

Communication Friendly Spaces™

Bags for Families Evaluation

July 2010



**35 Alpine Rd
Hove BN3 5HG
www.rminight.co.uk**

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Communication Friendly Spaces™ – Bags for Families Evaluation

Executive summary

The evaluation found that the CFS™ Bags for Families programme performs strongly in helping to improve the learning environment for children and in facilitating development of speech and language skills.

Evidence suggests that the programme works particularly well in strengthening the relationship between early years settings and families in supporting the child's social development.

Most parents/carers participating in the programme were reported as improving communication with the practitioner and becoming more engaged with their child's development.

- 64% of families improved in the frequency of conversations with setting practitioner
- 77% of families improved the quality of communication with setting practitioner with a large majority of these families making significant advancement

Qualitative feedback suggested that the programme is making an important contribution to:

- triggering communication with parents/carers
- encouraging more open communication with parents/carers
- establishing more informative conversations with parents/carers about the child's communications skills
- stimulating parent/carer engagement with development of child's communication skills

“We are now communicating about the child's learning and development including confidence and communication instead of just ‘hello’ and discussing pick up times, etc.”

Early years practitioner

“This child seemed to enjoy his own company both in class and outside. He was very quiet in class. Since using the bags he has become much more communicative.”

Early years practitioner

Communication Friendly Spaces™ – Bags for Families Evaluation

Full report

Introduction

Since 2007 Elizabeth Jarman's Communication Friendly Spaces™ (CFS™) Approach has developed a range of specialist training and resources aimed at helping practitioners and teachers develop more effective learning environments. CFS™ is a pedagogic approach that focuses upon how the design of an environment can stimulate children's social and emotional development and particularly their speaking and listening skills. ELIZABETH JARMAN® has developed a range of comprehensive training programmes and resources dedicated to help practitioners apply the approach to daily activities with children and the design of their environment. Training has been completed by over 20,000 practitioners to date. There is more information at www.elizabethjarmanltd.co.uk

CFS™ Bags for Families was launched in January 2009 to extend the support and interventions already offered to practitioners and early years settings. The idea was to provide a resource that would enable practitioners to support families in adopting the CFS™ principles in the home environment. It was hoped that the resources and support offered by the programme would create a 'bridge' between setting and the home. Parents/carers would become more aware of the impact of the home environment for their child's social development, begin to introduce CFS™ into the home, and generally become more engaged with their child's development. The intention was for Bags for Families to act as a catalyst leading to strengthened engagement with the child's development and a closer relationship between setting and family supporting this development.

The programme comes at a time of increased recognition of the importance of communication skills in early development. Recent research highlights the acquisition of language skills as an essential component of behavioural development. Communicating, speaking and listening provide a foundation for emotional and social development as well as supplying vital competencies for intellectual development and learning. Effective communication skills are building blocks for learning: children who communicate and listen well at an early age become good learners. Policy now widely recognises that a focus on giving children the time and opportunity to use their emerging speaking and listening skills should be a priority of early years practice. The Early Years Foundation Stage clearly states that "language, thinking and learning are interlinked; they depend on and promote each other's development."¹

Research identifies the importance of a stimulating and language rich environment in the home for long term effective child development. Children who lack these opportunities in the first years of life are up to six times more likely to experience reading problems in school than those who receive appropriate stimulation.² Early years policy is eager to support parents/carers to become more engaged with their child's language development and aware of the importance of providing opportunities to talk and play. With its focus on supporting children's communication in the home CFS™ Bags for Families is clearly aligned to this key national priority.

¹ *Early Years Foundation Stage, Principles into Practice Card: 1:1 Child Development.*

² Ernest L. Boyer. *Ready to Learn.* 1991. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

The Programme

CFS™ Bags for Families was launched in January 2009 and consists of a bespoke training and development programme and the accompanying set of bags. Practitioners attend the Bags for Families training and development sessions prior to distributing the bags from their setting.

Each setting participating in the programme is supplied with the following resources:

- Practitioner guidance – ‘Ideas for Practitioners’
- ‘Bags for Families- Getting Started’ DVD
- Bags for Families memory stick including an impact measure and guidance on how practitioners can work with families on the programme
- 10 family bags – each with a variety of products selected to reflect the principles of CFS™, e.g. soft pillows, tents, wicker baskets, groundsheets, rugs, voile netting, blankets, torches, camouflage netting, small chairs, and seating pads.

The settings are encouraged to hold introductory meetings with parents/carers to explain the CFS™ approach and encourage families to participate in the programme. Consenting families are then loaned a bag for a limited time period, e.g. a weekend. Each participating family is asked to provide feedback on how they and their child or children reacted to the bags and used the resources. Parents/carers are also invited to share photos of how the resources were used by the children.

By July 2010 the programme had distributed nearly 8,000 bags in 65 local authorities across England and Wales.

Evaluation Aims and Objectives

The evaluation aims to assess the effectiveness of the programme in meeting the following three key objectives:

- To improve communication of parent/carer with practitioner about child’s social development
- To stimulate engagement of parent/carer in child’s development
- To facilitate child’s development of speech and language skills and social/emotional development

Evaluation methodology

The research agency, RM Insight, was commissioned to use reported feedback and the data gathered from the Bags for Families Impact Measure to evaluate the programme. The agency was not involved in the design of the evaluation or collection of data.

The following data was made available:

- impact measure forms for each participating family completed by practitioner (n=125)
- ad hoc written feedback by practitioners on project in settings (n=8)

The Impact Measure provided practitioners with six questions each monitoring progress of a particular area of the relationship between practitioner and family. The questions cover two-way communications with family, frequency of conversations, subject of conversations, contributions made to observation and assessment, discussion of child's speaking and listening skills and discussion of child's preferred learning context. The questions monitor progress on how parents/carers are engaging with the child's speech and language development and how they are communicating with the practitioner.

Answers to the open-ended question at the bottom of the form provided an opportunity for the practitioner to give feedback on speech and language outcomes, i.e. whether any development of these competencies had been observed for the child during the course of the programme.

Put together the data available covered a range of criteria relevant to practitioners helping families support speech and language development. In our judgement the data offered robust insight into how the programme was performing on the three key objectives stated above.

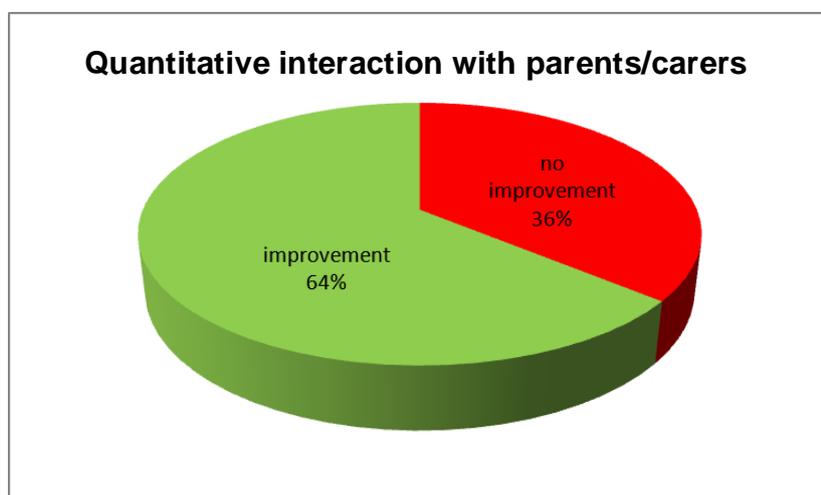
Evaluation findings

Parental/carer engagement and communication

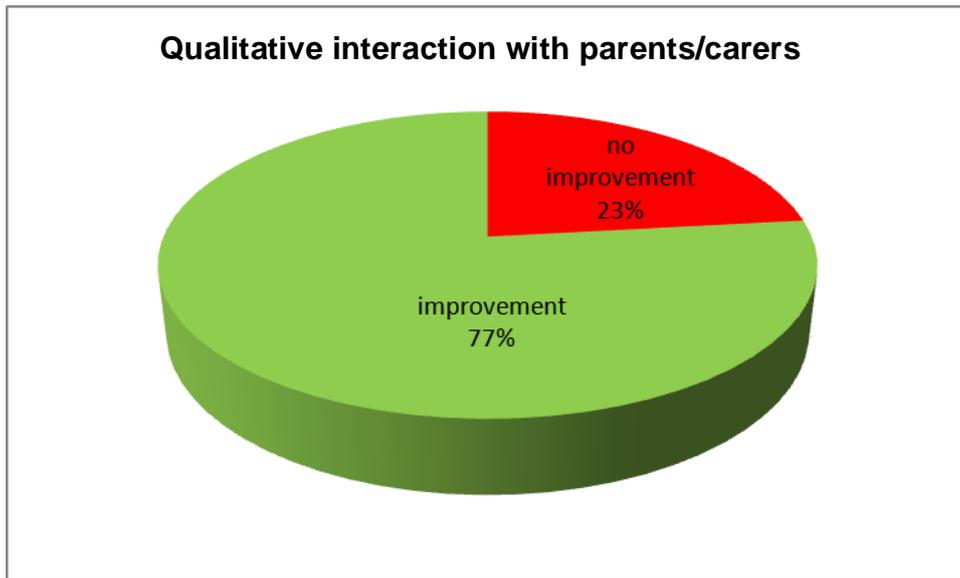
Responses from the impact measure provided an opportunity to monitor changes in the quantity and quality of interaction with parents/carers over the duration of the project.

Practitioners reported that most parent/carers showed improvement on both the quantity and quality of interaction with practitioners:

- 64% of parents/carers talked more frequently with practitioners after participating in the project



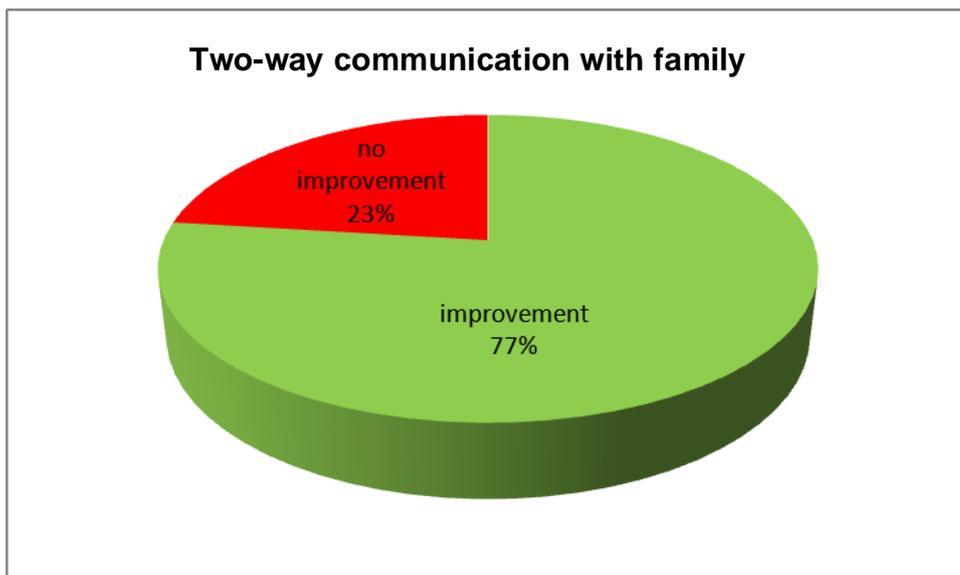
- 77% of parents/carers showed an improvement in the quality of interaction with practitioners after participating in the project.



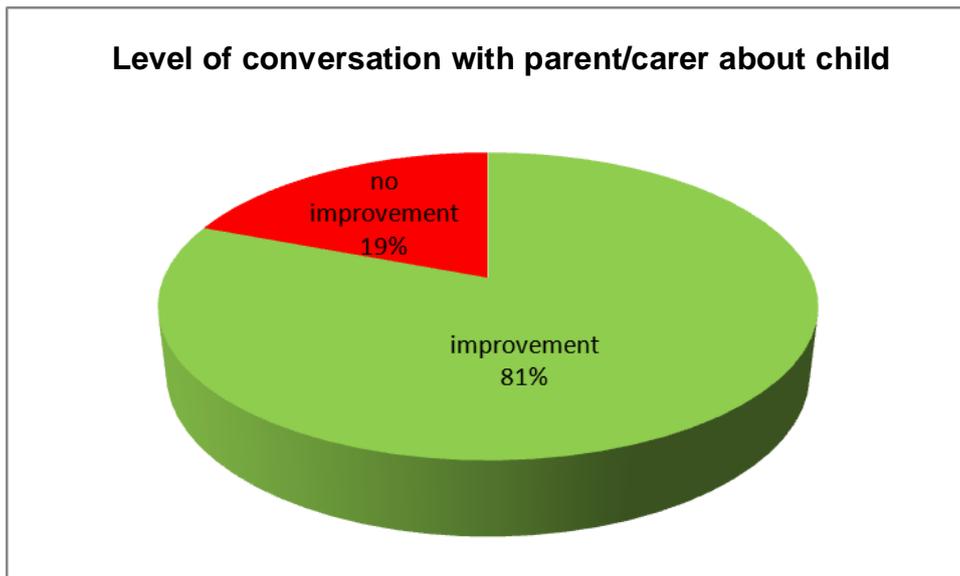
The above findings demonstrate the particularly marked improvement that practitioners observed in the quality of communication with parents/carers after receiving a CFS™ bag. While practitioners observed that in 64% of cases they talked more frequently to participating families, responses to questions concerning the quality of interaction showed consistent improvement in over 70% of cases.

The following shows a breakdown of responses to the five individual questions concerned with qualitative behaviours:

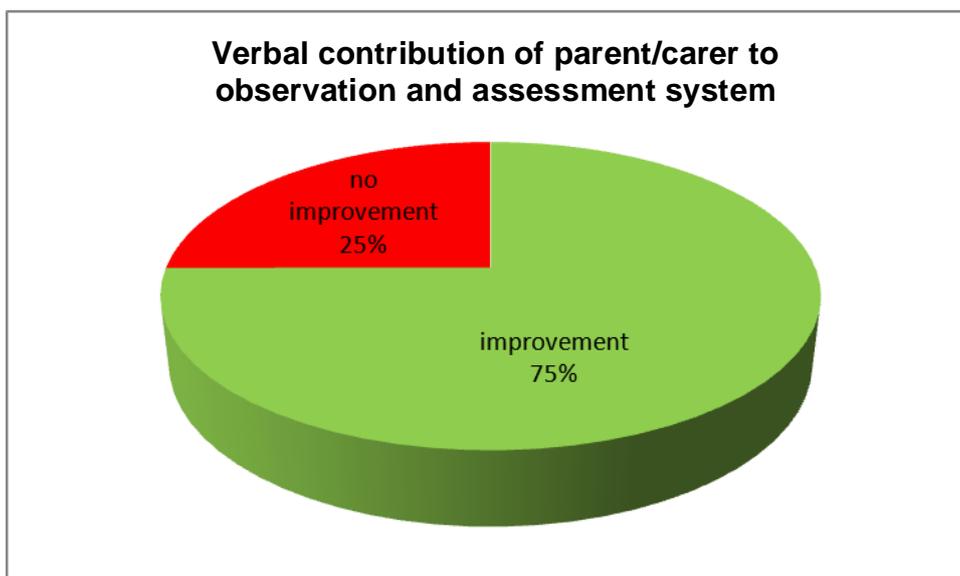
- 77% reported more effective two-way communication with family



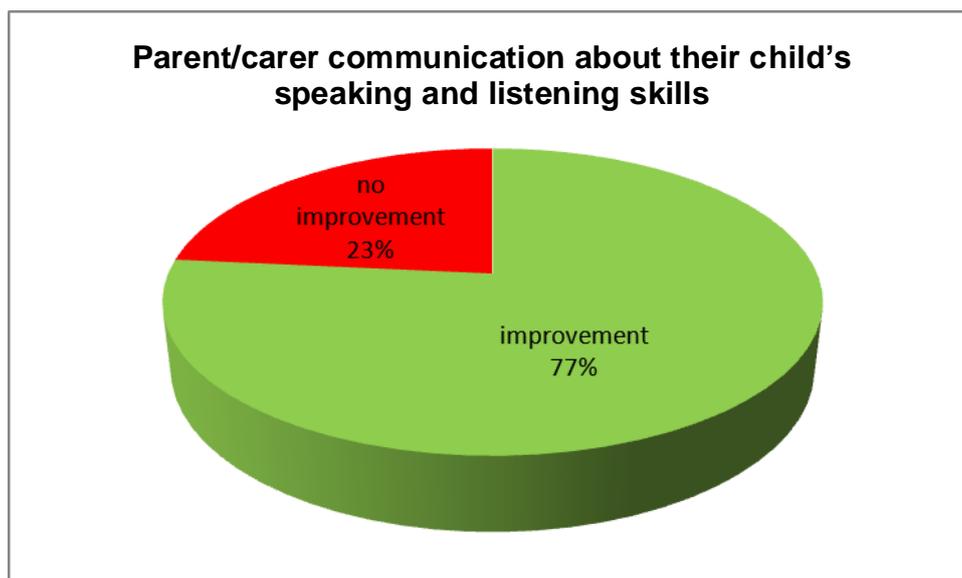
- 81% reported more informative conversations about child with parent/carer



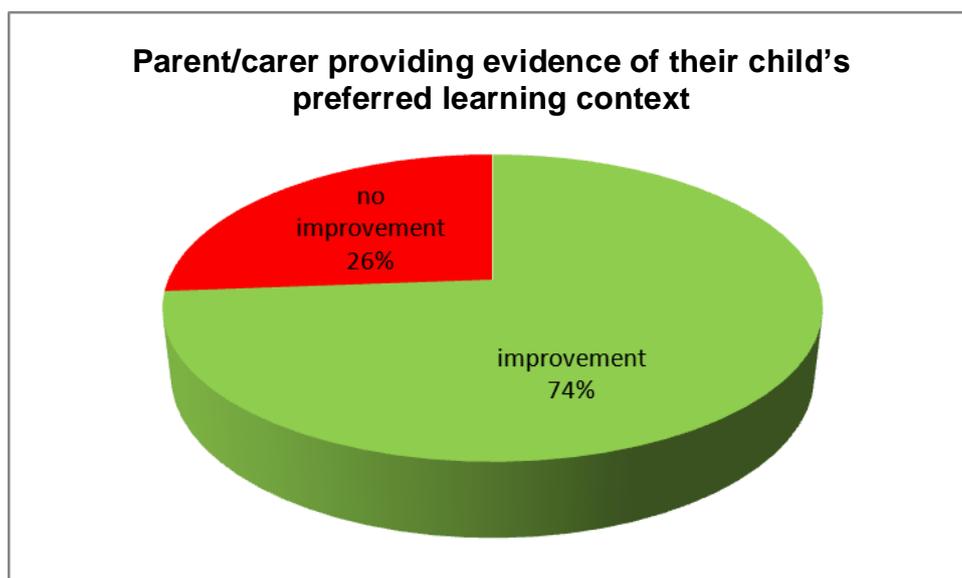
- 75% reported improved contributions from parent/carer to practitioner observation and assessment



- 77% reported improved communication from parent/carer about child's speaking and listening skills



- 74% reported improved provision of evidence from parent/carer about child's preferred learning context.

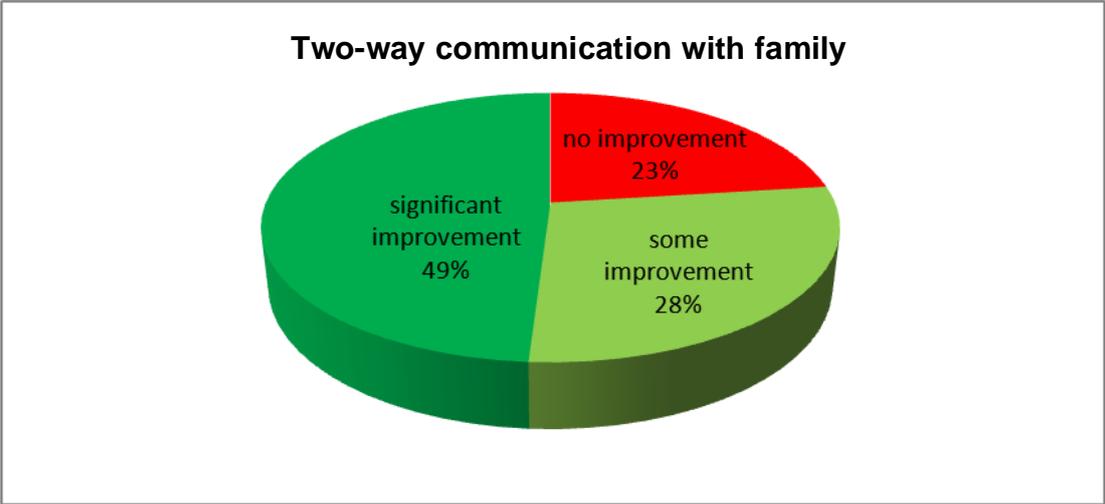


Further breakdown of this data shows the consistent depth of the improvement of qualitative behaviours after receiving the bag. By examining the amount of improvement on the five point scale provided for each question we were able to distinguish between families who had showed 'some improvement' (a one point improvement) and families who had showed 'significant improvement' (a two point or more improvement).

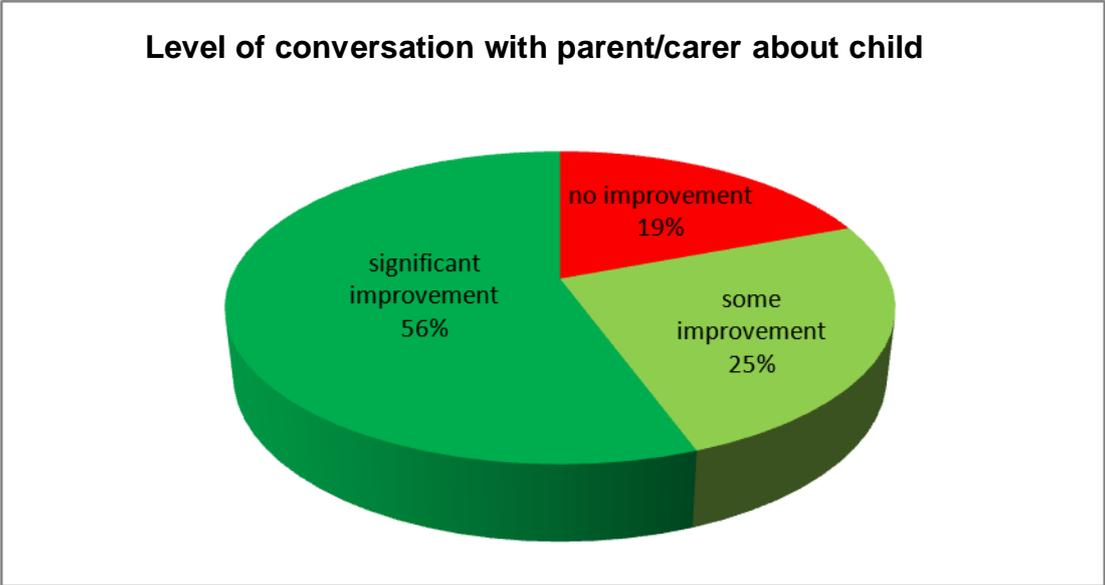
Whereas only a small proportion of families (11%) were reported as *significantly* improving the frequency of communication with the practitioner, high levels of *significant* improvement on qualitative behaviours were reported by practitioners. Assess-

ments of around half of all families indicated that the quality of communications with practitioners had significantly improved during the course of the project:

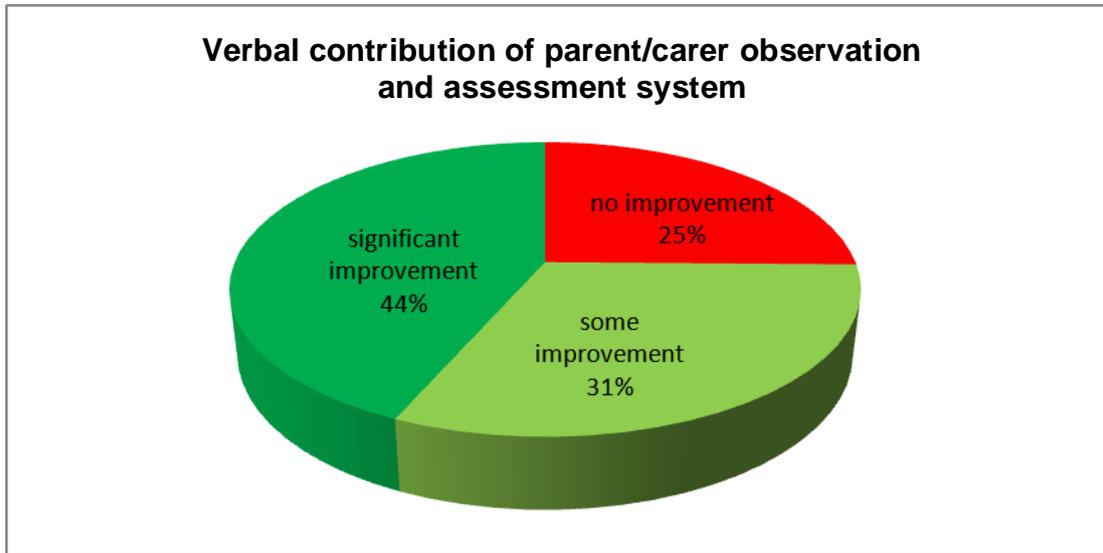
- 49% reported significant improvement in effective communication with family



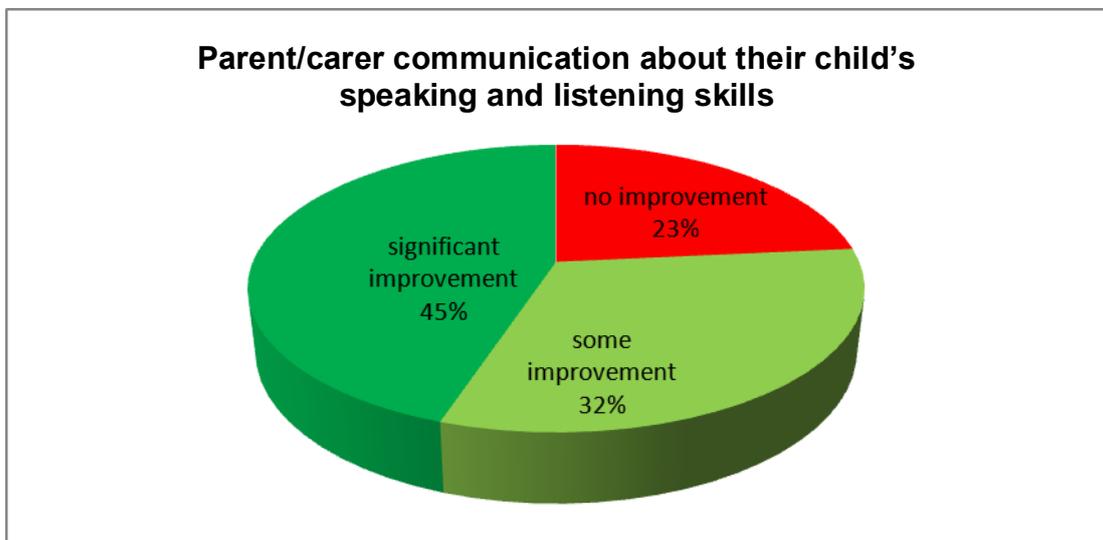
- 55% reported significant improvement in the quality of conversations



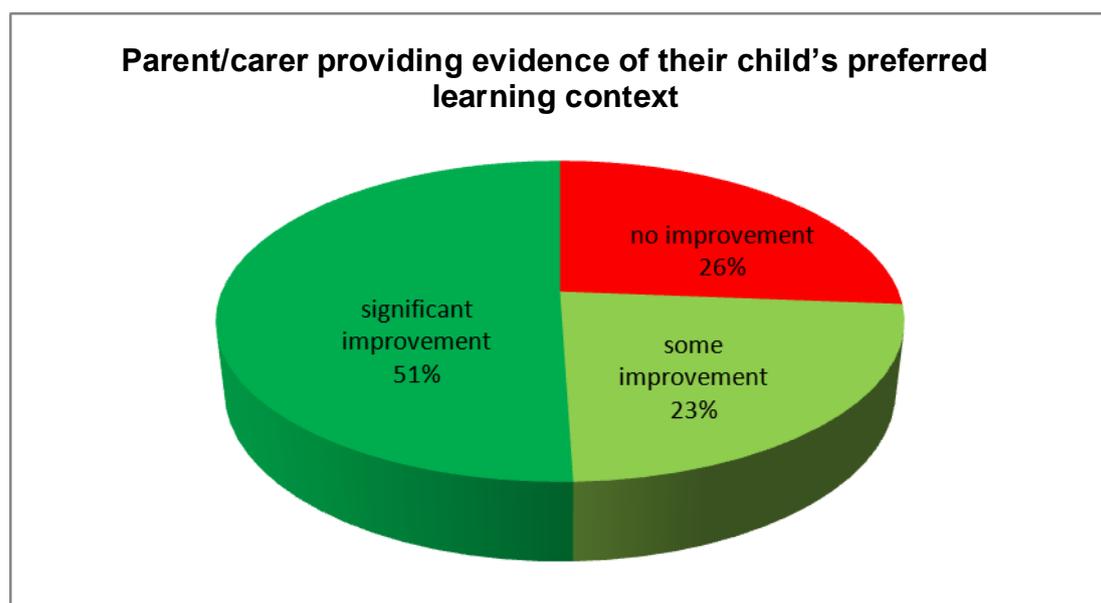
- 44% reported significant improvement in verbal contributions to observation and assessment



- 45% reported significant improvement in communication from parent/carer about child's speaking and listening skills



- 51% reported significant improvement in provision of evidence from parent/carer about child's preferred learning context.



Open ended comments from practitioners provided qualitative insight into how participation in the CFS™ Bags for Families programme helped improve communication with parents/carers.

Practitioners identified four key outcomes that they felt the project had contributed to:

- opening-up communication with parents/carers
- encouraging more open communication with parents/carers
- encouraging more informative conversations with parents/carers about the child's communications skills
- stimulating parent/carer engagement with development of child's communication skills

Opening-up communication with families

The project "has helped open up a dialogue between practitioners and parents- has given parent opportunity to discuss problems."

"Using the CFS bags has helped us all get to know the family situation better and also has triggered conversations with parents."

More open communication with families

"The use of CFS bags encouraged Pupil B's parents to talk to me more openly about how Pupil B plays at home and how he relates to other children."

The "project has encouraged conversation with child's family and they talk more openly about child's interests."

"The relationship between the team and the family has increased. Parents speak more to us and seem more relaxed with regards to getting more involved in observations."

Informative conversations with families

“We are now communicating about the child’s learning and development including confidence and communication instead of just ‘hello’ and discussing pick up times, etc.”

“We now discuss A’s learning and development both at home and at nursery on a regular basis.”

Parental engagement with communication development

“Mum makes more conscious effort to observe and discuss Mason’s achievements. Mum asks more questions and is genuinely interested in Mason’s development.”

Impact on children

Parental engagement and improved communication between parent/carer and practitioner are all positive signs in regards to improved communication outcomes. These factors are indications that the family are engaged in the project and using CFS™ Bags for Families creatively. It is under these conditions that children are most likely to have the opportunity to develop speaking and listening skills.

Comments provided by practitioners on the changes in behaviour of children offered direct evidence of outcomes associated with the programme.

The following changes in children’s communication skills were observed by practitioners:

- more confidence in classroom activities
- more confidence and communication with other children
- more communicative and open

“This child seemed to enjoy his own company both in class and outside. He was very quiet in class. Since using the bags he has become much more communicative.”

Child shows “increased confidence since taking bags home, more willing to participate in class speaking and listening activities.”

“Pupil C loves CFS bags. He spoke for the first time in nursery when a ‘tent’ was introduced.”

“Particular improvements in Stacey’s language development have been noted in the last few months...”

“Child is more confident and chatty.”

“Olivia is beginning to communicate with the other children.”

Conclusions

The evaluation found credible evidence that the CFS™ Bags for Families programme has performed strongly. Data made available to the researchers gave strong evidence of the programme helping to build an effective relationship between setting and family around the child's social development. Most families participating in the programme were reported as improving communication with the practitioner and becoming more engaged with their child's development. Practitioners reported improvements in the frequency of conversations for around two-thirds of families (64%) and improvements in the quality of communication for an average of three quarters of families (77%). High levels of improvement (72% - 80%) were recorded across the six different aspects of parental communication and engagement. These consistently positive results offer a reliable indication that CFS™ Bags for Families has performed strongly in engaging with families.

A further indication of strong performance in engaging with families was the depth of changes that were reported by practitioners. Whereas families tended to increase the frequency of conversations with practitioners only to a small extent, significant advances in the quality of communication were reported for a large proportion of families. Between 43% and 55% of all families showed significant improvement in the quality of communication with practitioners and engagement with learning and speaking and listening issues. The qualitative character of interaction with parents/carers is obviously crucial in creating a supportive context for communication development. Significant improvement in this respect is particularly encouraging because it indicates the type of profound change that is likely to last beyond the duration of the project. This bodes well for the likelihood that the programme is impacting child speech and language development in the long term. Overall, CFS™ Bags for Families appears to be working well in strengthening the building blocks necessary for supporting communication-friendly activities in family life.

We can perhaps better appreciate some of the typical changes reported in families by following the progress of two actual families that participated in the project. Case studies Family A and Family B typify the two most common experiences reported in response to receiving a CFS™ bag.

Before receiving the bag Family A spoke to the setting staff once or twice a week. These conversations were fairly limited and rarely discussed specific matters regarding their child. The parent would talk to the practitioner about their child's speaking and listening skills but only if asked.

Family A experiences significant change after receiving the bag. They report the excitement with which the family had used the bag. The children had used the contents of the bag creatively and with imagination. After the returning the bag the practitioner observed that the parents were much more willing to talk to staff. They now readily discussed issues about the child and specific issues related to speech and language. The child is observed as having more confidence in speaking aloud and is making some progress with speech and language skills.

Family B only occasionally spoke to setting staff before receiving the bag. When these conversations occurred they were usually limited to a social greeting.

Family B experiences some change after receiving the bag. They report the bag had been well received and that the contents had been made use of. After returning the bag, the practitioner observed that the parents were more willing to talk to staff and would discuss issues relating to the child if asked. The child is observed as being more communicative and more open to talking to other children in the nursery.

These two case studies illustrate how, in different ways, families responded to receiving the bag. In both cases the families responded positively to the programme and broadly understood the idea of focusing on communication-friendly activities in the home. Both families were willing to enter into a more open dialogue and showed at least some interest in talking about issues concerning their child. Receiving the bag seemed to act as a catalyst that triggered more open and productive dialogue between parent and practitioner. Each family would open up to different degrees and focus on specific speech and language issues to a greater or lesser extent. And each child would demonstrate greater or lesser improvement on communication skills.

The cases highlight how effective the programme has been in building a productive relationship between home and setting and providing a supportive environment for the development of communication skills. Furthermore, there is good evidence to suggest that this relationship is likely to be maintained.

Overall, CFS™ Bags for Families has achieved notable successes in helping to create supportive conditions for the development of children's communication skills. Early indications suggest the programme is making an important contribution to the speech and language development of children involved.

Dr Roland Marden

July 2010



Research, evaluation and performance support to help deliver better outcomes for children and young people. Specialising in education and early years programmes, impact evaluations and SROI.