**Every Child a Talker in Milton Keynes**

In April 2009 Anteros Educational Consulting Ltd was contracted by Milton Keynes Council (MKC) to deliver “Every Child a Talker” (ECaT). This was a government led initiative to improve the provision for language development in Early Years settings.

Anteros worked closely with the lead Education Officer from MKC to design a strengths based approach to the project. The key to success was to develop Early language Lead Practitioners (ELLPs) in their role as language champions in their own settings. Our goal was to ensure that positive outcomes were achieved for the ELLPs, other staff in the settings and the children in their care. We also wished to development a more strategic approach across agencies who had an impact on speaking and listening for the under fives.

 Initially working with 20 Early years settings Anteros brought together a team of 20 Early Language Lead Practitioners (ELLPs). This team, steered by Anteros, worked in collaboration with Early Years Consultants, Speech and Language Therapists, Ethnic Minority Achievement Consultants, Inclusion Specialists, Early Years SENCOs, Children Centres, Health Visitors, Family Support Workers, the Library Service and Parents to develop language rich learning environments for the under fives. In time the core team was expanded to include a further 22 settings.

The list below provides a flavour of the exciting and innovative practice of the team that developed as they began to ask and answer important questions about language development and its provision in Milton Keynes. Within each sentence there is an amazing story to tell.

* Training – I CAN; local; multi-agency; understanding the theory of language development and how this translates to everyday practical activities and ideas – also sharing this with parents
* HEART radio campaign - 2 sets of commercials to raise awareness of the importance of early language development
* Poster campaign/display boards
* Story “The boy at Willen Lake” - including nursery rhymes sung by the children of Milton Keynes and distributed to settings across the City
* ICT and language – innovative practice using Easi- Speak microphones
* Communication Friendly Spaces-Outdoor/indoor role play areas/ book areas/outdoor/indoor dens
* Take home teddy bear
* Newstime/ story and rhyme time
* Story sacks to share at home
* Trips out with parents ( to places that are free)
* Stay and play sessions with parents
* Bedtime story session with parents ( everyone wore their pyjamas)
* Awareness raising of the importance of using first language and opportunities created to share cultural experiences
* Language and cooking with children
* Book week
* Story of the month
* Top tips for talking – promoting high quality adult –child interaction

The outcome of the approach Anteros used was that practitioners had greater confidence in their own ability and used their learning to create the positive changes with their teams. co-creating language rich learning environments. This also extended to working with parents and the positive potential of the home learning environment.

Practitioners now felt more able to talk about language with parents and other professionals and recognise when a child’s development may be atypical . With the support of a child language monitoring tool and coaching to analyse data, the needs of individuals could be identified to ensure that children did not “slip through the net”, and intervention was appropriate and timely.

In Milton Keynes, there has been a 20% reduction in the number of young children at risk of language delay.

A further impact of the theoretical training relating to language development was the realisation that learning language does not happen in a vacuum –it is all pervasive. Practitioners related other training in literacy, numeracy, music, wellbeing to what they knew about language and how this translated in practice to enhance the learning environment for the children in their care.

Combining this knowledge with the quantitative data collated to analyse trends in the development of social skills or listening and attention, for example; the team and individual practitioners within it, could reflect in a non-judgemental way about how or if language provision was meeting the needs of settings .

The following testimonies exemplify the emergence of reflective practitioners who are pioneers in their own learning and ambassadors for the importance of the development of children`s language and communication within their communities .They recognise that everyone has a contribution to make, however big or small.

*“ECAT and Anteros have opened my eyes to just* ***HOW*** *important language is and made me understand that actually* ***I*** *can really make a difference.”*

*“Thbis project has provided me with lots of opportunities to improve my confidence – leading staff meetings, speaking to parents and other early year professionals. As a setting we are much more aware of the children`s needs and how to support them”*

*“ECAT and has made a positive impact on our pre-school. The children are already talking so much more.”*

*“Working with Jacqui and Dave has given me the confidence to talk to colleagues and parents about communication skills.”*

*“This (EcaT) helped me to improve the way I talk to children and encourage them to be talkers”*

 *“Being part of ECAT has helped me to be reflective about my own and my setting`s practice. It has stimulated me to read, talk and find out more about language and communication in a broad sense. I have engaged with colleagues to start a process to make our setting as good as it can be. My aspirations for continuing developing children`s language are to improve my own communication skills, particularly with adults in order to bring about change for the better. “*

When a team and the diverse individuals within it feel that their voice is heard, valued and respected, the empowerment and energy this creates means that sustainability, a key issue in many aspects of development work, is a given.

The original centrally funded ECaT project was completed in March 2011. Anteros have been retained by MKC and have since fully trained practitioners from over 120 settings in Milton Keynes in the key aspects of ECaT, we continue to support the ELLP network and are embarking on a training programme for over 400 childminders in the city.