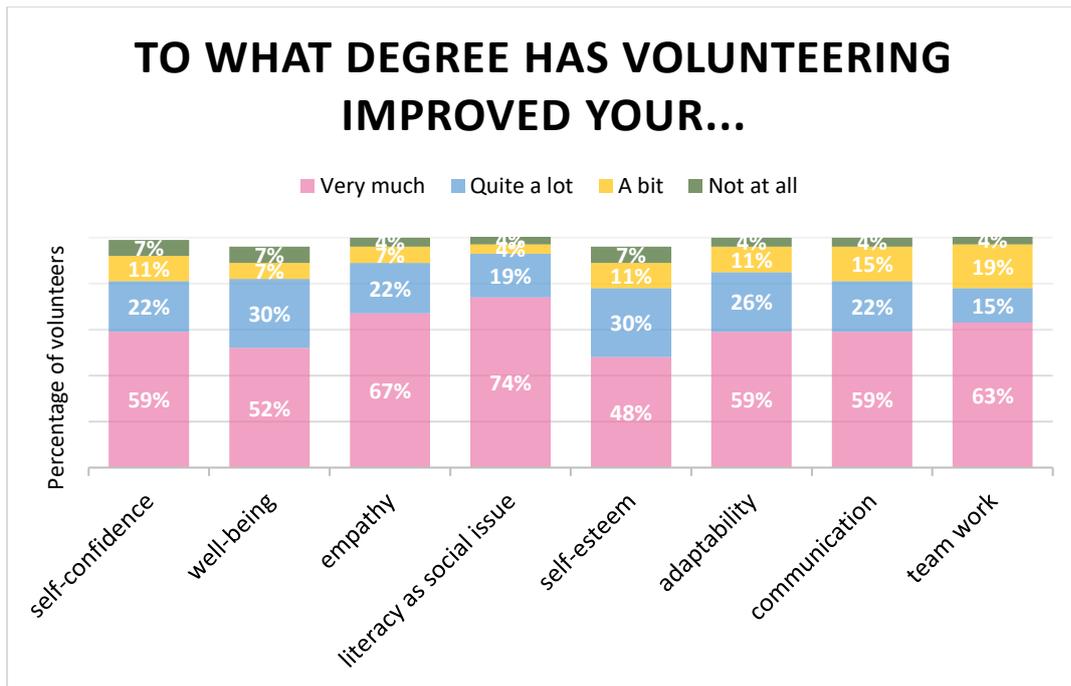


Figure 4. Volunteer reports following participating in EWT (n = 27).

### Practitioners

From pre to post-test, practitioners reported greater *confidence* in interacting with parents/carers and in their ability to give advice to parents about supporting their child's language and communication, in addition to home learning environment. There were increases in the percentage of practitioners who reported being "very confident" in interacting with parents/carers (52-78%: pre-post); asking parents about their child's home learning environment (24-33%); giving advice to parents about their child's home learning environment (24-44%); asking parents about their child's language and communication development (33-44%) and giving advice to parents about supporting their child's language and communication (19-44%). Results using the full response scale are illustrated in Figure 5.

## HOW CONFIDENT DO YOU FEEL IN...?

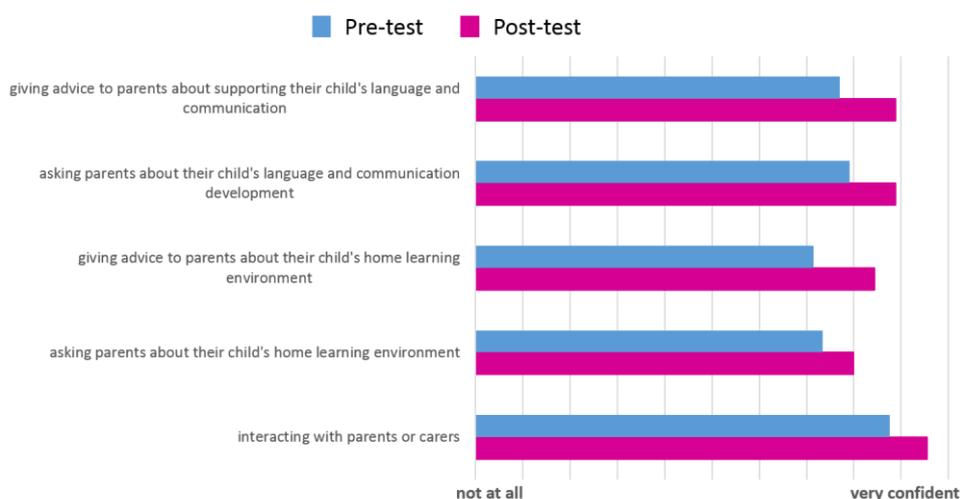


Figure 5. Practitioner reports following participating in EWT (n = 21 at pre-test and n=9 at post-test).

Furthermore, the survey data illustrated increases in *frequency of encouragement* that practitioners gave to parents in relation to interacting with their child. After EWT, there were increases in the percentage of practitioners who reported *encouraging parents "very often"* in the following areas: playing with their child (43→67%); listening to their child (33→67%); sharing books with their child (57→89%); sing songs and rhymes with their child (43→56%); giving their child opportunities to make marks (33→78%); using environmental print such as signs (24→44%); and using the public library and other local resources(29→67%).

On the other hand, participation in EWT appeared to produce few changes in the practitioners' views about their own setting. Even at pre-test settings were rated very positively in terms of the support they offered for developing practice and the structure and planning of reporting to parents.

## Qualitative insights

### Parents

Parents who completed the open-ended questions in the survey were generally very positive about their experiences of EWT: *"It's been amazing, thank you"; "I have enjoyed every moment and can't thank you enough for the time spent with me and my child"*.

Information from the open-ended questions in the parents' survey provided examples of a wide range of benefits perceived by parents and were consistent with parents growing engagement with their child's learning. For example, when asked about the biggest change since EWT, parents noted many key aspects of their child's development and education. For example, 22% of parents mentioned that their child's enjoyment and interest in stories and books had grown. For example: *"[name] now likes to read books more and concentrates better when we are at home"; "We read and look at books a lot more especially before bedtime. I feel this helps with the bedtime routine better"*.

Furthermore, 20% of parents said that they were talking to their child more and enjoying this one-to-one time: *"Having some bonding time with [name] and also seeing [name] come out her shell"; "I have learned that those extra 5/10 minutes with my child really do make a difference"*.

Approximately 11% of parents noticed improvements in their child's confidence as a main outcome from EWT: *"My child's confidence grew. Singing her songs at home and with other family members, more confident talking to others"; "More confident doesn't give in and refuse books"*.

While 7% parents commented on improvements in concentration: *"listening and doing as asked" "his concentration has improved"; "she concentrates more when we're reading and I make more time to read /chat about books"*.

There were also positive statements about their increased engagement with the school or nursery setting (9%): *"My child had had something to look forward to at school that I could attend with her"; "Understanding of what he does in a school day - seeing how he interacts with other children and teacher"; "It was good seeing her interacting with everyone"*

Furthermore, parents reported an increase in library visits (6%): *"He enjoys reading more and wants to go to the library more often."*

Open-ended responses from the parents' survey also give an indication of the perceived benefits of EWT when they give reasons for recommending the programme to other families. Parent-child and family bonding was mentioned by 20% of the parents: *"Because of the quality of the time spent*

together”; “Both myself and [name] really enjoy the sessions but I enjoyed being able to just spend some one to one time with her”.

Other main benefits included child learning and development either in general (13%): “It is good for the kids brings them out of themselves”; “Because it helps my son to discover himself” or specifically in relation to books and reading (17%): “It has helped both of us enjoy books, reading, drawing and writing more than we did before”; “Children are more interested in books and doing well drawing and reading”.

Furthermore, 7% of parents mentioned involvement with the school as a key benefit to recommend the programme to others: “Because you become closer to your child's environment”; “I feel that I am more involved with the nursery now and the parents and the staff”. In addition to an opportunity to meet other parents and get to know the staff (7%): “It has been good meeting other parents”; “It good for mother to bond with other mum's in it's also good for kid's to bond as well and to get to know teacher at the Early Word together group”.

This wide range of benefits were echoed in the interviews. Indeed, parents spoke of a range of benefits to their children and themselves from taking part in the programme. Benefits cited were not restricted to language and literacy benefits, but typically included more general benefits such as enjoyment, increased confidence and opportunities to socialise, both for them and their child:

Parent: “I thought it was really good. My wee girl, she came out of her shell quite a lot you know, she really enjoyed it.”

Parent: “Brings you out of your shell and it helps you with your wee ones. Cause I don't mix with anybody and the only time I mix with anybody is in here, so it's really good for learning how to mix.”

Parent: “She quite enjoyed it and you seen her playing with other kids that she wouldn't usually play with in the class. With some children, some older children, she actually got on quite well with them – I thought she'd take longer to settle in. It was really good for her”.

Parent: “my wee girl is really excited to see me when she comes into this room. I get to spend extra time with her and she loves it”.

Parent: “Because before that, even in the nursery, we parents never spoke with each other, but after that we can say, we were kind of friends, at least we could say “hello, hi.”

Parent: “[Name] is my only child, so she is lonely. And in small group, she can communicate, and this is good for her.”

Key individuals who had visited different settings were also aware of the wider benefits:

KI: “From places we have been and teachers we have spoken to, they feel that it's not just the literacy that its helped, that its helped the parents' confidence and has had all these unexpected outcomes that they weren't thinking about. They just thought of it as a literacy programme.”

Practitioners echoed these findings:

PRACTITIONERS: “In Assembly this morning, in front of everyone, she put her hand up, and answered in front of everyone, and mum couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. And I attribute that to this. Because in a very small group, her mum and I have both been saying, speak louder, speak up. We've been valuing her opinion, letting her speak, and she's found that – she's found her voice! So I think that's a huge success story”

Parents spoke specifically of the opportunity to spend more time with their child, particularly in the primary school environment:

Parent: *"Yeah, [Name] loves it, when I come in to school."*

Parent: *"[Name] likes that I'm coming in, so it's something that me and him do together, and he really likes and looks forward to that as well"*

Parent: *"was good to get one-on-one time with them, within the school as well, so you can kind of see how it's all done"*

Parent: *"The first week or two he got quite upset going back into class; he's kind of okay now. I think he's going to be quite sad when it finishes."*

Practitioners also felt that the children enjoyed the extra time with their parents:

*PRACTITIONERS: "But I think on the whole, most of the children really enjoy the stories, and they get a lot out from just being beside their parent"*

*PRACTITIONERS: "So it's given a lot of people that opportunity to have one-on-one time with their child in a small, smaller setting than like larger events that we put on sometimes"*

Parents also cited language and literacy benefits associated with the programme, benefits to both themselves and their children. For example:

Parent: *"And you know, when we are all sitting together, our basic language is English to communicate, so you know, they learn, and we learn."*

Parent: *"I think it's not just good for the kids, but for people speakin' languages as well, so I think it's good for that as well..."*

Parent: *I liked we did literacy time in a wee circle. I don't do stories at home [note: mother has very poor literacy] so it was kinda like, that was her chance to fit in and do something like that.*

Parent: *"I am happy that [Name] hears correct pronunciation. Because when I read her, in English, it is not in English, it is poor English, something like this. So I am happy that she hears correct version of language."*

Aligning with the responses from the questionnaires, parents spoke of changes to their home life, that is, transfer from EWT to the home environment:

Parent: *"she wasnae interested in books at all. Wasnae interested at all. And now, since being here, every night, she's desperate, "mum, let's read it, let's read it again, let's read it again." I'm like, okay"*

Parent: *"Well, he's trying, my son, because my English, you know, is not quite nice. He's going to his sister, and he's saying, [Name], will you read me that kind of book. But yeah, he definitely – I am seeing some kind of change."*

Parent: *"It's the kind of things that I was doing, but do you know, [Name]'s more inclined to pick up a book and come to me, and say, can we read this together, rather than waiting for bedtime. Do you know I mean? It's in every – it's any time of day, rather than just nighttime."*

However, in one exchange with a parent, it was clear that what was done during EWT wasn't different from what they did at home already:

Interviewer: "Has it given you guys any ideas about stuff you can do at home that you might not have done already, or is it just the kind of stuff that you'd maybe"-

Parent: "It's just the same".

Interviewer: "Is it just the same?"

Parent: "Aye, reading books and sitting round more and stuff like that".

Practitioners also shared examples of changes to the home environment:

*PRACTITIONERS: "One mum, that hopefully'll be here today, was telling me that her child, he's in P2 now – they've had to buy a bookshelf, because the library every few weeks, buying and getting books, and he's totally just changed – he just wasn't interested before."*

Seeing how their child was at school was also important to parents:

Parent: "at home, and when I collect her from the school, she speak only Polish. So I don't know – does she speak English, or nothing? I don't know her progress. But when I came here, I see that she's understand, and she answer in English. So I am a little bit, not as worried as I was before."

Parent: "It's great to see [Name] with his peers, and in front of his teacher. Stuff that I take for granted that [Name] knows, or that we've done, and to hear him in front of other people saying it, I do get a little, "Oh! Forgot we've done that!" So that's lovely, that's really lovely."

Finally, parents felt exposure to other cultures/families was a benefit:

Parent: "because in the nursery we are having lots of parents from other communities, from other countries, so it is a great chance for us to learn about them, about their culture, how they treat their children"

The settings staff shared similar points as the parents, for example:

*PRACTITIONERS: "I would say that the parents have tended to stick to their own culture but since EWT there's been a crossover, where the parents were all standing having a good chat to each other when you came in in the morning – chatting to other cultures. It's certainly built relationships. I think it's very good."*

One practitioner member invited parents to participate in EWT even if they didn't feel they were in need of language/literacy support. Yet, they still felt they benefited:

*PRACTITIONERS: "But that's been another real wake-up call to me, because everyone benefits from EWT. if they've all signed up for it, you have to take them all. So I took parents, families I didn't think would benefit – but they did! They all benefit in some way."*

## **Volunteers**

Firstly, practitioners recognised the benefits to the volunteers, particularly when they were parents or from the local community. For example:

*“The one thing that’s surprised me has been the volunteers. I thought all the benefit would be for the children and their parents; I didn’t really think about the volunteers, but I’ve seen their immense benefit. Some of them have now got jobs because they felt confident, they had something to talk about in interviews. And one of them, who’s been involved, wasn’t... the best at doing homework and supporting her child, she’s also learned through being a volunteer. I’ve built up an amazing relationship with them”*

Volunteers echoed this sentiment:

Volunteer: *“Aye, and it’s improved my confidence and all. I feel as if my confidence has grown.”*

Volunteer: *“For us, aye. I’ve really enjoyed it.”*

Volunteer: *“You get to know more people”*

Volunteer: *“My grandson comes here, but it’s got me to meet different people.”*

Volunteer: *“We bounce off each other, yeah. Like, the child I’m working wasn’t particularly interested in this, and then someone will say, well why don’t you try that, and...”*

Volunteer: *“We all just work together.”*

Volunteers from Harper Collins typically expressed different benefits, for example:

Volunteer: *“you learn a lot about children, obviously, I learnt a lot about children that I didn’t really know already (laughs) like how mad they can be and how much fun they can be. I would say its worthwhile for the sole reason that you get to connect with them and learn with them and see them developing in a short space of time. It’s been an excellent experience.”*

Volunteer: *“Doing this has made me realise that I can probably do other types of things as well. You know, using my passion for books etc, do more voluntary work with kids. I think definitely, it makes me realise I could be of help in other voluntary sectors. It makes me less nervous about talking to children”*

Volunteer: *“I was thinking today, gosh, I’ve just started to get to know [Name], the little girl I’ve worked with, mostly, here, and next week’s my last week! And then that’ll be it, and I’ll never see her again! And I think it’s a real shame”*

Indeed, open-ended responses from the questionnaire illustrated that volunteers had a lot of praise for the programme: *“This is a great programme and really helpful for children”*; *“Great idea and kids loved it, definitely should keep it going, we all really enjoyed it”*. Volunteers felt that participating in EWT had been an enjoyable and rewarding experience for them: *“I would recommend taking part, I particularly enjoyed the responsive nature of the programme; “I’ve really enjoyed this experience and made new friendships”*; *“I thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience and would gladly volunteer again”*. In particular, volunteers liked the involvement they had with families: *“I have really enjoyed supporting other families and working with them”* and some reported increased confidence: *“The volunteering has made me feel more confident about speaking to staff and other parents in the nursery”*.

Furthermore, volunteers felt they had made a difference to the families they worked with: *“I feel the families have a closer relationship with myself and other members of staff in the nursery”; “All the children have improved and seem to be more confident and keen to express their ideas and get involved”; “We have made friendships in the group and we can support each other”.*

Although some recognised that not all families had benefitted: *“I felt that mum did not really want to be here but I did see a big improvement in the child in the week mum couldn't make it”.*

In addition to benefits to the families, volunteers reported development of their own skills, in terms of increased confidence: *“I now have the confidence to work anywhere”; “Has improved my confidence and my ability to work with someone I don't know”,* in addition to ideas about literacy and child development: *“I realise that it is not just about reading words, it's about observing what's round about you and that you can make stories about the world around you”.* Indeed, one volunteer also felt it improved her own home learning environment: *“I feel I have seen an improvement in my own child because of my involvement in Early Words”.*

#### **Practitioners:**

During the interviews, practitioners also reported benefits. The EWT programme and resources contributed to their professional learning and development. Practitioners recognised that there was always the opportunity for them to learn, even when they have experience and feel confident working with parents:

*PRACTITIONERS: “I've always loved working with parents, but what I would say is that its helped me build better relationships with some of the parents who came to this (EWT) class, because I know them very well now and they join in everything. So no, you never know it all, you can always come up with some other things”*

### **b) the drivers/barriers to engagement in the programme**

#### **Quantitative data**

Parents were very positive about the EWT programme itself and so there are no obvious barriers to participation in terms of the organisation or running of the programme (see Figure 6). More sessions would generally be well received, and more books/resources and longer sessions would be well received by some. Furthermore, all of the parents said that they would recommend EWT to other families and 59% said that they had already done so.

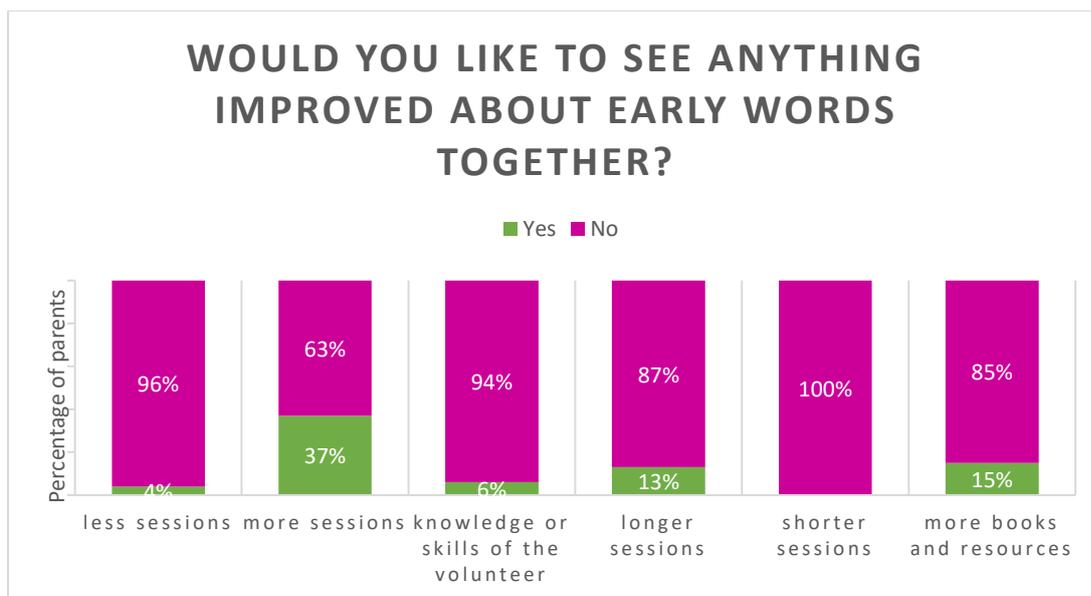


Figure 6. Parents reports of areas for improvement (n = 54).

#### Qualitative data

##### In terms of drivers:

Practitioners highlighted the desire to support parents from the local community as an important driver for them:

*PRACTITIONERS: "so we just got some parents, it was Chinese parents who started first and then the word went round and they all wanted to come, so we let them all come which was a bit unmanageable I have to say. I think I had 19 families all at the once. Then another four. So we had to go with 6 weeks of it being pretty chaotic with these families, and they were desperate to come I have to say".*

For parents, with regards drivers, they typically spoke of the social benefits of taking part, either for them or their children; parents did not mention language or literacy benefits per se. For example:

*Parent: "I just thought, I'm going to give everything a try because I never done it with my wee boy and I think that's held him back and that mix, it gets them out of their shell. So I'm going to do it properly with my wee girl and I actually quite enjoy it."*

*Parent: "I like to talk with other parents and I want to learn also from them, and because in the nursery we are having lots of parents from other communities, from other countries, so it is a great chance for us to learn about them, about their culture, how they treat their children"*

##### In terms of barriers:

Termly progress reports provided good insights into some of the main challenges encountered while running EWT. These included:

*Recruiting and retaining families: "The main issue that we have faced is getting families on board"; "One parent continually says that they will be attending and shows real interest at the time, however then does not turn up on the day"*

Pairing families with an appropriate volunteer (EAL): *“Pairing families that were suited to work together ie volunteer and parent”.*

Managing group dynamics: *“Out of the 3 families, there was only one whose first language was English, the other 2 shared a common language. The English speaking family felt 'left out'.”*

Recruiting and retaining volunteers: *“We found it hard to recruit volunteers”; “There were challenges with volunteer illness in this winter term”*

Space: *“Our challenge has been lack of space due to the group size as parents also had younger siblings working with them”*

Time: *“Running EWT required a lot of time, planning and preparation in order for it to run smoothly and efficiently within a busy nursery setting”.*

Staffing issues: *“I have just recently returned from long term sick leave and none of my colleagues could deliver the sessions”.*

Adapting EWT to suit the context (i.e., content seemed more appropriate for nursery setting but was being delivered in primary school setting): *“They [parents] also felt that some of the sessions were aimed at a nursery level. Due to this feedback we have had to adapted Early Words to suit our establishment [school]”.*

Other barriers were also shared during the interviews. For example:

Sharing information about the programme and the associated forms was seen in one setting as a potential barrier, and they put into place suitable approaches to manage this:

*PRACTITIONERS: “We had to get an interpreter in to explain to the parents what EWT was about as we are mainly EAL. Most of our parents are asylum seekers. They were not keen to do the forms or a formal registration or anything. When they saw forms and things they didn’t want to take part. We avoided the forms with the parents as from our understanding it was all about engagement”*

Parents noted that language or literacy skills could hold other parents back:

*Parents: “mostly parents are just shy because of the language barrier, so they are not getting involved; maybe they are having some fear or maybe they are hesitant.”*

Parents highlighted the importance of feeling comfortable with the practitioners who ran the session, or the volunteers helping:

*Parent: “It was kinda like, we weren’t comfy with the new woman. We thought, this isn’t for me. You feel better doing it with people you know. It holds people back a new face”.*

*Parent: “I think it depends on your face, if your face fits, and you feel comfy with them, then you’re fine. If they with us for a week or two and started chatting to us and see how we run it”.*

In addition to the context (i.e., nursery/school) which is not always welcoming for parents, as mentioned by practitioners and key individuals:

*PRACTITIONERS: “we want the school to be a welcoming place, and I think it is to an extent for some parents, but for some parents it’s still... school. Not comfortable here. Something to work on.”*

*PRACTITIONERS: “But a lot of parents feel a bit – there’s a barrier. They look at this as an “educational establishment,”*

Similar to information shared in the termly reports, time commitment, resources, staffing and space were also cited by practitioners during the interviews:

*PRACTITIONERS: "complete staff changes"*

*PRACTITIONERS: "We just didn't have the time or the space to run it. Or even the parents".*

*PRACTITIONERS: "we don't have a huge amount of children around at the moment either – the houses have been knocked down, new houses are being built"*

*PRACTITIONERS: "The barriers are time, time is definitely a barrier, for staff to do, if its something extra."*

*PRACTITIONERS: "Yeah, the planning. It would all have fallen apart if it wasn't for all of those volunteers."*

*PRACTITIONERS: "I have to phone every Monday morning, and remind them, otherwise they wouldn't come. But that's, again, there is a lot of time commitment, to phone them, text them, the planning..."*

*PRACTITIONERS: "probably the biggest barriers are time. 'cause parents will have other things on."*

Similarly, practitioners stated that recruiting volunteers was also an issue.

*PRACTITIONERS: "every session, I would put out the survey to parents, explaining about volunteering, but none have come forward"*

*PRACTITIONERS: "I think some of the nurseries have I think found it a bit easier to recruit volunteers. I think they've got a closer relationship with the parents and quite often the age of their children means that maybe they're not at work"*

However, responses from the open-ended questionnaire suggest that parents would be eager to volunteer in the future; now that they'd taken part, 78% of the parents said that they would volunteer on EWT themselves. For those who said that they would not volunteer the reasons were: language skills not good enough (6%); already work (4%); already volunteer (4%); couldn't commit (2%); anxiety (2%); too old (2%); or no reason given (4%).

Practitioners recognised and valued the support provided by Harper Collins volunteers, however some HC volunteers felt strongly that involving people from the local community in the programme as volunteers would be useful, also with regards to continuity to other instances of the programme:

*PRACTITIONERS: "Harper Collins... knowing that I can rely on their experience and their passion for literacy has made a big difference to how we're running it here. I know that there's always going to be somebody there to keep the child and the family engaged, which makes a big difference to how we run it"*

*HC Volunteer: "it'd be nice, probably nicer to have people from the local community, so there's a greater likelihood that there would be some sort of continuity."*

*PRACTITIONERS: "By now, we should have had some volunteers, you know, established from within the community who would keep coming. But that's been the major stumbling block for me."*

Indeed, key individuals recognised barriers to getting involved came not only from parents, but from settings. They noted that SG documentation may mean parent involvement/engagement moves up the agenda:

KI: *“Parental engagement has been the biggest stumbling block across the board. It has been a bit of a culture shift for primary schools, not so much in early years settings because they are quite used to parental engagement. It is changing, there has been a document released by the Scottish Government called [Learning Together](#) so there has been a change in schools – schools are very aware of this and it has moved parental engagement up the agenda. Schools will need to have a bit of a culture shift in terms of how they include and involve parents in their child’s learning.”*

### Question 3. Which have been the most effective approaches to parental engagement?

With a focus on the following contexts:

#### a) schools and nurseries (QUAL)

Survey questions did not tap into this research question; therefore, conclusions are drawn from the qualitative findings only.

Interviews highlighted that being flexible is important, to shape different contexts/needs/encourage parental engagement. For example, the programme was offered to mothers with two-year olds who practitioners thought would benefit:

*PRACTITIONERS: “Yeah, so the mum who didn’t have great literacy skills, her wee girl started to talk in this room, just cause it was a wee crowd. It was a different situation, her mammy was there. She wanted to do it again. Again, how could I say no, when it was so valuable for her”*

*PRACTITIONERS: “her girl was two, so again, it wasne by the book but I thought it was so worthwhile that I wanted her in. And that was our success story”*

Practitioners would also plan content to suit specific children who they thought would benefit but need more encouragement:

*PRACTITIONERS: “Based on kid’s interests, the first week was dinosaurs, because I know [Name] who’s coming was dinosaur mad, and his teacher said “oh, it might be a bit tricky with him,” I was like right, okay, dinosaurs it is”*

Practitioners also felt that they learnt from previous instances of running the programme, and were continuing to improve/run the programme more efficiently/effectively:

*PRACTITIONERS: “The first time round we didn’t really know how structured it should be, or – and then the second time round I actually produced a plan, every week. I didn’t really know what to do the first time! I wanted the volunteers to feel empowered, but they were giving me the vibe that they kind of wanted to be told what to do. So together we made a plan. We talked about what worked the best the first time, what was the best thing, what should we do again”*

*PRACTITIONERS: So next, if we’re doing it again, I would try and not have a family (i.e., would oversee the session).*

*PRACTITIONERS: "in that first group, which was really, really good. But I learned from that that was maybe just too many. So, but every time, and I've said this to [Name] and the parents, I'm just learning this as I'm going along, so they need to give me lots of feedback. I'll just learn each time it goes on"*

*PRACTITIONERS: "I think each time we do it, it will just get a wee bit better – it will just become ours. And it's about being flexible,"*

Practitioners stressed that how it was advertised was important to recruit parents:

*PRACTITIONERS: "I advertised it as a wee club thing, I didn't say it was a literacy club, though when we started I said it had a literacy slant"*

Ensuring the person responsible for running the EWT sessions understood the parents and their context was also incredibly important to ensure it was pitched appropriately:

*PRACTITIONERS: "The last time it ran, it wasn't so successful... But obviously she [volunteer English teacher] took it at a different slant and some parents signed up for it and said, 'we're not coming back' – I think it frightened them a wee bit. The girl who was running it, she was lovely, but it's a different role."*

In terms of effective parent engagement, practitioners recognised that in some instances, parents weren't going to benefit from EWT if they were simply complying with the request to attend:

*PRACTITIONERS: Getting parents has been difficult... although not as difficult as I expected it to be. I think there's maybe only two or three that – one was just like, absolutely not, not for any reason, just not interested in any literacy intervention, I invited her about three times. One resisted until I had a very lengthy conversation about what the programme was, but then they didn't get the most out of it; it was almost like they were just kind of coming because they felt that they should, because we said that they should. So I feel like that wasn't great, and I probably should have just went like, okay, I'll ask somebody else."*

Practitioners recognised that it could be difficult to encourage parents to take part, if they were unfamiliar to them:

*PRACTITIONERS: I'm a Primary 2 teacher, unless they've met me before, they don't really know who I am or what I'm about, what I'm doing.*

While some practitioners were careful how to promote the EWT session, sometimes parents felt more information could have been given to them:

*Parent: "don't think there was a lot of information before we came.... so maybe that would put some people off, just because it wasn't particularly clear, about what we were coming in to do, until we came in."*

In addition to being flexible to be more inclusive and meet the needs of the community, practitioners also needed to be flexible, due to other commitments at their setting (i.e., space, resources, staffing):

*PRACTITIONERS: “so we just have to be really flexible and the parents and volunteers have been really understanding”*

#### **b) library and community support services**

As part of the programme, in all settings, the families had a trip to the library:

*Practitioners: “I know we were always to do one week out of six to the library and we always did that. The library is just up the road there and we all joined and we had a story in the library”*

Practitioners reported changes in families, in terms of their use of the library, either from speaking to parents or receiving feedback on the form:

*Practitioners: “One mum, that hopefully’ll be here today, was telling me that her child, he’s in P2 now – they’ve had to buy a bookshelf, because the library every few weeks, buying and getting books”.*

*Practitioners: survey that’s like, do you do this less, more, or less, the same, or more, and it’s so interesting to see about all the literacy tasks, like about reading at night, or going to library*

Indeed, when asked what they liked the most, one parent replied:

*Parent: “And then going to the library, that we did last week; I think that was good”.*

#### **Question 4. How effective is the programme within the Glasgow context?**

##### **In particular:**

##### **a) The relation to other sources of support for parents within Glasgow and existing Early Intervention projects**

As above, survey questions did not tap into this research question; therefore, conclusions are drawn from the qualitative findings only.

In discussion with key individuals associated with EWT and based at Glasgow Life, it was clear that there are a range of opportunities for families in Glasgow to support and develop their child’s language and literacy skills, and efforts are consistently being made to increase parent engagement specifically.

For example:

*KI: “Glasgow Life provide a whole range - Bookbug, library class visit programme (engages directly with schools and children), the reading calendar (includes reading challenge, aye we write wee write programme). The family learning team, based directly in schools, they are employed specifically to raise attainment in the key areas of the attainment challenge – they do a lot of work with families and sometimes in community based settings. So, there is a lot of work for families and learning in schools. There’s also family support workers delivering programmes (future families programme – bounce and rhyme, toddlers tales, food and fun, wee play). They are all early intervention, early engagement and promoting early language and literacy”*

Although they recognised that much of this work could be better consolidated:

KI: *“there’s a lot of work going on across the city, both in libraries and communities which is maybe not as joined up as it should be.”*

In terms of their thoughts on Early Words Together and its potential in Glasgow:

KI: *“I stand by the programme, it has a lot of benefits, it’s going in the direction we want to go in, that collaborative approach is absolutely the direction we have to continue down.”*

## **b) The fit with the literacy-related goals for Glasgow**

EWT aligns very closely with the literacy-related goals for Glasgow, which are to raise attainment in literacy and numeracy through targeted support and interventions, and to support families to be better able to support their child’s learning and development. Furthermore, it aligns with key priorities of the Scottish Government, as outlined in the National Improvement Framework, which includes improving literacy attainment and closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people ([Scottish Government, 2018a](#)). Furthermore, EWT’s focus on parent engagement fits well with a recent Scottish Government national action plan (2018-2021) on parent involvement, engagement, family learning and learning at home ([Scottish Government, 2018b](#)). Finally, this evaluation aligns with the Scottish Government’s recognition for more Scottish-based evidence and programmes proven to work in a Scottish context ([Scottish Government, 2016](#)). Indeed, key individuals associated with the programme recognised the potential for programmes like Early Words Together to provide targeted work to support Glasgow’s literacy goals.

KI: *“There is huge recognition about the language gap, between children from high and low income, aged 3-5, this programme is about targeting those parents. It’s an excellent tool in terms of doing that targeted work.”*

KI: *“value attached to the home learning environment is absolutely crucial. If we can use programmes like this to highlight this with parents, they will be better able to support their children’s early learning. Early Words Together fits that agenda”.*

KI: *“I think it’s spot on actually. Seeing the parents and the children during a session, it’s magical.”*

## Recommendations

Recommendations are based on this evaluation (quantitative data and qualitative findings), in addition to observations by the research team during EWT sessions and relevant research literature.

### Evaluation

- Future evaluations of programmes should align RQ's more closely with the methods used to gather data, and consider designing RQs and questionnaires simultaneously, as many of the RQ items did not align specifically with the questionnaires designed at the beginning of the study. Furthermore, questionnaire items were too restrictive (i.e., focused on language, reading, communication) to understand quantitatively the full range of benefits parents, volunteers and practitioners derived from the programme, as many reported qualitatively that EWT had other benefits (e.g., confidence, developing relationships with nursery/school staff). A better understanding of the broad range of benefits will help with future questionnaire design as EWT continues to be evaluated.

### Volunteers

- EWT draws heavily on the support of volunteers to engage parents/families with their child's language and literacy learning. However, it may be useful to consider to what extent this is a necessary aspect of the programme. Firstly, settings sometimes found it difficult to start or maintain the programme as they did not have a sufficient number of volunteers to support it; this suggests the programme did not reach families that could have benefitted. Of greater concern however, were suggestions that sessions were sometimes too adult heavy, which was perceived to be intimidating for some children. Furthermore, the presence of a volunteer sometimes meant the parents allowed the volunteer to lead the activity, or felt they were being 'observed' while reading with their own child, or failed to attend the session as they knew a volunteer would be present. The presence of volunteers also had implications for group dynamics. For example, parents reported benefits of meeting other parents and getting to know setting staff; the presence of a volunteer may undermine these opportunities. That said, volunteers themselves were very positive about the programme and their participation in it, and many practitioners and parents also spoke positively about the volunteers. However, we would argue that flexibility with regard using volunteers may be appropriate, as different settings identify what works best for them and the families they support. If volunteers are used, it may be particularly beneficial to use parents who have already participated in EWT, as they will have first-hand experience of being a parent in the programme and therefore may be particularly tuned in to parents' needs.

### Age range

- EWT focuses on supporting families with young children aged 3-5; however, research literature suggests that children in this age range benefit from different shared reading practices (e.g., dialogic reading is more beneficial for younger children, aged 2-3). EWT could be re-organised to be better suited to developmental changes in children's language, literacy and communication skills. While activities and features of the EWT programme may be shared across the different age groups, variation would also be expected. Furthermore, the contexts in which EWT is delivered vary considerably (nursery vs school). From interviews with parents, it appears that EWT in the school setting offered a unique

opportunity for families to get to know the staff/environment of their child's new school and more focus around developing this new relationship could be useful for parents.

### Programme duration

- Given recent research findings to suggest that short (i.e., 6-8 week) shared reading interventions are unlikely to result in measurable changes to language skills (Noble et al., under review), we would recommend a longer programme to support families in future. While parents are encouraged to continue the EWT language/literacy activities after the programme has ended, it is likely that continued support is helpful to ensure levels of language/literacy engagement and activity does not decline. In this study, 37% of parents reported they would like more sessions (only 13% reported that they would like longer sessions). Furthermore, information from within the progress reports indicated that some families actively sought to continue their participation across more than one term. While recruiting (and retaining) practitioners, volunteers and parents for more sessions could be challenging, developing an exciting programme of activities may encourage everyone to engage in a longer programme of activities.

### Explicit instruction

- While positive findings were reported for the majority of parents who completed the questionnaire, approximately 35-45% of parents in this evaluation reported few or no changes in their own confidence, or their child's engagement, in language/literacy activities. This could be explained by a number of factors (e.g., families recruited already had positive home learning environments). However, even if this was the case, there are always opportunities to develop parents' knowledge and confidence. During observations of EWT, there was no clear teaching of optimal shared reading styles to parents (i.e., dialogic reading, see Appendix 9), despite evidence of its effectiveness (Flack et al., 2018). While skilled practitioners were often naturally modelling dialogic reading, there was no explicit teaching of this skill to parents, who are very unlikely to indirectly pick it up through observation. Research shows that shared reading interventions are less effective for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Manz, 2010; Mol et al., 2008); most likely because parents do not implement as effective reading strategies. Empowering parents to become more skilled in this area is likely to develop their confidence and result in more positive language and literacy outcomes for their children. Explicit teaching can be done easily and can make reading more fun for both parents and children.

### Focus

- While the primary focus of EWT is to support language and literacy, in the open-ended questionnaire items and interviews, parents, practitioners and volunteers consistently reported social and emotional benefits (increased confidence, opportunity to socialise, spend time with child). While this broader range of benefits is beneficial, it is possible that the benefits to language/literacy are reduced, as practitioners, volunteers and parents start to identify with a broader range of benefits being developed and change the focus of the programme/activities accordingly. Practitioners should be clear from the outset what their goals are for the programme (i.e., develop language/literacy, increase parent engagement) and be mindful of how changes to the focus of each session will have implications for the programme outcomes.

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Duncan and McGeown have recently founded LALco: Language and literacy: Communication, collaboration, co-production, a multidisciplinary network to bring together individuals with shared interests in language and literacy, but different areas of knowledge and expertise. Our aim is to create a context for inclusive dialogue and generate evidence-based and workable solutions to increase language and literacy attainment and narrow the poverty related attainment gap. Details of this project and the network can be found here: [www.lalco.org.uk](http://www.lalco.org.uk).

