

“Better Conversations with Children”: development and evaluation of a new intervention for children with language disorder

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Background:

- Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) affects over 7% of children and can impact on their learning and social participation (Bishop et al., 2016).
- Conversation has been identified as a priority area for language therapy (Croteau et al., 2015). Yet, there are few programmes available which directly target conversation skills for children with DLD.
- This study investigated a new intervention – ‘Better Conversations with Children’ (BCC) based on established methods used with other clinical populations.

Aims:

- 1) To explore the feasibility of BCC, including recruitment and outcome measurement
- 2) To examine the response of four mother-child dyads to the research intervention. Specifically, we investigated change in: (a) the number of targeted conversation facilitators and barriers (b) children’s standardised language scores.

Method:

- A case series design was used with each dyad acting as their own control.
- Four children with DLD (age 6;06-7;06 years) were recruited with their main carers.
- Each dyad took part in six conversation-based therapy sessions. BCC entails video feedback to highlight **facilitative strategies** and **barrier behaviours** occurring within talk and the therapist agreed targets for change with each child and parent.

Outcome measures

- a) Five-minute samples of conversation from across the study were coded, blind to timepoint, for targeted behaviours.
- b) Children’s language level was assessed using the CELF.

Example therapy targets:

Adult facilitator: contingent commenting	Adult barrier: test questions
There's a mermaid doll in the window.	Where does Granny live?
Child facilitator: asking for clarification	Child barrier: giving up when stuck on a word
Huh?	It doesn't matter.

Results:

1. Feasibility:

- 13 schools were contacted, resulting in four children being recruited, who met the inclusion criteria for the study.
- There was a 100% retention rate, with all dyads completing the full research therapy programme and follow-up assessment.
- Each 5-minute conversation took approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes to transcribe orthographically and score.

2. Change after intervention

a) Conversation behaviours: Two of the four dyads showed a statistically significant increase in targeted conversation facilitators. There was a statistically significant decrease in conversation barriers for all four dyads.

	Dyad A	Dyad B	Dyad C	Dyad D
Child's gender	M	M	M	F
Age on initial assessment	7;06	6;08	6;06	7;03
RQ2a i): Statistically significant increase in targeted facilitators?	✓	X	✓	X
RQ2a ii): Statistically significant decrease in targeted barriers?	✓	✓	✓	✓

b) Language:

All the children showed positive change on the Clinical Evaluation of Fundamentals (CELF-5, Semel et al., 2017).

	Dyad A		Dyad B		Dyad C		Dyad D	
RQ2b: Change in standardised scores?	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
CELF-5 Sentence comprehension (SCS*)	5	7 ✓	9	13 ✓	6	9 ✓	6	6 =
Word structure (SCS)	10	10 =	8	8 =	8	9 ✓	9	10 ✓
Formulated sentences (SCS)	9	13 ✓	5	5 =	6	10 ✓	6	6 =
Recalling Sentences (SCS)	7	7 =	7	7 =	9	12 ✓	7	9 ✓
Core Language Standard Score	86	95 ✓	84	89 ✓	84	100 ✓	82	86 ✓

*SCS: scaled score, where 10 is the average and ≤7 indicates below average performance

Conclusion:

- Our results indicate that primary-aged children with DLD can benefit from direct intervention to improve their everyday conversation.
- Differing results for the four dyads highlight the need for SLTs to tailor their intervention to individual strengths and needs.
- BCC has the potential to extend clinical practice and to enhance children’s language, learning and social relationships.