

find out more

June O'Sullivan is the CEO of the London Early Years Foundation. Visit leyf.org.uk or June's blog at juneosullivan.wordpress.com



Simple messages

Nowadays, we are so overwhelmed by information that to survive we ignore most of it and rely on a few ideas. It's ironic, really, as we know so much more. Therefore, my mission in life is to use my understanding of marketing principles to present staff with key facts and statements so powerful that they will be embedded in their consciences and influence what they do – as Anton Checkov (Jan, 1860 – July, 1904) once said, "Knowledge is of no value unless you put it into practice."

I am beginning with some key messages about the power of communication and what that means for a child. We talk a lot about the importance of communication, but despite that fact we still have one in 10 children in the UK (1.2 million) with communication difficulties requiring ongoing speech and language support. We also know that as many as half of all children start primary school with delayed speech and language skills. Yet, 20 per cent of parents think that talking and reading to children aged three is irrelevant. Startling statistics.

Ask many people what we should expect of children and you will receive a shrug, a random guess, or a grappling in their memory for a statistic from Mary Sheridan. This is a situation we cannot tolerate. We need a simple set of data that is the benchmark from which we operate, especially as we are seeing so many of the children referred through the two-year-old programme exhibiting negative behaviour associated with the frustration of limited language or no language at all. In one of my nurseries we

could be doing an Individual Education Plan (IEP) on every child, so instead I have designated it a high-risk nursery for communication. When I say 'communication' I am including speaking, listening, understanding, vocabulary, concentration and using language appropriately. We are therefore creating the richest communication environment possible. We are also building an assessment framework based on the successful ECAT model.

So what do we need to know first? Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman spent 40 years assessing issues to do with child poverty. He linked poor language acquisition at an early age to poorer outcomes for the child right into adulthood. One of his clearest messages is that a child whose family depend on welfare will have achieved on average 500 words by the age of three years. A child from a working class family will have an average of 700 words, but a child from a professional family will have 1,100. And we know from other researchers that once the gap begins to emerge between the three main groups it is hard to start closing it.

Two speech and language therapists with

whom I was working recently summarised Heckman's message in an easy mantra:

*Two words together at two.
1,000 words at three.
Fluent at four.*

Such a simple message, and one we could share so easily with parents. Creating shared statements that say a lot in a clear way has got to be the way we cut through all the information noise, confusion and clutter. We need to get smarter at doing this and think like Mark Twain, who told us that many a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising...



We know that as many as half of all children start primary school with delayed speech and language skills

JUNE O'SULLIVAN