A brief review of approaches to oral language development
Summary 2015
Introduction
Speech and language skills are fundamental to learning, development and communication and predict educational success later in life. Children experiencing poor language development are at high risk of experiencing difficulties with their learning and development, literacy, social interaction and formal education. Evidence suggests higher rates of speech and language difficulties in areas of social disadvantage. Rates of identification of difficulties can be low, children may not get access to specialist help and difficulties can be severe and long lasting.

This summary is based on ‘A brief review of approaches to oral language development’, a report produced by the Centre for Effective Services (CES) in 2014 which considers the best available evidence on how to organise and deliver services to achieve better language outcomes for children in areas of social disadvantage. The report makes five key recommendations for the Area Based Childhood Programme, a national initiative funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and The Atlantic Philanthropies, which targets investment in evidence-informed interventions to improve outcomes for children and families in thirteen areas of social disadvantage in Ireland. CES carried out this Review to ensure that services developed and implemented under the ABC Programme are evidence-informed, fit well with current service provision and are sustainable. The findings and recommendations in the review are also relevant to wider service delivery.

The Review was based on recent literature on the development of speech, language and communication and consultation with researchers, practitioners and specialists working in the field.

How many children are affected by speech and language difficulties?
According to international evidence approximately 6% of 2-5 year olds experience difficulties with language development. The Growing up in Ireland study has found that nearly one in five parents or guardians of three year olds in Ireland had concerns about their child’s speech and language development. Only one in three of these children had received interventions or services for the problem. By age nine, a reported 3.7% had a speech and language disorder.

How are oral language services currently delivered in Ireland?
While parents, early years workers and teachers all play important roles in promoting oral language development in children, assessment, interventions and services are mainly delivered by speech and language therapists. Speech and language therapists are primarily managed and funded by the Health Service Executive (HSE). Services are usually situated in clinics and sometimes in education settings.
Three key findings emerged from international evidence on language skills:

1. **The first three years are critical for developing language skills**
   Research findings support the provision of high quality supports to parents and families before children start to talk, rather than waiting until a delay or disorder emerges. These supports are most effective in naturally occurring environments and throughout the activities of the child’s life at home or in early years services. Research suggests that oral language development can be improved through support for good play and verbal exchanges in infancy and when parents are involved at an early stage. While the first three years are critical, older children may also need support with language development.

2. **Parents play a central role in the development of their children’s language skills**
   Parents are the most important influence on all aspects of the development of a child’s language. Approaches that strengthen parents’ capacity to support and encourage language and communication are shown to be effective. Regular routines and a stable home environment are also important factors in oral language development. Parents are different, so a wide range of approaches to support them is needed. Home-based and group-based programmes for parents can help to model and encourage positive parent-child interaction. Programmes for parents are a good fit for some parents, but not all.

3. **Developing the skills of early years practitioners can help children with language**
   Research emphasises the importance of the skills of early years educators over the specific curriculum or programme used in early years settings. Early years practitioners and teachers have the potential to support large numbers of children but may need additional skills to do so. There are evidence-based frameworks, curricula and programmes that support language development, which require staff training and ongoing coaching and mentoring to support their implementation. Evaluations show improved outcomes where speech and language therapists provide training and support to early years and schools staff.

The Review also found areas where further research and evidence on language development is needed. While there is a link between disadvantage and speech and language difficulties, there is still limited understanding of how disadvantage affects language development. Research is limited on how to assess language development in young children and those for whom English is a second language. However, evidence on what works in promoting language development in children experiencing disadvantage is growing. There are working models and theories of language development, a range of interventions, approaches and programmes based on these understandings and an emerging body of evidence on the outcomes of these interventions. Results of studies of new or adapted programmes, or very small studies, should be treated with caution.
The Review also considered evidence on different models of service delivery. There is an emerging trend to focus on prevention and early intervention approaches through the provision of universal services. Evidence suggests that allocating the most resources to the delivery of universal services reflects best use of resources. Fewer resources should be allocated to the delivery of targeted services, and the availability of specialist resources should be retained to meet the needs of a very small proportion of the population with rare, unusual or complex needs. This model of service delivery is structured as follows:

- **Universal services** are accessible to all children. They are provided by many people in the child’s life, be they a parent, sibling, early years educator or teacher, and help to promote and support language development through daily interactions and activities. Approaches that work build on the strengths of the child and are responsive to their interests and attention. Universal services are delivered in naturally occurring environments and throughout the activities of the child’s life, such as at home, preschool and school.

- **Targeted services** are available to children for whom universal services may not be sufficient for their language-learning needs and who have gaps or difficulties in their language learning. They are provided by adults with specific awareness, experience and skills. Parents and early years educators, as well as others involved in a child’s life, are well placed to identify potential problems and provide additional opportunities for children to hear and use language. Targeted services include parenting programmes which help parents to support their children’s language development, or training or coaching initiatives where speech and language therapists provide support to early years educators to help children learn.

- **Specialist services** are designed for a very small number of children, for whom universal and targeted services are not enough. This level of service is provided by speech and language therapists who provide assessment, diagnosis and therapy for children with a variety of communication difficulties.
Evidence suggests that the links between disadvantage and speech and language delays and disorders are best addressed by focusing on the delivery of universal and targeted services. This approach involves directing services at the general population and raising awareness about the scope and problems associated with early speech and language difficulties.

Based on the findings on how language develops and the delivery of services, the Review makes five recommendations about the delivery of oral language services within the ABC programme.

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<th>Five recommendations for the ABC Programme</th>
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<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td>Focus on both universal and targeted services for oral language development</td>
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<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td>Prioritise strengthening capacities in parents who are the best resource for developing language in children</td>
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<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td>Enhance the transfer of skills from speech and language therapists to early years educators and schools</td>
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<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>Deploy speech and language therapists as the specialist designers and resources to the system, not as the only form of intervention</td>
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<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td>Provide a platform for sharing and pooling knowledge, experience, resources and evidence on oral language development</td>
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What are the wider implications for service planning and delivery?
While recommendations in the Review focus on services within areas of social disadvantage, the Review also provides insights relevant to wider service delivery at a time when services are experiencing high levels of demand. Access to speech and language services varies widely throughout Ireland and waiting lists are in operation. A study conducted by Inclusion Ireland in 2014 found that almost 3,000 children currently wait more than 12 months for speech and language therapy. No health area in Ireland currently achieves the international recommended caseload for speech and language therapists of between 30 and 65.

The pressure on services to reduce waiting lists means that universal and targeted services are not prioritised and there is limited time to plan and review programmes and interventions. Problems may not be identified early enough. This results in greater demand for limited specialist speech and language resources. The Review highlights the potential for greater use of speech and language therapists in developing the skills of others, including parents, teachers and early years practitioners, to strengthen universal and targeted services and to ensure that children with the greatest need have access to specialist services.

Children access a range of services in health, education and social care as their language skills develop. The Review findings indicate the potential for better outcomes where there is integration across these services. The development of a common language, common practices, shared assessment and interventions across health and education systems could enhance service delivery and ultimately result in better outcomes for children.

Conclusion
Language is integral to all parts of a child’s life. In particular, the first three years are critical in the development of speech and language. Oral language needs to be supported throughout a child’s life and this requires multiple services and systems, greater connections across government departments and agencies, and better use of existing resources. The ABC Programme provides the opportunity to pursue a prevention and early intervention approach, by focusing on the role of language in early childhood development, developing universal services which use evidence to prevent problems in speech and language, and to design and implement interventions which draw on the specialist skills and knowledge of all adult resources in children’s lives.
The Area Based Childhood Programme is a cross-departmental initiative targeting investment in effective and integrated services to improve the outcomes for children and families living in areas of disadvantage. It is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and The Atlantic Philanthropies.

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