



TALKING TIME EVALUATION

Pilot Year Evaluation

Denise Coster and Chris Wellings

Learning from Implementing Talking Time in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee.

Executive Summary

Thrive at Five is a place-based initiative focused on helping children develop strong foundations for life and learning in their early years. This report examines the implementation, and early effectiveness of, the Talking Time intervention¹ in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee which was introduced in the 2023/2024 school year. Talking Time aims to enhance nursery children's oral language skills through small-group activities, professional development for staff, and supportive resources. A total of 187 children across nursery classes in six schools participated in the Talking Time pilot year. The schools selected which children to include in group sessions, resulting in 160 children benefiting from these sessions.² The evaluation of the first year of Talking Time focused on three main objectives: assessing how well the intervention was implemented, looking at changes for children and teachers, and identifying ways to improve local delivery in future years.³

What worked well?

- Data collected from nurseries during the 2023–2024 academic year demonstrates a significant improvement in early communication skills. Overall, 71% of children showed an improvement. In total, 93 children (52.5%) had language abilities within the normal range at the end of the year, compared to 48 children (27.9%) at the beginning. Whilst it is not possible based on this study to attribute these changes to the Talking Time intervention, the scores combined with positive reflections from teachers and Thrive at Five staff on the intervention (see below) represent an encouraging start.
- Thrive at Five's involvement helped secure commitment from schools who received training paid for and facilitated by Thrive at Five including twilight training sessions, in-class mentoring, and weekly reflection sessions. The structured training, blending theory with practical application, was highly effective. Support from Thrive at Five through follow-up visits and responsive guidance helped keep the momentum going.
- Nursery staff reported that the universal design of Talking Time resulted in benefits for all children regardless of their language development levels. This is important in schools where there is a high and variable level of need.
- Some schools adapted their teaching, ensuring the intervention complemented or replaced existing teaching methods and any other targeted support they were providing to children.
- Teachers reported increased confidence and improved teaching practices, with more intentional and inclusive interactions with children. They also noted that children showed enhanced vocabulary, communication skills, and confidence. The story-based activities were engaging and promoted participation and language development

¹ [Talking Time© – Department of Education \(ox.ac.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/talking-time)

² It's important to note that the intervention is designed so that other children in the class should also benefit, as the Talking Time intervention fosters a language-rich classroom environment by equipping teachers with strategies to promote language development, such as using open-ended questions and encouraging discussions.

³ To explore these issues, we conducted an *Interview with Thrive at Five Lead*, got *Qualitative Feedback from Staff*, conducted *Pre- and Post-Analysis of the Early Communication Screen Scores*: Basic demographic data and scores from the Early Communication Screen which all schools in the ward complete were collected for each child at the start and end of the school year (Autumn term 2023 – Summer term 2024).

What were the challenges?

- Staffing issues, such as high turnover, and the demands of existing curricula posed some challenges, threatening to undermine the intervention's sustainability. In all but one of the schools, nursery staff left, moved into different classes, or went on maternity leave.
- Ensuring equal access for all children in mixed-ability groups and balancing small group sessions with whole class teaching was challenging for some schools. In some schools not all children participated in small group sessions.
- Resource demands, including more materials and planning time, highlighted the need for better resource sharing and collaboration among schools.

What could be improved?

- Providing repeat training for new teachers, and encouraging schools to put forward for training, where possible, those staff who are likely to remain in nursery roles and who do not have leadership responsibilities could help overcome staffing issues.
- Developing follow-up support with regular check-ins, feedback sessions, and ongoing help to sustain training momentum and troubleshoot issues could help keep schools on track and adapt Talking Time to their own contexts.
- A system for sharing resources and collaborative planning among schools would make the intervention more sustainable.
- Ensuring that all children participate in the small group sessions would give children the best chance of making progress.

1 Background

At Thrive at Five, we focus on improving early childhood outcomes in areas with concentrations of social disadvantage so that more children [in these disadvantaged places] reach a "Good level of Development" by the end of the Reception Year. We unlock the power of parents to give their children the nurturing care they need. We also collaborate with local stakeholders to help create a comprehensive pathway of high-quality support for children and families from pregnancy through to the end of reception.

In Abbey Hulton and Bentilee, two wards on the eastern border of Stoke-on-Trent, we've been working with schools and nurseries since 2022. Our Early Years Development Lead has built strong relationships with these education providers, all of whom confirmed that many children were entering nursery and reception with below-expected levels of speech and language development. The Nuffield Early Language Intervention, which draws on undergraduate students and peripatetic support staff to improve reception children's language skills, was first delivered in the 2022/2023 school year⁴. Additionally, work with schools to improve the home/school transition has been in progress since summer 2022⁵. Pre-school children and parents are also accessing more parent and baby toddler groups set up through collaboration with the local community and voluntary and education sector partners. This left a gap at the nursery level for an intervention that could further bolster the pathway of support, particularly around language and communication.

To address this, we consulted with local schools and Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) early education and childcare settings and reviewed potential interventions. In early 2023, we collectively decided to introduce the Talking Time intervention. To get the work underway, we organised a session with a Talking Time consultant⁶ and local educators to outline the delivery schedule and clarify expectations. Training began shortly after, and the intervention was rolled out in schools during the 2023/24 school year.

This short paper evaluates Talking Time's pilot year of delivery in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee. It draws on qualitative feedback from both key members of the Thrive at Five team and school staff. It also draws on quantitative data collected from local schools including screening data administered at the start-and-end of the nursery year.

2 About Talking Time

Talking Time is an oral language intervention for nursery children, designed to enhance their language skills through high-quality interactions in small-group activities. The strategies are then carried into whole class teaching (continuous provision). Training is structured into three parts: developing children's conversational skills, enhancing children's vocabulary, and integrating these approaches into everyday practice. Professional development for staff includes workshops, in-class mentoring, video mentoring, and reflective practice using a framework of *Rehearse, Notice, Analyse, and Refine*. This approach helps staff become skilled in communication-supporting practices throughout the day.

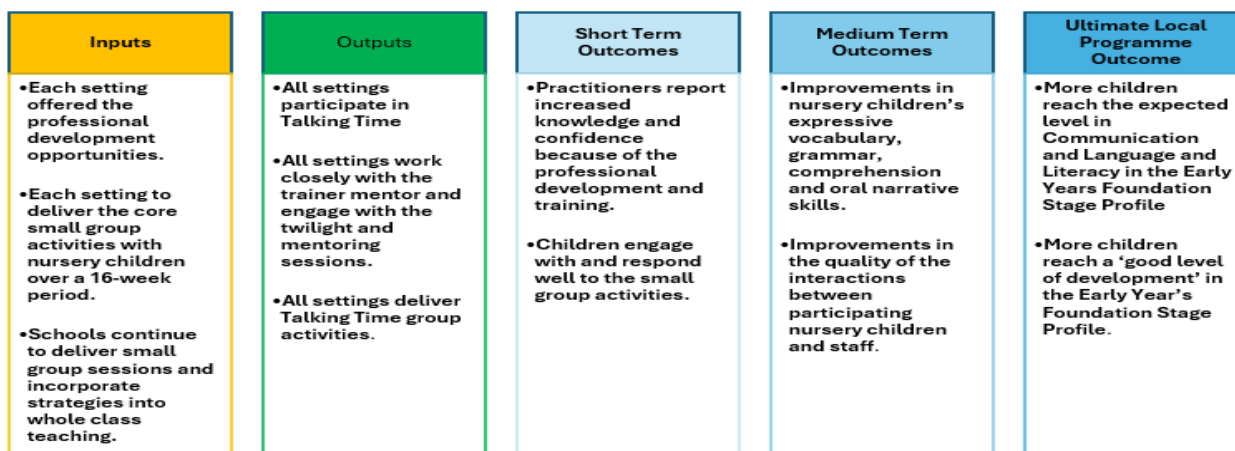
⁴ [The Nuffield Early Language Workstream – Thrive at Five](#)

⁵ [Transitions Workstream 2023 \(thriveatfive.org.uk\)](#)

⁶ [Lingo – Speech and Language Therapy and Consultancy by Wendy Lee \(lingospeech.co.uk\)](#)

The Theory of Change below sets out how Talking Time was delivered and the hoped-for outcomes:

Figure 1: Talking Time Theory of Change



3 What happened?

Six schools in Abbey Hulton and Bentilee implemented the Talking Time intervention, with each receiving comprehensive professional development, including training, mentoring, and weekly reflection sessions. Nurseries had a Talking Time lead and Talking Time support staff. They conducted twice-weekly 15-minute small-group activities for children, and a weekly reinforcement activity, for a period of 20 weeks, all supported by high-quality resources.⁷ The table below (table 1) details the schools, the number of groups they set up and the total number of children who received the small group activities.⁸

Table 1: Talking Time delivery⁹.

School	Groups	Children in Talking Time Groups	Numbers in the nursery cohort	Staff members
Carmountside	5	21	21	2
Eaton Park	9	43	45	2
Kingsland	3	41	46	2
Maple Court	5	25	26	2
Our Lady and St Benedict	3	15	26	2
St Maria Goretti	4	15	23	2

⁷ Schools are given a manual, five picture books, a starter pack of photos to support sessions, activity instructions, flexible plans, a timetable to support delivery, prompts and ideas for follow up activities.

⁸ This data is from logs kept by schools. Two schools, Our Lady and St Benedict and St Maria Goretti, didn't include all children in the small group delivery according to these logs.

⁹ Staff recorded group allocations and sessions delivered as part of the intervention. However, the data provided by the schools does not identify which children participated in the small group sessions, limiting any individual level analysis to understand the impact of this element of Talking Time.

4 What worked well in implementation?

Existing relationships between schools and the Thrive at Five Early Years Development Lead enabled early conversations with schools and ensured there was effective buy-in to the intervention. Subsequently, Thrive at Five provided money for training and helped identify where schools needed additional support to keep them on track. The Early Years Development Lead also brokered the relationship with the speech, language, and communication consultant who provided the training, supporting her in providing additional guidance for schools as necessary.

The training was felt to be highly effective, offering a range of strategies that were easily digestible for teachers. It was broken down into manageable pieces, making it less overwhelming. Participants valued the twilight sessions followed by in-class observations, which allowed them to first understand the theory and then see it applied in real classroom settings. The final part of the training focused on integrating newly developed skills into daily practice and helped teachers adapt stories and real-life opportunities into teaching moments. This proved effective in reinforcing the training and ensuring it became part of the teachers' regular routines.

"I think the Speech, Language and Communication advisor has been really, really effective. I think the way in which they've organised it and set out the intervention in a really consistent and effective way, so the twilight followed by an in-school visit is probably one of the most effective ways of delivering training I've ever seen, because what they do by doing that is they give all the theory in the background and then they go into schools and they prove that it will work with those children" (Early Years Development Lead).

The successful training was further supported by follow-up visits and ongoing support. The trainer conducted visits to observe implementation and provide additional assistance as needed. This ongoing support was important in maintaining momentum and addressing challenges. In two nurseries where there were implementation challenges (such as changeover in nursery staff), follow-up visits by the Thrive at Five lead helped address these issues by providing delivery guidance.

Resources and materials provided during the training were well-received. They included visually engaging materials such as photographs that served as excellent discussion prompts, helping children relate to their own experiences. The storybooks provided were particularly effective in introducing new vocabulary, containing rich discussion points and opportunities for role-playing. One teacher commented on the value of these resources, noting how they helped children grasp the meaning of new words through interactive play.

Staff appreciated that Talking Time was a universal intervention, making it easier to include all children and avoid losing sessions. The strategies could be used with children at any level of language development, moving children who only had one or two words to using phrases, and moving children with better language skills onto using sentences. The universality of the intervention allowed for flexibility in grouping children, which was particularly effective in part-time nurseries with varying attendance schedules. One school also replaced their literacy curriculum with Talking Time which meant that Talking Time was effectively embedded.

"And because it is universal, it's easier to keep your groups, so if you've got little Billy and Sammy who are missing from one group, they can join another one to catch up on the day they come in. So that element is much more effective than having the kind of intervention where you've got to have the same groups of children and that would be particularly effective if you had a part-time nursery where you've got different children coming in on different dates." (Nursery leader).

Teachers also felt that because the intervention was for all children, they were more likely to engage with all the children in the class of differing abilities. When the intervention was being followed, it meant that they were having focused conversations with all children in the class at least twice a week.

Regular reflection before, during, and after sessions, along with weekly professional reflections and tools like RNAR sheets, helped teachers identify areas for improvement and enhance session delivery. Collaborative planning sessions within schools, where teachers shared ideas and resources, were also noted as valuable, leading to more effective implementation of the intervention.

5 What were the challenges in implementation?

Despite the success of the intervention, there were some challenges to implementation which may go on to impact the sustainability of the intervention going forward. Some of these challenges are resolvable with support but some are related to the wider contextual challenges that schools face, such as workforce issues.¹⁰

Staffing issues were significant, especially in larger schools with only two trained staff members. Teachers had to spend considerable time delivering sessions, which limited their ability to cascade training and support the intervention's sustainability. Additionally, having senior teachers trained led to disruptions in implementation, as leaders were often pulled in multiple directions.

"If it's a sixty-place nursery with five or six staff and only two of the staff have had the training, they've got to get through those 50-odd kids, so they don't have time to be modelling the intervention for other staff. They've got to power through, and they've had to change their timetables to get through all the group delivery." (Early Years Development Lead)

High staff turnover threatened the effectiveness of embedding and sustaining Talking Time. In all but one of the schools¹¹, nursery staff left, moved into different classes, or went on maternity leave. This suggests that one year may not be enough to support schools in effectively implementing Talking Time when school staffing is in such a state of flux and emphasises the importance of Thrive at Five's role in helping schools to overcome challenges and support staff.

Ensuring all children had equal access to the intervention was a concern expressed by some teachers. In two schools not all children seemed to have been engaged in small group sessions.¹² Furthermore, managing mixed-ability groups posed challenges, with quieter children sometimes overshadowed by more confident peers. Teachers responded by adapting sessions to meet diverse needs but reported that this was time-consuming. In one school, sessions were run with two children separately, requiring additional planning to ensure all children could access and benefit from the intervention effectively.

"The mixed groups are still a challenge as we have some children with Speech and Language difficulties and some who are very confident and others who are not. I do sometimes feel that I am trying to stop some children from taking over the whole session... We have tried to tailor the groups and ideas to better meet these needs, but I find I am very often having to tell some children to speak a little less and encourage the others more." (Nursery Leader)

Balancing small group sessions with whole class teaching also presented challenges. While small group sessions were acknowledged for their impact, managing time constraints was difficult, particularly if

¹⁰ [Blog: The workforce challenges facing an incoming government – Education Policy Institute \(epi.org.uk\)](https://epi.org.uk/blog/the-workforce-challenges-facing-an-incoming-government)

¹¹ Carmountside

¹² Our lady and St Benedict and St Maria Goretti

teachers had tried and tested ways of whole class teaching, they felt were effective. Some schools also still ran additional support sessions for children alongside Talking Time and teachers worried about balancing different times given to different activities. In schools with bigger class sizes, it was also sometimes difficult to find a quiet area. The demand for more resources, including additional copies of books, to accommodate larger groups of children was also cited as an issue.

Finally, the time it took to gather resources, plan additional continuous provision activities, adapt materials, and share joint planning was significant. Encouraging schools to share resources and collaborate on developing and implementing training materials was challenging across different schools. Without a structured system for resource sharing, opportunities for collective learning and leveraging expertise were missed.

What changed for Nursery Staff and Children?

For Nursery Staff: Throughout the intervention period, teachers reported a growing sense of confidence in delivering sessions and a clearer understanding of their objectives. Witnessing the impact of these sessions on student learning reinforced their confidence.

Teachers also spoke about changes in their practice and fine-tuning their approach. The intervention facilitated skill refinement through reflection on teaching practices. They [teaching staff] noted changes in their approach during carpet time sessions, focusing more on supporting children's conversations.

Teachers also reflected that the intervention had improved their interactions with children. One teacher noted that the intervention enabled them to talk to every child regularly, revealing that some children were not receiving as much attention as they needed. This realisation led to more intentional and inclusive interactions with all students.

"When I've spoken to the teachers, which of course you'll get this feedback, it's all about how this is helping me to talk to every child on a regular basis. Some of them have said they're really reflective practitioners and didn't realise that there were some children they weren't talking to as much as they should have been. Very often, these are the children that need it most." (Early Years Development Lead)

As time went on, some teachers found they were using their time more effectively. They expressed satisfaction in integrating newly acquired skills into their everyday practice, contrasting this with standalone interventions that can be time-consuming.

Staff observed changes for children: Overall, children enjoyed and engaged with Talking Time. The story-based approach allowed children to relate to familiar concepts while introducing new ones in an engaging way. This approach was generally effective in holding children's attention and most groups were enthusiastic, actively participating, and offering numerous opportunities for discussion and vocabulary expansion. However, some groups required additional encouragement and guidance to fully engage.

"They have loved the word play session! Very engaged and eager to participate in the role-playing activities. Their confidence has grown very much since starting these sessions." (Nursery Lead)

The approach helped children connect with the material, enhancing their understanding of the meaning of words and enabling them to communicate aspects of their home life more effectively. Teachers observed a noticeable increase in the variety of vocabulary children used during play. They began linking back to different stories, incorporating new words and sentences they had learned previously. Some children

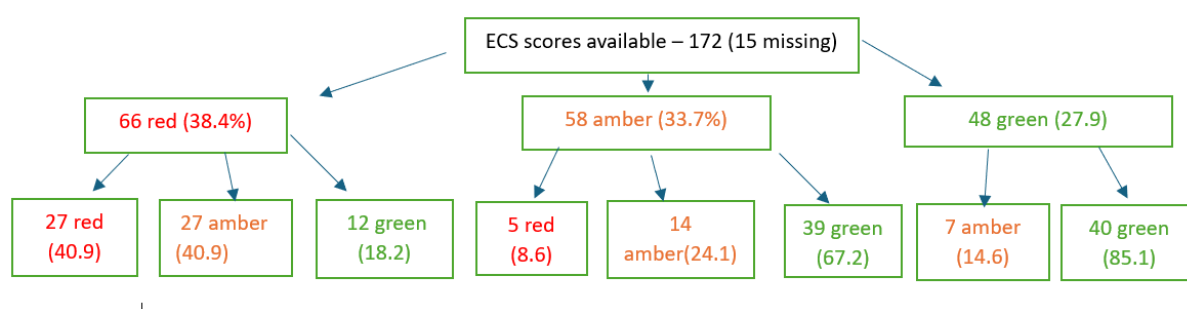
began to create their own stories, imagining new endings, and considering what might happen next, then acting out their thoughts. For instance, they role-played scenarios such as having a library, and some children expressed excitement about creating their own gardens at home.

Teachers also reported improvements in children's confidence and interaction with their peers. They confirmed that it was heartening to see children eagerly participating and expressing their opinions. Smaller groups encouraged more reluctant children to join in, showing notable improvement in the language development of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). During some group sessions, quieter children started to come out of their shells, enjoying interactions with others, which in turn enhanced their confidence during play.

Change in language scores: All schools completed Early Communication Screen Scores for every child in the autumn term and again in the summer term. This screening instrument is designed to identify language delay and was developed by the local speech and language service. By looking at scores at the start and end of term, we can begin to understand changes in language development over this period.

A red score indicates children with significant language delay/disorder who require intervention, scoring 0–3 out of 10. Amber indicates children with mild to moderate language delay who require differentiated support and/or targeted intervention, scoring 4–7 out of 10. Amber children's needs can sometimes be met through adjustments to everyday planning. Green indicates language within the normal range or above, with a score of 8–10.

Figure 2 illustrates how children initially scored in the autumn and how they scored in the summer.

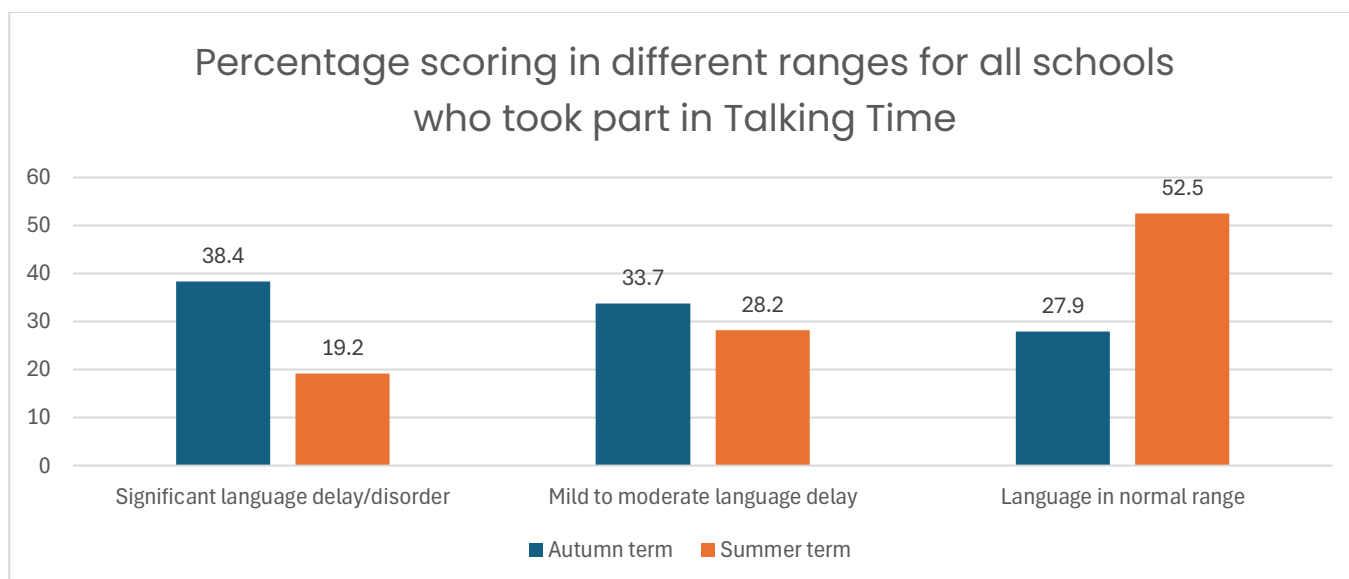


Of those 66 children who started off as red, 12 children (8.6%) moved to green, and 27 children (40.0%) moved to amber. Of those 58 children who started off as amber, 39 children (67.2%) progressed to green. Overall, 78 children (62.9%) made progress by improving bands out of the original cohort of 124 who were red and amber.

Figure 3 shows the percentage change from the autumn term to the summer term¹³. The number of children across all schools with significant language delay and mild to moderate language delay decreased, and the number of children with language within the normal range increased from approximately a quarter to a half. Of course, it is not possible to infer that the Talking Time intervention caused these positive improvements. It is possible that wider confounding factors were responsible for the changes. To ascribe attribution, we would require a more robust evaluation with a control group and intervention group as the basis for comparison. Nonetheless, the positive shifts that can be seen in the data are encouraging (especially when combined with the positive qualitative data we also collected).

¹³ Please note we don't have pre and post scores for all children.

Fig 3: Language scores for all schools who did Talking Time – autumn and summer terms.



We also looked at changes in the overall scores for all individuals. This provides a more nuanced understanding of changes across all the scores, rather than just movement between different bands. We used a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, a method used to compare two related samples, in this case the autumn scores and the summer scores. (The SPSS output is in Appendix 1.) The results showed that 122 cases showed an increase in scores, 25 cases showed a decrease in scores and 24 cases were the same. The Wilcoxon test showed that this difference is significant and not due to chance. The large number of cases where the summer result was higher, as well as a higher mean score in summer than in autumn, suggests that children have made positive progress in their language development. Overall, 71% of children improved their communication and language skills as measured by the Early Communication Screen.

We also then examined the change for each school. Table 2 shows that in this analysis, Eaton Park and Maple Court, show the greatest mean change.

- Eaton Park has the highest mean change score (3.3864), indicating the greatest average improvement among the schools.
- The standard deviations¹⁴ suggest varying levels of consistency in score changes, with Our Lady and St. Benedict showing the most consistent improvements (smallest standard deviation: 0.74) and Carmountside showing the most variability (largest standard deviation: 2.87).

It is interesting to note that Eaton Park and Maple Court included nearly all children in Talking Time sessions and had the greatest change, whereas Our Lady and St Benedict and St Maria Goretti experienced lower amounts of change and did not have all children participating in small group sessions.

¹⁴ Standard deviation is a measure of how spread out the numbers in a data set are. In simpler terms, it tells us how much the individual numbers in a group differ from the average (mean) of the group. A **Small Standard Deviation**: means that most students scored similarly. A **Large Standard Deviation**: means the scores vary.

Table 2: Change in Scores

Name of School	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Eaton Park	3.3864	44	2.83841
Maple Court	2.8000	25	2.04124
Kingsland	1.7826	46	2.64082
Our Lady and St Benedict	1.6429	14	.74495
St Maria Goretti	.7727	22	2.63551
Carmountside	.4000	20	2.87274

Summary

A total of 187 children across nursery classes in six Thrive at Five schools participated in the Talking Time intervention. The schools selected which children to include in group sessions, resulting in 160 children benefiting from these sessions. The training for nursery staff was effective, reportedly boosting their confidence and enhancing teaching practices.

Teachers reported that children showed improved vocabulary, communication skills, and engagement due to the intervention's interactive activities. However, challenges included staffing issues, resource management, and difficulties in providing equal access for all children.

The data from schools shows a significant improvement in early communication skills, as evidenced by Early Communication Screen scores. The majority of children showed progress, with a notable reduction in those classified with significant or mild to moderate language delay and an increase in those with language abilities within the normal range. In the schools 93 children (52.5%) had language abilities within the normal range at the end of the year, compared to 48 children (27.9%) at the beginning. Overall, 71% of children made some progress.

From this analysis it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the Impact of Talking Time due to the lack of a control group and the possibility that improvements have been driven by confounding factors. However, it is encouraging that teaching staff have responded so positively to the intervention. It is also encouraging that children are making good progress in their language development, especially in schools where more children were included in the group sessions (Maple Court and Eaton Park). Considering these findings, several recommendations have been proposed for Talking Time delivery in future years.

What should we do going forward?

1. **Repeat Training for New Staff:** Due to the high turnover of staff, Thrive at Five will repeat the Talking Time training this year with a new cohort of teachers. It may be that we require schools to put forward for training those staff who are most likely to remain in nursery roles so that Talking Time can be fully embedded. In larger schools it may also be necessary to train more than two teachers to help with intervention delivery and sustainability and to train staff with less leadership responsibility so that those who deliver Talking Time are more likely to spend time in the classrooms.
2. **Structured Follow-Up Support:** Developing structured follow-up support that includes periodic check-ins and feedback sessions can help sustain the momentum of the training. This support

should be flexible enough to address the specific needs of different schools and provide ongoing assistance to teachers in adapting the intervention to their particular contexts. Thrive at Five, working closely with the Talking Time consultant, will take responsibility for overseeing this support for the next year of delivery.

3. **Resource Sharing System:** Establishing a centralised platform or system for resource sharing can encourage collaboration among schools. This could take the form of a shared learning space or community of practice events. This platform can include training materials, lesson plans, and examples of successful implementation. Schools can share their experiences and resources, fostering a collaborative learning environment. Having a bank of back up support to cascade training which is shared across schools would also help with sustainability. Again, Thrive at Five will take responsibility for establishing this resource sharing system.
4. **Continuing to deliver the full complement of small group sessions and including more pupils in these sessions:** The intervention is designed so that all children in the class (those accessing small group sessions and those not accessing these sessions) benefit from a language-rich classroom environment, with effective use of strategies to promote language development, such as using open-ended questions and encouraging discussions. However, there is very tentative evidence from this evaluation that schools where all children participated in small group sessions recorded better progress in children's language development. For delivery next year, we therefore recommend that schools include as many children as possible in the full complement of small-group sessions.
5. **Creating a locally sustainable operating model for Talking Time going forwards:** Our ambition is to see Talking Time's small-group activities and ongoing reflective practice embedded within local nursery provision for the long-term. However, it is not financially viable to fund an external Talking Time consultant year-on-year. Instead, we need to explore how local practitioners might in future years be able to take over the key support and improvement functions carried out by the external consultant.

Appendix 1.

Appendix 1: Wilcoxon test – SPSS output looking at change in language screen scores. (Excluding Abbey Hulton).

This SPSS output comes from a **Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test**, which is used to compare two related sets of scores—in this case, the scores before and after Talking Time, labelled as **ELCScore** and **ELCScore2**. Here's a simple breakdown:

Ranks Table:

- **Negative Ranks (25 cases):** These are the cases where the second score (**ELCScore2**) is lower than the first score (**ELCScore**). The **mean rank** for these cases is **48.66**, and the sum of their ranks is **1216.50**.
- **Positive Ranks (122 cases):** These are the cases where the second score (**ELCScore2**) is higher than the first score (**ELCScore**). The **mean rank** for these cases is **79.19**, and the sum of their ranks is **9661.50**.
- **Ties (24 cases):** These are cases where both scores are the same.

Test Statistics:

- **Z (-8.209):** This is the test statistic for the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. A large negative Z value indicates a significant difference between the two sets of scores.
- **Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) < .001:** This shows the significance level (p-value). Since it's less than **0.001**, the difference between the two sets of scores is statistically significant. This means the change between **ELCScore** and **ELCScore2** is very unlikely to be due to chance.

Ranks		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
ELCScore2 - ELCScore	Negative Ranks	25 ^a	48.66	1216.50
	Positive Ranks	122 ^b	79.19	9661.50
	Ties	24 ^c		
	Total	171		

a. ELCScore2 < ELCScore

b. ELCScore2 > ELCScore

c. ELCScore2 = ELCScore

Test Statistics^a

ELCScore2 - ELCScore	
Z	-8.209 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on negative ranks.