Communication and language approaches emphasise the importance of spoken language and verbal interaction for young children. They are based on the idea that children’s language development benefits from approaches that explicitly support communication through talking, verbal expression, modelling language and reasoning. Communication and language approaches used in the early years include reading aloud to children and discussing books, explicitly extending children’s spoken vocabulary by introducing them to new words in context, and drawing attention to letters and sounds. They also include approaches more directly aimed at developing thinking and understanding through language, such as ‘sustained shared thinking’ or ‘guided interaction’. Approaches usually involve an early years professional, nursery teacher or teaching assistant, who has been trained in the approach, working with a small group of children or individually to develop spoken language skills.

How secure is the evidence?

There is an extensive evidence base showing the impact of communication and language approaches, including a number of meta-analyses. The evidence is relatively consistent, suggesting that communication and language approaches can be successful in a variety of environments. Little is known about the long-term impact of communication and language approaches, so additional evidence about whether, and how to ensure that, benefits are maintained once children start school would be valuable. The evidence base includes a number of high quality studies from the UK.

A 2016 randomised controlled trial found a positive impact of four months’ additional progress for the Nuffield Early Language Intervention – a programme designed to improve the spoken language ability of children during the transition from nursery to primary school.

How effective is it?

Overall, studies of communication and language approaches consistently show positive benefits for young children’s learning, including their spoken language skills, their expressive vocabulary and their early reading skills. On average, children who are involved in communication and language approaches make approximately six months’ additional progress over the course of a year. All children appear to benefit from such approaches, but some studies show slightly larger effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Some types of communication and language approaches appear, on average, to be more effective than others. There is consistent evidence that reading to young children, and encouraging them to answer questions and talk about the story with a trained adult, is an effective approach. A number of studies show the benefits of programmes where trained teaching assistants have supported both oral language and early reading skills.

Most studies comment on the importance of training and professional development, and supporting early years practitioners with the implementation of different approaches. There are indications that settings should use a range of different approaches to developing communication and language skills, as it is unlikely that one approach alone is enough to secure progress.

What are the costs?

Overall, the costs are estimated as very low. There are few, if any, direct financial costs associated with the approach. Additional resources such as books for discussion may be required. In a recent UK evaluation, the cost of these additional resources was estimated at between £10 and £20 per pupil. Professional development or training is also likely to enhance the benefits on learning. One intensive communications programme evaluated by the EEF costed around £80 per child for a 30-week intervention, which included professional development.
Communication and language approaches: What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. How can you help children to articulate and express their ideas and experiences verbally?
2. What training will adults involved receive to ensure they are able to model and develop children’s spoken language skills?
3. How can you link children’s spoken language to the development of their writing and reading skills?
4. Combining a range of communication and language approaches is likely to be more effective than a single approach. How will you ensure that children are exposed to a range of different strategies?
Technical Appendix

Definition
Communication and language approaches emphasise the importance of spoken language and verbal interaction for young children in across range of pre-school and early years settings. They are based on the idea that children’s language development benefits from approaches that explicitly support communication through talking, verbal expression, modelling language and reasoning. Communication and language approaches used in the early years include sustained shared thinking, guided interaction, reading aloud and discussing books with young children, explicitly extending children’s spoken vocabulary by introducing them to new words in context, and drawing attention to letters and sounds. Approaches usually involve an early years professional, nursery teacher or teaching assistant, who has been trained in the approach, working with a small group of children or individually to develop spoken language skills.

Search Terms: language intervention, communication intervention, oral language, spoken language, speaking and listening, reading aloud, read-aloud, oral reading, story reading, book reading, shared reading, joint reading, story book, dialogic reading

Evidence Rating
There are seven meta-analyses indicating that communication and language interventions can produce positive benefits for young children’s learning, including their spoken language skills, their expressive vocabulary and their early reading skills. Six have been conducted in the last 10 years, but a number of included studies have only limited causal inference and the effect sizes vary widely, particularly in terms of different outcomes measured. All children appear to benefit from such approaches, but some studies show slightly larger effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (up to seven months’ additional progress). Overall the evidence is rated as extensive.

Additional Cost Information
Overall, the costs are estimated as very low. There are few, if any, direct financial costs associated with the approach. Additional resources such as books for discussion may be required. In a recent UK evaluation, the cost of these additional resources was estimated at between £10 and £20 per pupil. Professional development or training is also likely to enhance the benefits on learning. One intensive communications programme evaluated by the EEF costed around £80 per child for a 30-week intervention, which included professional development.
References

1 Blok, H. (Abstract)
Reading to Young Children in Educational Settings: A Meta-Analysis of Recent Research
Language Learning, 49(2), 343-371 (1999)

2 Bourier-Crane, C., Snowling, M. J., Duff, F. J., Fieldsend, E., Carroll, J. M., Miles, J., & Hulme, C.
Improving early language and literacy skills: Differential effects of an oral language versus a phonology with reading intervention

3 Correll, K.
A program evaluation of a conversational instruction program for the vocabulary development of four-year-old students in preschool classes
EdD Dissertation University of Houston (2008)

Children’s Story Retelling as a Literacy and Language Enhancement Strategy
Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) Reviews 5.2 (2012b)

5 Fricke, S., Bowyer-Crane, C., Haley, A. J., Hulme, C., & Snowling, M. J.
Efficacy of language intervention in the early years

6 Goodson, B., Wolf, A., Bell, S., Turner, H., & Finney, P. B.
Effectiveness of a Program to Accelerate Vocabulary Development in Kindergarten (VOCAB): First Grade Follow-Up Impact Report and Exploratory Analyses of Kindergarten Impacts

7 Marulis, L. M., & Neuman, S. B. (Abstract)
The Effects of Vocabulary Intervention on Young Children’s Word Learning A Meta-Analysis
Review of Educational Research, 80(3), 300-335 (2010)

8 Mol, S. E., Bus, A. G., & de Jong, M. T. (Abstract)
Interactive book reading in early education: A tool to stimulate print knowledge as well as oral language

9 Nuffield Early Language Intervention Evaluation report and executive summary
London: Education Endowment Foundation (2016)

10 Swanson, E., Vaughn, S., Wanzek, J., Petscher, Y., Heckert, J., Cavanaugh, C., & Tackett, K (Abstract)
A synthesis of read-aloud interventions on early reading outcomes among preschool through third graders at risk for reading difficulties

11 Zevenbergen, A. A., Whitehurst, G. J., & Zevenbergen, J. A.
Effects of a shared-reading intervention on the inclusion of evaluative devices in narratives of children from low-income families
## Summary of effects

### Meta-analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>FSM effect size</th>
<th>Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blok, H., (1999)</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Oral language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunst, C.J., Simkus, A., Hamby, D.W., (2012b)</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunst, C.J., Simkus, A., Hamby, D.W., (2012a)</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Literacy (overall average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mol, S. E., Bus, A. G., &amp; de Jong, M. T., (2009)</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>Oral language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swanson, E., Vaughn, S., Wanzek, J., Petscher, Y., Heckert, J., Cavanaugh, C., &amp; Tackett, K. (2011)</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Phonological awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Works Clearinghouse, (2015)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Language development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Single Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>FSM effect size</th>
<th>Measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correll, K. (2008)</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricke, S., Bowyer-Crane, C., Haley, A. J., Hulme, C., &amp; Snowling, M. J. (2013)</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Phoneme awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Academic knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IES (2010)</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Oral language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Cognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibieta, L., Kotecha, M. &amp; Skipp, A. (2016)</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>-0.94</td>
<td>Language skills (30 week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>Language skills (20 week)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Effect size (weighted mean):** 0.47

The right hand column provides detail on the specific outcome measures or, if in brackets, details of the intervention or control group.

### Meta-analyses abstracts

For more information, tools & supporting resources, please visit:
https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/
This article reviews 10 studies, comprising 11 samples, of the effects of reading to young children in schools. The age of the children varied between 31 and 90 months. Dependent variables were classified in 2 domains: oral language and reading skills. The combined effect size for the oral language domain was $d = .63$, and for the reading domain $d = .41$. Although these figures look promising, caution is needed because the empirical evidence appears to be meager. Not only is the number of studies small, but a critical analysis of the design of the studies generally reveals poor quality.

The effects of children’s story retelling on early literacy and language development was examined in a meta-analysis of 11 studies including 687 toddlers and preschoolers. Results indicated that children’s story retelling influenced both story-related comprehension and expressive vocabulary as well as non story-related receptive language and early literacy development. Findings also showed that the use of the characteristics that experts consider the important features of retelling practices was associated with positive child outcomes. Implications for practice are described.

The effects of reading to infants and toddlers were examined in a meta-analysis of six intervention studies including 408 participants. Results indicated that interventions were effective in promoting the children’s expressive and receptive language. The benefits of the interventions increased the earlier the interventions were started and the longer they were implemented. Implications of the findings for research and practice are described.

This meta-analysis examines the effects of vocabulary interventions on pre-K and kindergarten children’s oral language development. The authors quantitatively reviewed 67 studies and 216 effect sizes to better understand the impact of training on word learning. Results indicated an overall effect size of $d = .88$, demonstrating, or average, a gain of nearly one standard deviation on vocabulary measures. Moderator analyses reported greater effects for trained adults in providing the treatment, combined pedagogical strategies that included explicit and implicit instruction, and author-created measures compared to standardized measures. Middle- and upper-income at-risk children were significantly more likely to benefit from vocabulary intervention than those students also at risk and poor. These results indicate that although they might improve oral language skills, vocabulary interventions are not sufficiently powerful to close the gap—even in the preschool and kindergarten years.

This meta-analysis examines what extent interactive storybook reading stimulates two pillars of learning to read: vocabulary and print knowledge. The authors quantitatively reviewed 31 (quasi) experiments ($n = 2,049$ children) in which educators were trained to encourage children to be actively involved before, during, and after joint book reading. A moderate effect size was found for oral language skills, implying that both quality of book reading in classrooms and frequency are important. Although teaching print-related skills is not part of interactive reading programs, $7\%$ of the variance in kindergarten children’s alphabetic knowledge could be attributed to the intervention. The study also shows that findings with experimenters were simply not replicable in a natural classroom setting. Further research is needed to disentangle the processes that explain the effects of interactive reading on children’s print knowledge and the strategies that may help transfer intervention effects from researchers to children’s own teachers.

A synthesis and meta-analysis of the extant research on the effects of storybook read-aloud interventions for children at risk for reading difficulties ages 3 to 8 is provided. A total of 29 studies met criteria for the synthesis, with 18 studies providing sufficient data for inclusion in the meta-analysis. Read-aloud instruction has been examined using dialogic reading; repeated reading of stories; story reading with limited questioning before, during, and/or after reading; computer-assisted story reading; and story reading with extended vocabulary activities. Significant, positive effects on children’s language, phonological awareness, print concepts, comprehension, and vocabulary outcomes were found. Despite the positive effects for read-aloud interventions, only a small amount of outcome variance was accounted for by intervention type.

What Works Clearinghouse (2015)

*Shared Book Reading* encompasses practices that adults can use when reading with young children to enhance language and literacy skills. During shared book reading, an adult reads a book to an individual child or to a group of children and uses one or more planned or structured interactive techniques to actively engage the children in the text. The adult may direct the children’s attention to illustrations, print, or word meanings. The adult may engage children in discussions focused or understanding the meaning or sequence of events in a story or on understanding an expository passage. Adults may ask children questions, give explanations, and draw connections between events in the text and those in the children’s own lives as a way of expanding on the text and scaffolding children’s learning experiences to support language development, emergent reading, and comprehension. Importantly, the adult engages in one or more interactive techniques to draw attention to aspects of the text being read.