

Peer to peer talk in the early years

Protocol for a rapid evidence assessment

Principal investigator(s): Jon Kay, Isabel Kempner, Kat Pearce, Hannah Shackleton

Background and review rationale

Early childhood education is increasingly recognised to be a crucial stage in a child's education, as well as an important stage in addressing the attainment gap between children from richer and poorer backgrounds. In Autumn 2021, the UK Department for Education announced funding for the early years sector to support its recovery from the impact of the pandemic. One part of this is the establishment of a network of Stronger Practice Hubs: early years settings which will support other settings to adopt evidence-informed practices that are supported by the best available evidence. The EEF is in the process of writing an early years framework to support the Stronger Practice Hubs. This framework will identify approaches and practices in early years education that are supported by high-quality evidence; the Stronger Practice Hubs will be underpinned by this evidence.

Peer-to-peer talk is one approach under consideration for inclusion in the early years framework. Peer-to-peer talk interventions involve the intentional organisation of provision by adults to elicit peer-to-peer conversation. The adult creates opportunities for naturally occurring talk through the layout of the room, organisation of resources, routines and activities. Peer-to-peer talk may be facilitated by the adult in dedicated teaching time, or it may take place intentionally during guided and free play.

Our searches on the topic of peer-to-peer talk suggested that there may be a gap in the evidence of the effectiveness of this approach; we were not able to find a systematic review or a sufficient number of high-quality individual studies on the topic to judge whether this practice could be recommended. However, the evidence that we were able to identify gave a generally positive picture. Since facilitating peer-to-peer talk appears to have potential as an approach to improve language and communication, it was decided that we would undertake a more systematic search of the evidence base.

This protocol is the next step in our mapping of the evidence base on peer-to-peer talk. With this rapid evidence review, we aim to find out whether there is high-quality evidence on this topic and, if so, what the key messages are. The results of this review will shape the EEF's recommendations on peer-to-peer talk in the early years framework.

Objectives

The aim of this review is to summarise the effects of interventions involving peer-to-peer talk on children's early language and communication skills in early years settings. In addition, we aim to identify any common elements of interventions that have a positive effect, as well as which skills may be particularly impacted by these interventions. The findings will help inform our recommendations on effective practices for improving children's early language skills, alongside our grant-making and trials in this area. At the first stage the review will map the evidence and identify whether it is appropriate to conduct further synthesis.

Suggested research question:

What evidence exists around peer to peer talk in the early years?

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Supplementary questions:

Does facilitating peer-to-peer talk improve language and communication outcomes for children in the Early Years?

What are the common elements of effective practices and interventions that promote peer-to-peer talk?

Which communication and language skills are influenced by peer-to-peer talk interventions?

Methodology

	Include	Exclude
Study design	<p>This study will include RCTs and quasi-experimental evaluations of interventions that aim to increase language and communication through peer to peer talk. .</p> <p>Meta-analyses or systematic reviews will be drawn upon to look for individual studies that fit the inclusion criteria.</p>	<p>Single group pre/post-test studies, qualitative studies and narrative, non-systematic reviews.</p>
Population	<p>Include if 50%+ of the sample are: Children aged 0 to 6 attending a mainstream Early Years setting. This includes both formal and informal provision, and both group and individual settings, for example nursery, kindergarten and childminders.</p> <p>Children who usually learn in the language of the intervention (I.e., including EAL pupils in English medium of instruction schools).</p>	<p>Exclude if 50%+ of the sample are: Children under the age of 3 and/or over the age of 6. Children aged 0-6 that do not attend an Early Years setting (e.g. exclusively in the home learning environment rather than an early years setting). Children with a language impairment or delay. Children with special needs e.g., ASD. Children attending bilingual schools/nurseries.</p>
Types of interventions	<p>Interventions involving talk between peers (in pairs or groups) in early years settings.</p> <p>Interventions delivered by the teacher/teaching assistant/nursery nurse/childminder or a researcher</p> <p>Examples of interventions include: Collaborative group work Thinking together Cumulative talk Exploratory talk Collaborative problem solving Productive classroom dialogue Circle time Show and tell Role play Small world play Talk partners</p>	<p>Interventions that take place exclusively outside of early years settings (e.g., in the home)</p> <p>Interventions where children do not interact directly with each other (i.e., responses are directed to an adult)</p> <p>Interventions where the target language is not the main language of instruction (e.g. English as a foreign language in a Swiss nursery)</p>

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Comparison	No treatment, or business as usual or another treatment, e.g., comparison of two peer-to-peer interventions .	Studies that do not include a comparison group.
Outcome measures	Expressive language Oral language skills Receptive Language Number of utterances Length of utterances Peer directed utterances Turn taking Listening skills Social skills Communication skills Attainment Vocabulary	Studies that report outcomes that take place outside of Early Years settings e.g. home environment Studies that have outcomes focused on parent/sibling interactions Studies with outcomes focused on second language acquisition Teacher outcomes
Other criteria	Published since 1980 Published in English Journals or grey literature	Published before 1980 Published in languages other than English

Search strategy for identification of studies

The search string below will be used to identify studies. Searches will take place in Web of Science Core Collection and Ebsco (all databases). References will then be managed in EPPI-reviewer.

Category	Search terms
Targeted population	"early childhood education" OR "early years" OR kindergarten OR preschool OR pre-K* OR nursery OR reception, OR "child#care" OR ECE* OR pre-primary
AND	
Intervention	"peer#to#peer" OR "talk NEAR/3 partner" OR "peer interaction" OR "peer talk" OR collaborat* OR "peer NEAR/3 play" OR "group#work" OR "dialogue" OR "child-child" OR partner OR pro#social OR "peer#mediated"
AND	
Targeted behaviour/outcome	"Communication skills" OR Utterances OR "Oral Language" OR "Expressive Language" OR "Receptive Language" OR "turn#taking" OR "Listening skills" OR attainment OR progress OR "social skills" OR "classroom talk"

Selection of studies

The results of the search will be imported into EPPI reviewer and duplicates removed. Each search result will be screened twice, first on abstract and title only, then on the full text. After initial calibration, each screening stage will be completed by one reviewer only due to the timeline for this project. However, we will take a "safety first" approach at both screening stages; that is, the reviewer will have the option of marking a search result as unclear for review by a second reviewer. At the title and abstract stage, every reviewer will begin by screening the same 30 search results. The results of

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this screening will be compared to ensure that the inclusion and exclusion criteria are being interpreted and applied in the same way.

The process will be mapped using a PRISMA flow chart, which will be included in the short mapping report (see below).

Mapping

The first stage of this process will be to identify whether there are any studies that meet the inclusion criteria of the review. When scoping the review a lack of high quality studies were identified. Once the screening on full text has been complete, a brief mapping report and summary of the studies that have been included will be produced. If there is sufficient evidence to move to synthesis then the team will publish an addendum to this protocol outlining the proposed analysis approach. This will either comprise of:

- Narrative synthesis, informed by a risk of bias assessment on the included studies
- Meta-analysis and moderator analysis on the overall impact of the approach and moderator analysis to answer the supplementary questions around the components of effective peer to peer talk in the early years

The decision on which analysis approach will be taken prior to any analysis of outcomes across the studies and will be based upon the number of studies and heterogeneity of approaches within the category of peer-to-peer interaction. It is unlikely that meta-analysis would be attempted with fewer than ten studies. If meta-analysis is to be conducted a data extraction tool and process for effect size calculation and random effects meta-analysis will be included in the subsequent protocol.