



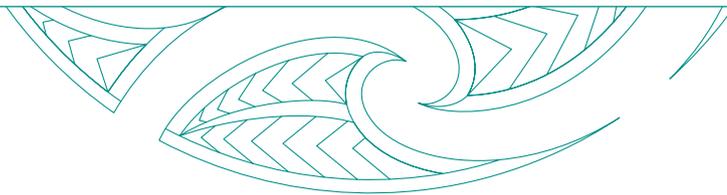
Let's keep talking:

Oral language development in the early years



EVALUATION REPORT





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We give generous thanks for the ECE services and schools that accommodated our research team on visits, organising time in their day for us to talk to teachers and leaders. We know your time is precious.

We also thank the many experts who have shared their understandings of oral language in the Aotearoa New Zealand context with us. Ministry of Education staff and speech-language therapists had a pivotal role in the development of these reports. We particularly acknowledge the members of our Expert Advisory Group of practitioners, academics, and sector experts, who shared their knowledge and wisdom to help guide the evaluation and make sense of emerging findings.



Executive summary

Language is the foundation for children's learning and success. Children use oral language to become good thinkers and communicators, and to develop the literacy skills they need to achieve well in school and beyond. This report draws together a range of evidence to look at how well children are developing the oral language skills they need when they start school. We also look at how early childhood education (ECE) can help children to develop these important skills.

ERO found that while most children's oral language is developing well, there is a significant group of children who struggle, and Covid-19 has made this worse. Quality ECE makes a difference, and the evidence shows there are key teaching practices that matter. We recommend five key areas of action to support children's oral language development.

What is oral language?

Oral language is how we use spoken words to express ideas, knowledge, and feelings. Developing oral language involves developing the skills and knowledge that go into listening and speaking. These skills are important foundations for learning how to read and write. ERO looked at eight areas of language development:

Gestures	Using and adding gestures as part of communication
Words	Learning, understanding, and using a range of words
Sounds	Adding, using, and understanding sounds
Social communication	Changing their language, using words to express needs
Syntax	Combining words to form sentences
Stories	Enjoy listening to, being read to, and telling stories
Grammar	Constructing nearly correct sentences and asking questions
Rhyming	Making rhymes

What are the early years?

ERO looked at oral language development of children aged 0 to 7 years old in ECE and new entrant classes.

What did ERO look at?

ERO drew together a wide range of established international and Aotearoa New Zealand evidence. We also surveyed and spoke to parents and whānau, ECE and new entrant teachers, ECE service leaders, and a range of sector experts to understand how well children across Aotearoa New Zealand are developing oral language skills and how well supported they are. ERO visited a selection of ECE services and new entrant classrooms across Aotearoa New Zealand to better understand children's progress and the teaching practices that support them.

Key findings

Oral language is critical for achieving the Government's literacy ambitions.

Finding 1: Oral language is critical for later literacy and education outcomes. It also plays a key role in developing key social-emotional skills that support behaviour. Children's vocabulary at age 2 is strongly linked to their literacy and numeracy achievement at age 12, and delays in oral language in the early years are reflected in poor reading comprehension at school.

Most children's oral language is developing well, but there is a significant group of children who are behind and Covid-19 has made this worse.

Finding 2: A large Aotearoa New Zealand study found 80 percent of children at age 5 are doing well, but 20 percent are struggling with oral language.^a ECE and new entrant teachers also report that a group of children are struggling and more than half of parents and whānau report their child has some difficulty with oral language in the early years.

Finding 3: Covid-19 has had a significant impact. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (59 percent of ECE teachers and 65 percent of new entrant teachers) report that Covid-19 has impacted children's language development. Teachers told us that social communication was particularly impacted by Covid-19, particularly language skills for social communication. International studies confirm the significant impact of Covid-19 on language development.

“A lot of children are not able to communicate their needs. They are difficult to understand when they speak. They are not used to having conversations.”

TEACHER

^a Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ) is Aotearoa New Zealand's largest longitudinal study of child health and wellbeing, following the lives of more than 6000 children and their families.

Children from low socio-economic communities and boys are struggling the most.

Finding 4: Evidence both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally is clear that children from lower socio-economic communities are more likely to struggle with oral language skills. We found that new entrant teachers we surveyed in schools in low socio-economic communities were nine times more likely to report children being below expected levels of oral language. Parents and whānau with lower qualifications were also more likely to report that their child has difficulty with oral language.

Finding 5: Both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, boys have more difficulty developing oral language than girls. Parents and whānau we surveyed reported 70 percent of boys are not at the expected development level, compared with 56 percent of girls.

Difficulties with oral language emerge as children develop and oral language becomes more complex.

Finding 6: Teachers and parents and whānau reported more concerns about children being behind as they become older and start school. For example, 56 percent of parents and whānau report their child has difficulty as a toddler (aged 18 months to 3 years old), compared to over two-thirds of parents and whānau (70 percent) reporting that their child has difficulty as a preschooler (aged 3 to 5).

Finding 7: Teachers and parents and whānau reported to us that children who are behind most often struggle with constructing sentences, telling stories, and using social communication to talk about their thoughts and feelings. For example, 43 percent of parents and whānau report their child has some difficulty with oral grammar, but only 13 percent report difficulty with gestures.

Quality ECE makes a difference, particularly to children in low socio-economic communities, but they attend ECE less often.

Finding 8: International studies find that quality ECE supports language development and can accelerate literacy by up to a year (particularly for children in low socio-economic communities), and that quality ECE leads to better academic achievement at age 16 for children from low socio-economic communities.¹

Finding 9: Children from low socio-economic communities attend ECE for fewer hours than children from high socio-economic areas, which can be due to a range of factors.

The evidence is clear about the practices that matter for language development, and most teachers report using them frequently.

Finding 10: International and Aotearoa New Zealand evidence is clear that the practices that best support the development of oral language skills are:

Practice area 1	Teaching new words and how to use them
Practice area 2	Modelling how words make sentences
Practice area 3	Reading interactively with children
Practice area 4	Using conversation to extend language
Practice area 5	Developing positive social communication

Finding 11: ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed reported they use these evidence-based practices often. ECE teachers reported that they most often teach new words and how to use them (96 percent), use conversation to extend language (95 percent), and read interactively with children (95 percent). New entrant teachers we surveyed reported they most frequently read interactively with children (99 percent), teach new words and how to use them (96 percent), and model how words make sentences (95 percent).

Teachers' practices to develop social communication are weaker.

Finding 12: ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed both reported to us they develop social communication skills least frequently.

Professional knowledge is the strongest driver of teachers using evidence-based good practices. Qualified ECE teachers reported being almost twice as confident in their knowledge about oral language.

Finding 13: Qualified ECE teachers we surveyed reported being almost twice as confident in their knowledge about how oral language develops than non-qualified teachers. Most qualified ECE teachers (94 percent) reported being confident, but only two-thirds (64 percent) of non-qualified teachers reported being confident.

Finding 14: Qualified teachers reported more frequently using key practices, for example, using conversation to extend language (96 percent compared with 92 percent of non-qualified teachers).

Finding 15: ECE teachers who reported being extremely confident in their professional knowledge of how children's language develops were up to seven times more likely to report using effective teaching practices regularly.

“We got the [provider] to come in and talk to us about the science, and the brain, and the neuroscience behind basically play-based learning.”

TEACHER

“You know that you are using this strategy that is researched and proven to work.”

TEACHER

Teachers and parents often do not know how well their children are developing and this matters as timely support can prevent problems later.

Finding 16: Not all ECE and new entrant teachers are confident to assess oral language progress. Of the new entrant teachers we surveyed, a quarter reported not being confident to assess and report on progress. The lack of clear development expectations and indicators of progress, and lack of alignment between *Te Whāriki* and the *New Zealand Curriculum*, makes this difficult. Half of parents (53 percent) do not get information from their service about their child's oral language progress.

Finding 17: Being able to assess children's oral language progress and identify potential difficulties is an important part of teaching young children. However, not all ECE and new entrant teachers are confident to identify difficulties in oral language (15 percent of ECE teachers and 24 percent of new entrant teachers surveyed report not being confident).

Finding 18: For children who are struggling, support from specialists, such as speech-language therapists, who can help with oral language development is key. But not all teachers are confident to work with these specialists, with 12 percent of ECE teachers and 17 percent of new entrant teachers surveyed reporting not being confident.

“Many are attending ECE, but not being referred early enough once the delay in oral language is noticed. Then when trying to get intervention, the wait times are too long and the support is inconsistent.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

ERO has identified five areas for action to support children's oral language development.

Area 1: Increase participation in quality ECE for children from low socio-economic communities

- 1) Increase participation in quality ECE for children from low socio-economic communities through removing barriers.
- 2) Raise the quality of ECE for children in low socio-economic communities – including through ERO reviews and Ministry of Education interventions.

Area 2: Put in place clear and consistent expectations and track children's progress

- 3) Review how the *New Zealand Curriculum* at the start of school and *Te Whāriki* work together to provide clear and consistent progress indicators for oral language.
- 4) Make sure there are good tools that are used by ECE teachers to track progress and identify difficulties in children's language development.
- 5) Assess children's oral language at the start of school to help teachers to identify any tailored support or approaches they may need.

Area 3: Increase teachers' use of effective practices

- 6) In initial teacher education for ECE and new entrant teachers, have a clear focus on the evidence-based practices that support oral language development.
- 7) Increase professional knowledge of oral language development, in particular for non-qualified ECE teachers, through effective professional learning and development.

Area 4: Support parents and whānau to develop language at home

- 8) Support ECE services to provide regular updates on children's oral language development to parents and whānau.
- 9) Support ECE services in low socio-economic communities to provide resources to parents and whānau to use with their children.

Area 5: Increase targeted support

- 10) Invest in targeted programmes and approaches that prevent and address delays in language development (e.g., *Oral Language and Literacy Initiative* and *Better Start Literacy Approach*).

Conclusion

Oral language is a critical building block for all children and essential to setting them up to succeed at school and beyond. Most children's oral language is developing well, but there is a significant group of children who are behind (including children in lower socio-economic communities), and Covid-19 has made this worse. Quality ECE can make a difference.

We have identified five key areas of action to support children's oral language development. Together, these areas of action can help address the oral language challenges children face. We have developed a suite of oral language evaluation, practice, and support resources for key individuals in the education sector and parents and whānau to use to support children with their oral language development.

ERO's suite of oral language evaluation, practice, and support resources

Title	What's it about?	Who is it for?
Let's keep talking: Oral language development in the early years (Evaluation report)	The evaluation report shares what ERO found out about what is happening with oral language in ECE and new entrant classrooms.	Teachers, leaders, parents and whānau, learning support staff, specialists, and the wider education sector.
Good practice: Oral language development in the early years	The good practice report sets out how services can support oral language development and implement good practices.	Teachers, leaders, parents and whānau, learning support staff, specialists, the wider education sector.
Poster for teachers: Oral language development in the early years	This poster sets out the five key areas for ECE teachers .	Early childhood teachers
Guide for ECE teachers: Oral language development in the early years	This guide for ECE teachers explains how they can support oral language development.	ECE teachers
Guide for ECE leaders: Oral language development in the early years	This guide for ECE leaders explains how they can support oral language development.	ECE leaders
Insights for new entrant teachers: Oral language development in the early years	This brief guide for new entrant teachers explains how they can support oral language development.	New entrant teachers
Insights for parents and whānau: Oral language development in the early years	This brief guide parents and whānau explains how they can support oral language development.	Parents and whānau



About this report

Language is the foundation for children's ongoing learning and success. Children use oral language to become good thinkers and communicators, and to develop the literacy skills they need to achieve well in school and in life. This report looks at how well children are developing oral language skills, and at the range of teaching practices that support oral language development.

The Education Review Office (ERO) is responsible for reviewing and reporting on the performance of early childhood education services, kura, and schools. As part of this role, ERO looks at the performance of the education system, the effectiveness of programmes and interventions, and good educational practice.

In this report, ERO looks at how well children's oral language is developing in the early years, the teaching practices used by Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers^b and new entrant teachers to develop children's oral language, and the conditions which support good practices. We also outline what good practice strategies look like, based on research evidence, for supporting children's oral language development.

This report describes what we found out about the current state of oral language in the early years in Aotearoa New Zealand. To do this, we looked at international and local evidence, and worked closely with an Expert Advisory Group that included academics, teachers, practitioners, and oral language experts.

As well as drawing together the established evidence, we learned through rich observations in early learning services and new entrant classrooms. Through surveys as well as in-depth interviews, we draw on the experiences of ECE leaders and teachers, new entrant teachers, primary school leaders, parents and whānau, and key experts. Together, these present a picture of how children's oral language development is tracking, as well as the teaching that is happening to strengthen children's oral language.

What we looked at

This evaluation looks at the current state of oral language in the early years and what can be done to improve children's oral language. Across this work, we answer five key questions.

- 1) What is the current level of oral language development? (for 0 to 7-year-olds)
- 2) What impact has Covid-19 had?

^b In this report, the term 'teacher' is used for qualified and non-qualified staff that have a teaching and learning role within early childhood services. Some services may use other terms such as 'kaiako' or 'educator'.

- 3) How can ECE support oral language development and what does good practice look like?
- 4) How well are teachers in ECE and new entrant classes supporting oral language development?
- 5) What could strengthen oral language development in ECE?

Good practice teaching strategies for promoting children's oral language development, and the supports that underpin them, are unpacked in greater detail in our companion report: *Good practice: Oral language development in the early years*.

Our companion good practice resources for ECE teachers and leaders, parents and whānau, and new entrant teachers, can be found on our website: evidence.ero.govt.nz

Where we looked

We focused our investigation on children in ECE and in new entrant classes, their parents and whānau, and teachers and leaders in ECE services and new entrant classes across Aotearoa New Zealand.

This report does not look specifically at the oral language development needs of disabled learners.^c

Many children in Aotearoa New Zealand come from multilingual households and are learning two or more languages. We do not report specifically on children who are learning English as an additional language as a group in this report, but do discuss multilingual language learning.

English, te reo Māori, and more.

Our site visits and surveys draw from 'English medium' services and schools. (For evaluations that look at language learning in Māori-medium and Māori immersion early learning services, see our reports: 'Āhuru mōwai²' (Te Kōhanga Reo) and 'Tuia te here tangata: Making meaningful connections'³ (Puna Reo).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, all licensed ECE services are expected to provide opportunities for children to build their understanding of te reo Māori as well as English (and/or other languages relevant to the community), as part of the everyday experiences and learning that happen there.⁴ Ensuring children are able to access te reo Māori, and reflecting the cultures and languages of children and families at the service, is required and affirmed by our guiding curriculum and regulatory frameworks.^{5,6} When we talk about oral language in this report, this includes oral language in English, te reo Māori, and more.

Some of our survey and site visit data comes from Pacific bilingual services, which primarily use Pacific languages as well as some English and te reo Maori.

^c Disabled learners are an important group who can require different support to develop oral language. ERO's report on disabled learners (including deaf and non-verbal neurodivergent learners) looks in more detail at this group of learners in early childhood education services: *A Great Start? Education for Disabled Children in Early Childhood*.

How we found out about the current state of oral language and teachers' practice

This report draws together the wide range of international and New Zealand evidence about oral language development in the early years. In particular we draw on:

- international meta-analysis of good practice in supporting oral language and contextualising it to Aotearoa New Zealand
- Aotearoa New Zealand and international longitudinal studies (GUiNZ^d, SEED^e, and EPPSE^f) and administrative data
- surveys of:
 - 540 parents and whānau of children at early childhood education services and new entrant classes
 - 308 ECE teachers
 - 105 new entrant teachers
- observations of:
 - 10 ECE services across Aotearoa New Zealand
 - 10 new entrant classrooms in six schools across Aotearoa New Zealand
- in-depth interviews with:
 - 15 parents and whānau
 - 35 ECE teachers
 - 10 new entrant teachers from six schools
 - five speech-language therapists
 - five key informants (e.g., Ministry of Education leads).

International and local research evidence, alongside our surveys, rich observations and in-depth interviews presents a nuanced picture of the current level of oral language of children in New Zealand and how children can best be supported to develop their oral language.

^d Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ) is Aotearoa New Zealand's largest longitudinal study of child health and wellbeing, following the lives of more than 6000 children and their families.

^e The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) is a major longitudinal study following nearly 6000 children from across England from age two. It started in 2013, and it is funded by the Department for Education.

^f The Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education Project (EPPSE) is a longitudinal study from the UK that looks at how pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time.

How this fits with previous ERO reviews

In 2017, ERO asked early learning services and schools what they were doing in response to children's oral language and development. We reported on the importance of supporting oral language learning and development from a very early age, with evidence showing these years are critical in terms of the rapid language development of children.

Appendix 1 sets out findings and recommendations from ERO's 2017 report in more detail.

Report structure

This report is divided into six chapters.

- **Chapter 1** sets out the **context** of oral language, the role of ECE in supporting language development, and which children attend ECE.
- **Chapter 2** describes **how well children are developing** in oral language.
- **Chapter 3** sets out **good practice in oral language development**. (More detail can be found in our companion *good practice report*.)
- **Chapter 4** sets out **how well teachers are supporting** children's language development using key teaching practices.
- **Chapter 5** describes **how well teachers are supported** to develop children's oral language.
- **Chapter 6** sets out **key findings** and **areas for action**.

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this research, particularly the teachers, leaders, parents and whānau, and experts who shared with us. Their experiences and insights are at the heart of what we have learnt.





Chapter 1: Context

Oral language is the most common way we share our ideas, experiences, and feelings with others and how we understand people around us. Oral language is also foundational to reading and writing. Children need to learn to speak and listen before they can learn to read. Quality early childhood education can help build and strengthen children's oral language so that they are set up for success to communicate well with others, share their ideas and experiences, read and write when they start school, and more.

This section sets out what oral language is, why it is important, and the role of early childhood education services in supporting oral language development.

This chapter outlines:

- 1) what oral language is, including the aspects of oral language
- 2) why oral language is important
- 3) oral language indicators of progress
- 4) how ECE can help children develop oral language
- 5) which children are participating in ECE.

What we found: An overview

Oral language is critical for the achievement of the Government's literacy ambitions.

Oral language is critical for later literacy and education outcomes. It also plays a key role in developing key social-emotional skills that support behaviour.^{7,8} Children's vocabulary at age 2 is strongly linked to their literacy and numeracy achievement at age 12, and difficulties in oral language in the early years are reflected in poor reading comprehension at school.^{9,10,11}

Quality ECE makes a difference, particularly to children in low socio-economic communities, but they attend ECE less often.

International studies find that quality ECE supports language development and can accelerate literacy by up to a year (particularly for children in low socio-economic communities), and that quality ECE leads to better academic achievement at age 16 for children from low socio-economic communities.¹²

Children from low socio-economic communities attend ECE for fewer hours than children in high socio-economic areas, which can be due to a range of factors.

1) What is oral language?

Language is key to human connection and communication. It is essential for people to navigate through the world effectively. People communicate in a variety of ways, ranging from gestures to written and oral language. Oral language is the most common form of communication and includes:

- listening (receptive language) skills: the ability to hear, process, and understand information
- speaking (expressive language) skills: the ability to respond and make meaning from sounds, words, gestures or signing.

Through listening and speaking, children learn to communicate their views, understand others, and make and share their discoveries. In *Te Whāriki*, Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE curriculum, oral language includes any method of communication the child uses in their first language.¹³

We recognise *Te Whāriki* includes non-verbal methods of communication (e.g., NZSL, and use of assistive technologies). However, in this report, we refer to oral language as spoken communication in a child's first language (the language they speak at home), because the evidence base available is robust for spoken language, while non-verbal language encompasses vastly different skills and strategies.

2) Why is oral language important?

Children's early oral language learning is critical for educational achievement later. It predicts academic success and retention rates at secondary school. Early measures of language, such as vocabulary at 2 years of age, predict academic achievement at 12 years of age and in secondary school.^{14,15}

Children need oral language to become proficient thinkers, communicators, and learners. Oral language is the foundation of literacy, helps children fully participate at school, is critical for children to recognise and express their own feelings and needs, and to recognise and respond to the feelings and needs of others.

Oral language is the foundation of literacy.

Before children can read and write, they need to be able to understand language. Children's early reading, writing, and comprehension skills all build on their oral language.¹⁶ Oral language development links to better outcomes in reading comprehension, articulation of thoughts and ideas, vocabulary, and grammar.¹⁷

Oral language enables communication in the learning environment.

Oral language is used for sharing thoughts and transmitting knowledge. Oral language development includes using language for social communication and discussions with peers at ECE and school. It is needed for conversational skills in small groups, including being able to initiate, join, and end conversations. It also helps children learn more effectively, apply their learning through problem solving, and address challenges.¹⁸

Oral language skills help children communicate their needs and wants.

Poor social communication skills in childhood relate to behavioural problems when children have difficulty communicating what they need and want, and get frustrated, which is estimated to affect up to 10 percent of children in Aotearoa New Zealand.^{19,20.}

Raising literacy levels

With many students starting below expected levels at secondary school, the New Zealand Government has set expectations for achieving improved literacy levels for Year 8 students. The Government has set a target that 80 percent of Year 8 students will be at or above the expected curriculum level for their age in reading and writing by December 2030.

To achieve this, children need the foundations of reading comprehension. Longitudinal studies in the UK and Aotearoa New Zealand link oral language in the early years and achievement in reading comprehension and literacy assessments in primary and secondary school.

3) What are the indicators of progress for oral language?

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are a range of sources for oral language progress markers or indicators. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health have both developed guidance and expectations for typical language development for children in their first five years. The Ministry of Education's 'Stepping stones' for oral language development in the early years are set out in Table 1.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, early childhood education and school have separate curriculum documents. The ECE curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, provides an indication of some of the growing interests and capabilities seen in infants, toddlers, and young children. Oral language learning is also a part of the school curriculum, which includes guidance for oral language for 5 - 8-year-olds. The *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) English learning area sets out achievement objectives on:

- making meaning of ideas or information that they receive, including listening
- creating meaning for themselves or others, including speaking.

Multilingual children

In Aotearoa New Zealand, 18 percent of children under the age of 14 years speak more than one language. Multilingual children can learn multiple languages at home, or can learn to speak one language at home and another in their learning environment.

Multilingual children who are capable in more than one language can have better creative thinking and multi-tasking skills, but children acquiring two or more languages at the same time do develop language at a different pace. It's useful for teachers to be aware that it's normal for multilingual children to take longer than children learning one language to:

- have the same number of words in each language
- combine words
- build sentences
- speak clearly.

Table 1: Stepping stones for language development

Stepping stones ^g			NZ Curriculum
Infants (0-18 months)	Toddlers (1-3 years)	Pre-schoolers (2.5 – 5 years)	New Entrants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Point to people and things they know, when asked to → Copy/ repeat simple words or sounds → Understand things like 'come here' → Say two or three words → Use their voice to get attention → Listen when people talk → Point to things when questions are asked (e.g., where is the dog?) → Say at least two words together (e.g., more milk) → Use more gestures than waving and pointing (e.g., nodding) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Say about 50 words → Say two or more words together, with one action word (e.g., doggie run) → Name things in a book when asked → Do two things when asked, like get the ball and bring it here → Repeat what you say → Continually learn new words → Say simple sentences with two or more words in them → Use many words that non-family members can understand → Talk with you in conversation using at least two back-and-forth exchanges → Ask questions (e.g., Who? What? Why?) → Talk well enough for others to understand → Speak clearly so that everyone can understand → Ask lots of 'why' and 'what' questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Say sentences with four or more words → Talk about at least one thing that happened during the day → Answer simple questions → Tell a story they heard or made up with at least two events → Answer simple questions about a book or story after it is read/told to them → Keep a conversation going with more than three back-and-forth exchanges → Use/recognise simple rhymes → Tell a long, clear story about things they have done → Speak well, with only a few sounds wrong → Know what things are for → Like books and being read to → Understand most of what you say 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Have an awareness of the connections between oral, written, and visual language → Begin to recognise that oral, written, and visual language features can be used for effect

^g These stepping stones have been developed from the Te Kōrerorero (Ministry of Education, 2020) and Much More Than Words resources.

4) What is the role of ECE in supporting language development?

Quality early childhood education has a central role in supporting oral language development in the early years. In Aotearoa New Zealand, high quality ECE reflects ERO's *Indicators of Quality*.²¹ ERO sets out domains, process indicators, and examples of effective practice that include professional learning, leadership, and curriculum expectations that contribute to positive learning outcomes for children. These include specific indicators and examples around:

- effective assessment, planning, and evaluation of teaching and its impact on children's learning and development
- the expectation that the learning outcomes in *Te Whāriki* are prioritised, and should provide the basis for assessment for learning
- thoughtfully and intentionally giving priority to oral language, recognising that it plays a crucial role in learning.²²

How does oral language fit in to *Te Whāriki*, the ECE curriculum?

Te Whāriki includes specific goals and outcomes related to oral language – such as developing non-verbal communication skills for a range of purposes (goal), and understanding oral language and using it for a range of purposes (learning outcome).²³ The Mana Reo | Communication strand focuses on children's communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal. As of May 2024, the principles, strands, goals, and learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki* are gazetted – which means that all licensed early childhood services are required to implement them.²⁴

Quality ECE supports language development.

Oral language and communication focused teaching in ECE services can help children make seven months additional progress on their language in a year.²⁵

Quality ECE reduces disparities in oral language for children when they start school.

Attending quality early childhood education services not only improves children's language outcomes, but also reduces the disparity in the level of oral language at school entry.

Children from low socio-economic communities benefit most from quality ECE that focuses on language and communication development.^{26,27} Quality early childhood education services and skilled ECE teachers can provide rich, immersive language experiences for children,^h which have particular value if children are missing these opportunities at home.

^h This is required by the licensing criteria for early learning services in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as within *Te Whāriki*.

The duration of enrolment and hours of attendance also make a significant difference to the long-term outcomes for children from low socio-economic communities. International studies show that regularly attending a quality early childhood education service reduces the effects of multiple disadvantages on later achievement and progress in primary school, with these children achieving better outcomes in reading, writing, and science at 7 years of age.²⁸

Quality ECE enables children who need additional support to be identified and supported earlier.

ECE teachers can notice language difficulties that may not be apparent to parents and whānau.²⁹ Support from ECE services and speech-language therapists is effective in helping children get back on track.³⁰

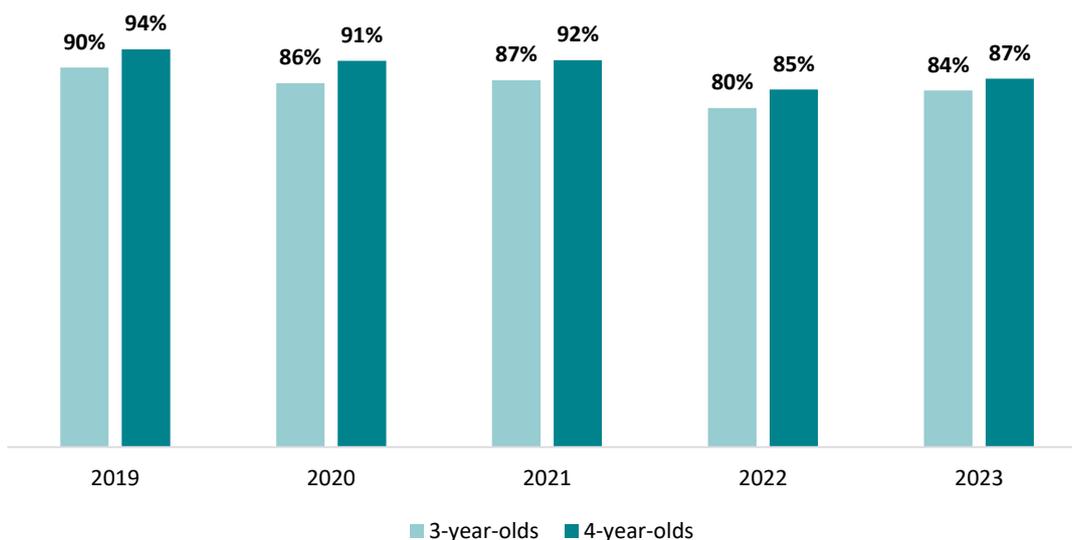
5) Which children are participating in ECE?

In Aotearoa New Zealand it is not compulsory for children to attend early learning services, but most do.

Nearly nine in 10 3- to 4-year-olds attend ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The proportion of 3- and 4-year-olds attending ECE increased between 2022 and 2023, but it is still lower than before the Covid-19 pandemic.^{i,j}

Figure 1: *Proportion of 3- and 4-year-olds attending licensed ECE services, 2019-2023^k*



i Early learning participation for 3 - 4-year-olds: [Early learning participation | Education Counts](#)

j This data comes from the Ministry of Education's Early Learning Information Reports (ELI). ELI is not used by all services

k Early learning participation: [Early learning participation | Education Counts](#)

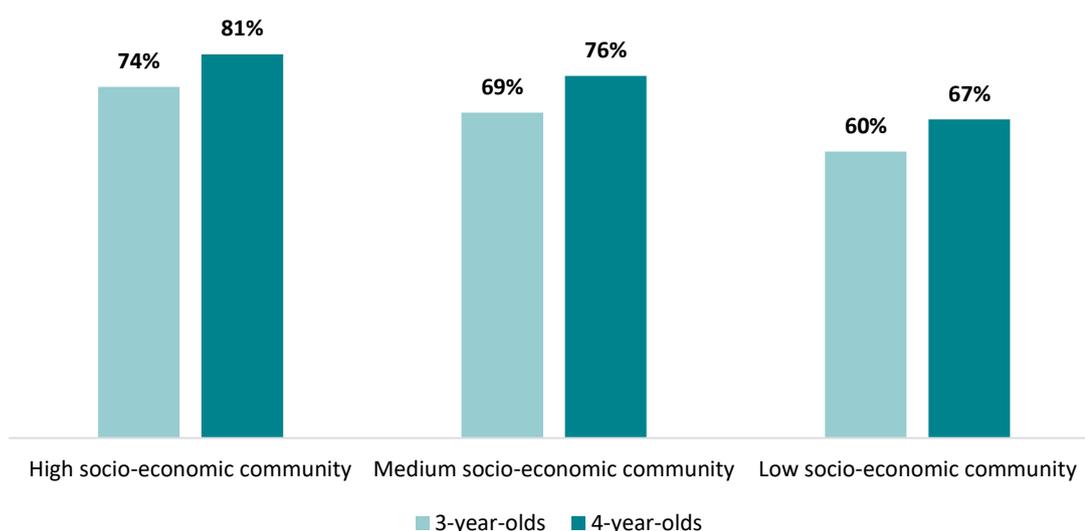
Children from low socio-economic communities attend ECE for fewer hours.

International evidence³¹ shows that children from lower socio-economic communities attend ECE for fewer hours. We also find this in Aotearoa New Zealand.^l

Of the 3-year-olds who attend ECE, less than two-thirds (60 percent) of children from low socio-economic communities attend ECE for more than 10 hours per week, compared with three-quarters (74 percent) of children from high socio-economic communities.^m

Of the 4-year-olds who attend ECE, only two-thirds (67 percent) from low socio-economic communities attend more than 10 hours per week, compared with four in five (81 percent) from high socio-economic communities.ⁿ

Figure 2: Proportion of 3- and 4-year-olds who attended ECE more than 10 hours per week, by socio-economic community, 2023^o



Conclusion

Good oral language skills support children's later literacy and academic achievement. Quality ECE can play a key role in supporting children's oral language and literacy development. But concerningly, fewer children are attending ECE than before the Covid-19 pandemic, and children from lower socio-economic communities attend less. This is worrying, as the evidence is clear that quality ECE is especially effective in reducing inequity at school entry.

In the next chapter of the report we look at children's oral language development, the impact of Covid-19, and the practices teachers in ECE services and new entrant classes are using to build children's oral language.

^l To determine socio-economic level, children's primary home address for their most recent enrolment in ELI is used.

^m Early learning participation intensity: [Early learning participation | Education Counts](#)

ⁿ Early learning participation intensity: [Early learning participation | Education Counts](#)

^o A measure of socio-economic deprivation produced by the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago, based on information from the 2018 Census. NZ Deprivation scores have been grouped into three categories: high socioeconomic (NZ Deprivation Index scores 1 to 3), medium (scores 4 to 7), and low (scores 8 to 10).



Chapter 2: How well are children developing in oral language?

Children's oral language development is critical to later literacy but some children are having difficulties, and this impacts on their ongoing learning. Boys, and children from low socio-economic communities, struggle the most.

In this chapter, we set out how different aspects of children's language are developing, where the key differences are in children's capabilities, and discuss the impact Covid-19 has had on children's oral language.

What we did

There are many aspects to oral language development, and factors that contribute to successful development. To understand how well children are developing oral language in the early years, we looked at:

- international evidence
- national longitudinal studies
- our surveys of ECE teachers, new entrant teachers, and parents and whānau
- our interviews with ECE leaders and teachers, primary school leaders and new entrant teachers, key experts, and parents and whānau.

This section sets out what we found about:

- language development in the early years
- where children are at when they start school
- impacts of Covid-19
- which aspects of oral language children can struggle with most
- differences in progress for boys, multilingual children, and children in low socio-economic communities.

What we found: an overview

Most children's oral language is developing well, but there is a significant group of children who are behind and Covid-19 has made this worse.

A large Aotearoa New Zealand study found 80 percent of children at age 5 are developing well, but 20 percent are struggling with oral language.^p ECE and new entrant teachers also report that a group of children are struggling and more than half of parents and whānau report their child has some difficulty with oral language in the early years.

Covid-19 has had a significant impact. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (59 percent of ECE teachers and 65 percent of new entrant teachers) report that Covid-19 has impacted children's language development, particularly language skills for social communication. International studies confirm the significant impact of Covid-19 on language development.³²

Children from low socio-economic communities and boys are struggling the most.

Evidence both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally^{33,34} is clear that children from lower socio-economic communities are more likely to struggle with oral language skills. We found that new entrant teachers we surveyed in schools in low socio-economic communities were nine times more likely to report children being below expected levels of oral language. Parents and whānau with lower qualifications were also more likely to report that their child has difficulty with oral language.

Both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, boys have more difficulty developing oral language than girls. Parents and whānau we surveyed reported 70 percent of boys are not at the expected development level, compared with 56 percent of girls.

Difficulties with oral language emerge as children develop and oral language becomes more complex.

Teachers and parents and whānau report more concerns about students being behind as they become older and start school. For example, 56 percent of parents and whānau report their child has difficulty as a toddler (aged 18 months to 3 years old), compared to over two-thirds of parents and whānau (70 percent) reporting that their child has difficulty as a preschooler (aged 3 to 5).

Parents and whānau and teachers reported to us that children who are behind most often struggle with constructing sentences, telling stories, and using social communication to talk about their thoughts and feelings. For example, 43 percent of parents and whānau report their child has some difficulty with oral grammar, but only 13 percent report difficulty with gestures.

^p Growing Up in New Zealand (GUINZ) is Aotearoa New Zealand's largest longitudinal study of child health and wellbeing, following the lives of more than 6000 children and their families.

1) How well is oral language developing in the early years?

There is limited curriculum guidance and no national assessments.

Te Whāriki, the curriculum for early childhood education, includes goals and outcomes for oral language – such as ‘developing non-verbal communication skills for a range of purposes’ and ‘understanding oral language and using it for a range of purposes.’

The *New Zealand Curriculum (2007)* includes key competencies for students such as use of language. These are not closely related to *Te Whāriki* outcomes for children in ECE.

There is no national measure or system-level national data for how well children under 5 are developing oral language. While ‘B4 School Check’ assessments help identify hearing problems or speech difficulty for 4-year-olds, they don’t measure broader oral language development.

We have to rely on studies, such as the Growing Up in New Zealand study (GUiNZ) and what parents and whānau and ECE teachers see, to get a broader understanding of how well children’s oral language is developing in ECE and into junior primary school.

Most children develop oral language well, but around one in five children in Aotearoa New Zealand have poor oral language skills.

The GUiNZ study investigated over 5,000 4.5 - 5-year-olds’ oral language in 2019, using two verbal tasks. According to GUiNZ, one in five children had lower language ability in the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test which looks at children’s understanding of words, and a lower ability in the DIBELS Letter Naming Fluency task which looks at children’s ability to say the ‘names’ of letters.

According to GUiNZ, there is a high degree of variability in oral language in children. This variability continues in the first two years of primary school and can reflect that children’s development is not the same for all children and it does not always progress linearly.

ECE teachers report that most children’s oral language development is on track, but there is a significant group of children who are behind.

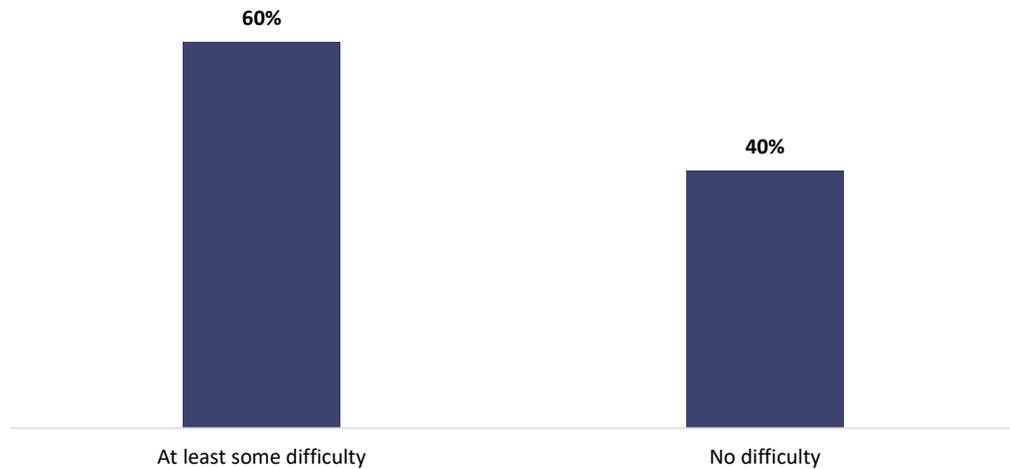
Most ECE teachers (89 percent) report three-quarters of the children they work with are at the expected level of oral language development. But 12 percent report that a quarter of the children they work with are behind.

Parents and whānau are also concerned.

More than half of parents and whānau (60 percent) with children under 5 report that their child has some difficulty with oral language in the early years.



Figure 3: *Parents and whānau reporting of whether their child has difficulty with oral language*

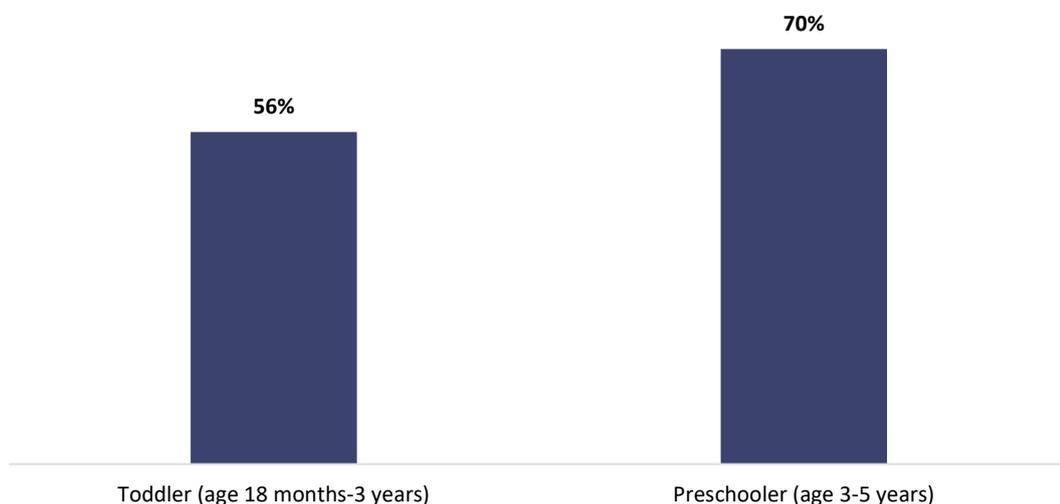


Teachers and parents and whānau become more concerned about language development as children get older.

In our surveys, we asked parents and whānau about whether their child has difficulty with oral language skills that are generally expected at their age. For example, ‘say simple sentences with two or more words in them’ for toddlers, and ‘tell longer stories’ for preschoolers.

Parents and whānau report more preschoolers have difficulty with oral language than toddlers. Seventy percent of parents and whānau of preschoolers report their child has some difficulty with oral language, compared with only 56 percent of parents and whānau of toddlers.

Figure 4: *Proportion of parents and whānau who report their toddler or preschooler has difficulty with oral language*



New entrant teachers are also more concerned than ECE teachers about the oral language skills of the children they work with. Only one-third of new entrant teachers we surveyed reported that most of the children they work with start school at the expected level of oral language. Three-quarters of ECE teachers we surveyed reported that most of the preschoolers they work with are at the expected level of oral language.

These differences in the level of concern reflect that as children grow older the oral language skills become more complex. It also may be that as this happens, it becomes more obvious to adults when children are below expected levels.

“A lot of children are not able to communicate their needs. They are difficult to understand when they speak. They are not used to having conversations.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER



2) Impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 has negatively impacted children's oral language development.

International studies have consistently shown that Covid-19 negatively impacted children's oral language, with fewer children achieving as expected during the pandemic than before.³⁵ For example, in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic, fewer children in Year 0 achieved 'at least expected' in:³⁶

- literacy (9 percent difference)
- communication and language (8 percent difference)
- personal, social, and emotional development (7 percent difference).

We heard that Covid-19 limited children's interactions with others, reducing opportunities to develop oral language. ECE teachers and new entrant teachers shared that negative impacts of Covid-19 included fewer opportunities for social interactions which support language development, increased screen time, and wearing masks which could impair speech development. ECE and new entrant teachers report social communication and development as the most significant negative impact of Covid-19. They also told us that Covid-19 had significantly impacted attendance at ECE, meaning reduced teaching and learning time.

“The majority of students missed ECE and were often at home on devices with very little input from whānau. I do wonder if they were spoken to, as many from this cohort have extremely poor oral language.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER



“Less opportunity to engage in language development with peers and teachers - many children were educated at home and opportunities for language and learning were more limited.”

ECE TEACHER

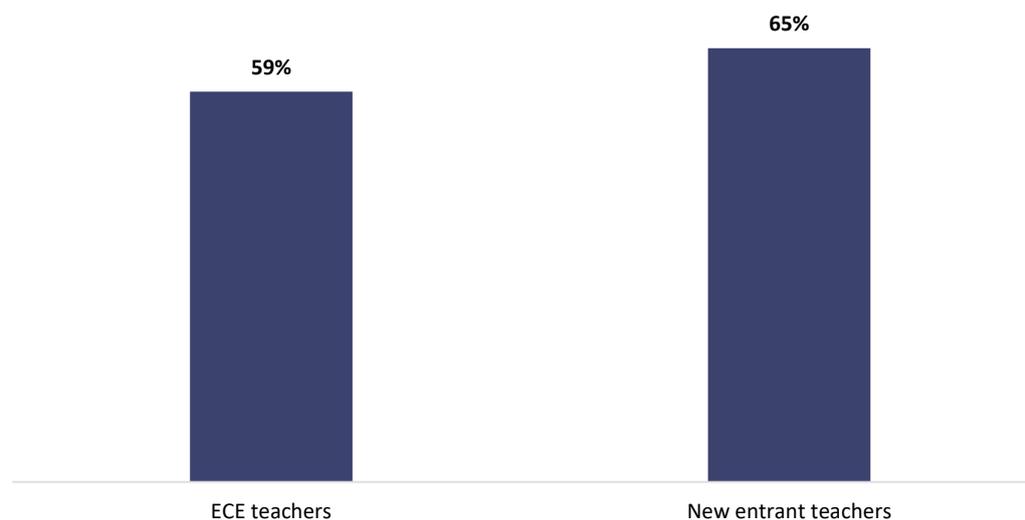
“We've had more higher needs students come in since Covid-19 than before. A lot more non-verbal students, a lot more with speech sound problems. A lot more haven't been to preschool.”

SCHOOL LEADER

ERO's research during the Covid-19 pandemic also found that children's oral language development was negatively impacted.³⁷

In 2023, three out of five (59 percent) ECE teachers and two-thirds (65 percent) of new entrant teachers we surveyed were still reporting Covid-19 impacting on children's oral language development.

Figure 5: *Percentage of teachers reporting Covid-19 had an impact on children's oral language development*



3) Which aspects of oral language do children have most difficulty with?

We looked at the following key eight aspects of oral language development:

Gestures	Using and adding gestures as part of communication
Words	Learning, understanding, and using a range of words as expected
Sounds	Adding, using, and understanding sounds
Social communication	Changing their language, using words to express needs
Syntax	Combining words to form sentences
Stories	Enjoy listening to, being read to, and telling stories as expected
Grammar	Constructing nearly correct sentences and asking questions
Rhyming	Making rhymes as expected

a) Teachers

We asked ECE teachers and new entrant teachers about children they work with who are below the expected level of oral language development. We found that both groups of teachers have the same top five, and bottom three, aspects of oral language that they are most often concerned about for these children.

ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed are most concerned about five areas: grammar, rhyming, syntax, sounds, and stories.

For their children who are below expected levels of development, there are five aspects of oral language where both ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed have concerns.

Aspect of oral language	Percentage of children, out of those who are below expected levels of development, that have difficulty with this aspect	
	Reported by ECE teachers	Reported by new entrant teachers
Grammar	78 percent	93 percent
Rhyming	77 percent	93 percent
Syntax	77 percent	93 percent
Sounds	64 percent	90 percent
Stories	60 percent	94 percent

ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed are least concerned about three areas: words, social communication, and gestures.

Aspect of oral language	Percentage of children, out of those who are below expected levels of development, that have difficulty with this aspect	
	Reported by ECE teachers	Reported by new entrant teachers
Words	55 percent	87 percent
Social communication	48 percent	87 percent
Gestures	31 percent	74 percent

While both ECE and new entrant teachers share their top and bottom aspects of concern, new entrant teachers we surveyed are consistently more concerned than ECE teachers.

Children are finding it challenging to form sentences as expected.

In our interviews, we heard that children in both ECE and new entrant contexts find it challenging to combine words to form sentences. New entrant teachers told us that children below the expected level of oral language find it challenging to form grammatically correct sentences, and will communicate in fragmented sentences. We heard this results in children communicating in 'demands' as opposed to full sentences.

“The children want to communicate and try, however, they will often use the same simple words or incoherent sounds to communicate regardless of different contexts and situations.”

ECE TEACHER

“It's not the lack of language for our tamariki, it's the inability to pronounce words correctly. Some of our 4-year-old tamariki like to tell long stories, but it mostly comes out as gibberish, much like an infant babbling.”

ECE TEACHER

New entrant teachers told us that many children start school using language below what they would expect for their age and have difficulty constructing coherent sentences that are age appropriate.

“There is a complete lack of positional language, pronouns, and simple grammar tenses. A 6-year-old might say “Me go pee” instead of “I need the toilet”... I have been teaching for 24 years and have never seen this low level of oral language.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

“They have difficulty both with understanding what is said to them and with formulating responses. They often fail to understand what teachers say, [and] miss important points in class.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

Children below expected levels of oral language often find it challenging to share their experiences.

We heard that children below expected levels of oral language struggle to have a back-and-forth conversation that allows them to tell and share stories from home with their teachers and other children. This is a key aspect of literacy development as well as social development and learning.

“There are more children who do not have the ability to share stories from home or understand conversational communication.”

ECE TEACHER

Fewer opportunities for children to engage in extended conversation makes oral language development more challenging.

Teachers report there is less extended conversation happening between children and parents and whānau, due to parents and whānau and children spending more time on screens.

“Many also have significant delays in the articulation of sounds, are unable to talk in more than a four - to five-word sentence, spend large amounts of time on devices... They have had very little interaction with books. Receptive language is very poor alongside expressive language.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

“I believe children are using screens far too much and do not have interactions with adults in the home as much, in this day and age. Talking to our tamariki makes them feel important and respected – listening and giving them time to respond is very important too.”

ECE TEACHER

In interviews, ECE and new entrant teachers shared their concerns about children's social communication skills. Children find it challenging to change their language depending on social contexts and, if they do not have words to communicate, can find it difficult to feel understood by adults around them.

“These children often struggle considerably with their emotional regulation and social skills as they cannot converse with their peers.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

b) Parents and whānau

Parents and whānau are most concerned about their child's ability to use: grammar, stories, social communication, syntax, and rhyming.

We asked parents and whānau which areas of oral language development their child has difficulty with. Their areas of most concern relate to more complex communication and the 'rules' of speaking well.

Parents and whānau are most concerned with their child's ability to use:

Grammar	43 percent
Stories	36 percent
Social communication	36 percent
Syntax	33 percent
Rhyming	33 percent

Parents and whānau are least concerned about their child's ability to use: sounds, words, and gestures.

They are less concerned about the areas of oral language that form the building blocks of speaking.

Parents and whānau are least concerned with their child's ability to use:

Sounds	28 percent
Words	24 percent
Gestures	13 percent

Parents are also concerned about the impact of other children's language ability on their child's development.

“I feel concerned with the massive number of kids around the kindy that have speech issues. This has massive social implications for my daughter as she struggles to understand what they are saying. My daughter struggles to form some sounds too so this is a worry!”

PARENT

Together, reports from teachers and parents and whānau indicate that children struggle to develop more complex elements of oral language (such as constructing sentences and telling stories) as opposed to the simpler elements of language (such as using gestures and a range of words).

4) How does children's oral language development look for different groups?

It is well established in the evidence base, and emphasised in *Te Whāriki* and other guiding documents, that individual children's oral language learning and development progress varies between children.

This section sets out the differences in oral language development for:

- a) boys
- b) multilingual children
- c) socio-economic communities.

a) Boys

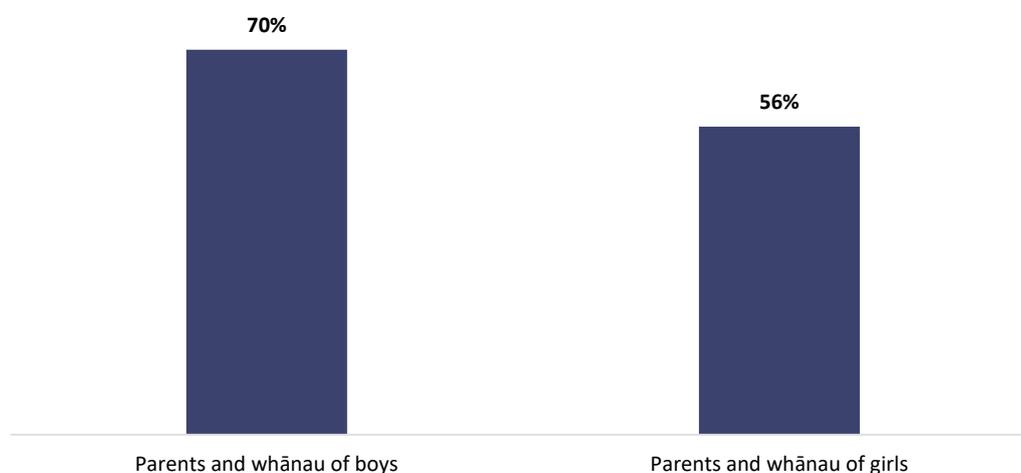
The evidence shows that girls tend to develop their language skills earlier than boys.^{38,39} This means boys are likely to have lower language ability and lower verbal ability than girls who are the same age. But these differences tend to only be a matter of months.⁴⁰ This means that it is normal and expected for girls to have similar oral language ability to boys that are a few months older than them.

However, it's also important to be aware that boys are twice as likely than girls to have language impairments and difficulties.⁴¹ Teachers have a key role in recognising the difference between expected variations and language difficulties that get in the way of children learning and progressing in their oral language and literacy. We talk more about identifying language difficulties that would benefit from specialist support in *Chapter 3* of this report.

Parents and whānau of boys are more likely to report their child has some difficulty in oral language than parents and whānau of girls.

The wider evidence is supported by our surveys which found that seven in 10 parents and whānau of boys (70 percent) report their child has some difficulty with oral language, compared with half of parents and whānau of girls (56 percent).^q

Figure 6: *Proportion of parents and whānau that report their child has some difficulty in oral language*

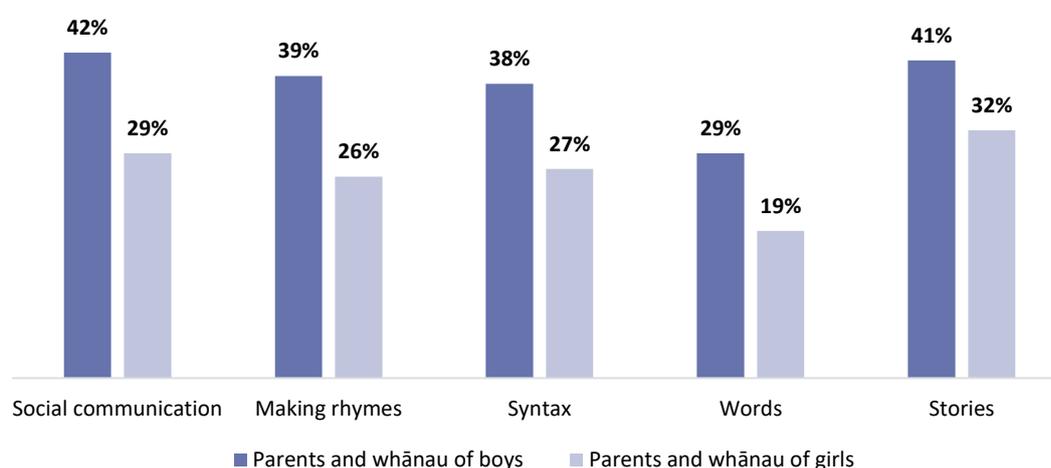


^q Numbers of parents and whānau of gender diverse children were too low in our sample to statistically analyse.

There are specific oral language aspects where parents and whānau of boys report more difficulty than parents and whānau of girls. These are:

- social communication
- making rhymes
- syntax
- words
- stories.

Figure 7: *Proportion of parents and whānau that report their child has some difficulty in different aspects of oral language*



These significant differences indicate that, as a group, boys may require more targeted support for oral language development.

b) Multilingual children

There are a range of significant benefits to learning two or more languages, such as better attention and problem-solving skills.^{42,43} Teachers have the opportunity to value and build upon the opportunities and benefits of children’s multilingualism. *Te Whāriki* sets out that “the languages and symbols of [children’s] own and other cultures are promoted” (p. 43) in ECE contexts, and clarifies that a positive outcome of quality ECE is children demonstrating “confidence that their first language is valued and increasing ability in the use of at least one language” (p. 42) – not necessarily English.

In terms of oral language development, it's important for teachers to remember that children learning more than one language can make progress in English (and/or te reo Māori) at a slower pace than children who speak only one language. This makes sense, as multilingual children are learning a broader range of words, multiple ways that sentences can be constructed, and more. Careful consideration of individual children's contexts, strengths, and information from families and experts need to be considered when assessing multilingual children's oral language capabilities and needs.

Assessing multilingual children's oral language progress

When it comes to assessment, it's important for teachers to be aware that children learning more than one language might take longer than their monolingual peers to grow their English or te reo Māori word bank, combine words, build sentences, and speak clearly compared to children who have one language. This is normal and expected. These children might also have stronger oral language skills or confidence in one language than the other, so teachers shouldn't make assumptions about multilingual children's oral language capability based on one language alone.

Teachers should seek expert advice, for example from speech-language therapists, about how to assess and support the oral language progress of multilingual children.

Multilingual children progress at a different rate to children who are only learning one language, but they catch up.

Sometimes multilingual children can mix up grammar or words from their two or more different and progress more slowly, languages, but the evidence shows they catch up with their single-language peers over time.⁴⁴ Consistent with published evidence, ECE and new entrant teachers told us about multilingual children they work with who progress at a slower pace, but soon catch up.

“As our tamaiti are learning two or three languages, their language and communication is often delayed but once they start, they catch up with their peers.”

ECE TEACHER

“In my room there is one new child, he speaks three languages. We got to know that he is interested in reading books, so reading books means he goes through the pictures - he can't read the words. So it is easy for us to extend his language through reading books and showing the pictures.”

ECE TEACHER

Many children who speak another language at home may be more proficient in their home language. When children have English as an additional language (i.e., they mostly speak English outside the home) it can be difficult for teachers to accurately assess their language abilities.

“There’s one new child, he speaks three languages – mum and dad have two different languages, then [he’s learning] English... He actually came from another centre, that had informed the parents that they were really concerned with his speech delays – but he speaks really well.”

ECE TEACHER

Our study aligns with the established evidence base: that multilingual children may appear to progress slower than monolingual peers, but soon catch up in their English or te reo Māori with appropriate teaching and support.

c) Socio-economic background

Socio-economic background is a key factor in children’s oral language development.⁴⁵ International and local evidence is clear that children from lower socio-economic communities are more likely to struggle with oral language and early literacy skills.⁴⁶ For example, an Aotearoa New Zealand study found that children from higher socio-economic communities were about 3.5 times more likely than children from lower socio-economic communities to be able to name letters.⁴⁷ In ERO’s study, we also found significant differences around socio-economic disadvantage.

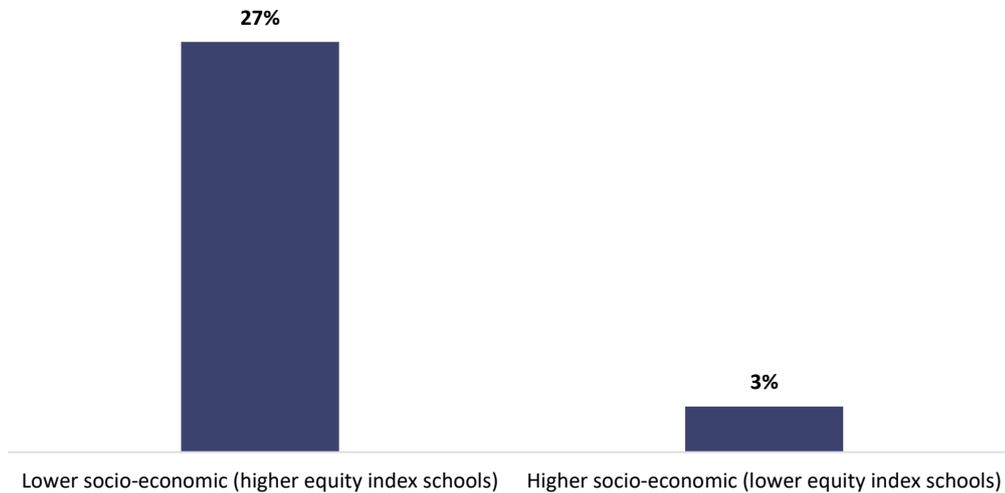
New entrant teachers we surveyed in schools with more disadvantaged children^r were more likely to report children in their class struggling with oral language.

The Equity Index is a way to understand the relationship between socio-economic circumstances and student achievement. A higher EQI number indicates that a school has students facing more or greater socio-economic barriers.

Over a quarter of new entrant teachers in schools with a higher equity index number report that *most* of the children they work with have below expected levels of oral language, compared to just 3 percent of new entrant teachers in schools with a lower equity index.

^r This was calculated using the Equity Index. [The Equity Index – Education in New Zealand](#). A ‘higher’ equity index number reflects schools in the top half of scores. A ‘lower’ equity index number reflects schools in the lower half of scores.

Figure 8: *New entrant teachers reporting that most children they work with are below the expected level of oral language, by socio-economic community*

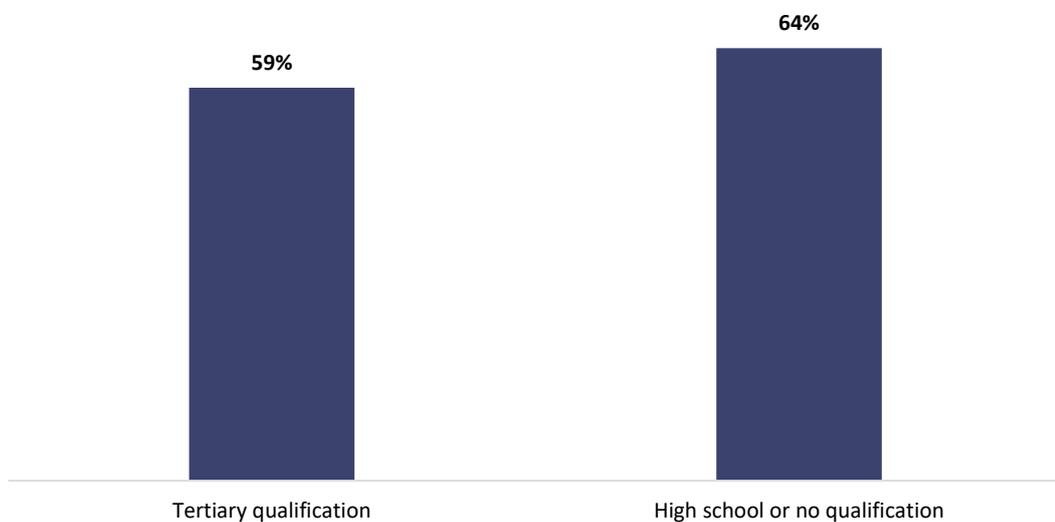


Parents and whānau with lower qualifications are also more likely to report their children have some difficulty with oral language.

Consistent with published evidence,^{48,49} parents and whānau we surveyed with lower qualifications were more likely reported their child has at least some difficulty with oral language.

About two-thirds (64 percent) of parents and whānau with a high school qualification or below (Level 0-3) report their child has some difficulty, compared to 58 percent of parents and whānau with a tertiary qualification (Level 7 or higher).

Figure 9: *Parents and whānau reporting their child has at least some difficulty with oral language, by parent qualification*



We heard that children from lower socio-economic communities face greater barriers to learning. For example, parents and whānau in lower socio-economic communities may be more likely to have limited time and resources to support their children's oral language development at home. Teachers that we talked to identify low socio-economic status of families as a contributing factor for lower levels of oral language. We heard that this is sometimes linked to reduced attendance at ECE.

“Patterns of lower speech does seem to be more common in our lower income whānau.”

ECE TEACHER

“Children who are below expected levels have tended to be from lower socio-economic whānau or have not consistently attended daycare.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

ECE teachers, new entrant teachers, and school leaders from low socio-economic communities talked about the added and complex challenges faced by their families, and their ongoing difficulties in connecting with busy parents and whānau in ways that work for families.

“The [parent/whānau] engagement is not good... All parents have been invited to attend these speech language therapy lessons so that they can support their children at home. Other than one, no-one has taken up the offer.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

Conclusion

Oral language development is critical for children, but we don't have a national measure for how children are developing. Evidence suggests most children are on track but around one in five children are not at expected levels of oral language development. Covid-19 has had an impact for many children.

Children have the most difficulty with more complex aspects of oral language, such as understanding syntax and telling stories, as opposed to more foundational aspects such as gestures and using words. Boys, and children from low socio-economic communities, can have more difficulty with oral language development than their peers.

In the next chapter, we discuss how quality ECE can help close the gap and set children up to succeed at school.



Chapter 3: Good practice in developing oral language

ERO reviewed the international and local evidence base to find the most effective practices for supporting oral language in early childhood education services. We also visited early childhood education services and new entrant classrooms across Aotearoa New Zealand to capture good practice.

This chapter summarises five practice areas and four supports that make the most difference. We unpack these in greater detail in our companion report *Good practice: Oral language development in the early years* for ECE teachers and leaders and accompanying guides.

ERO looked at good practice in supporting oral language in Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood services and classrooms.

To find out what really works, we took a deep dive into the literature on good practice for supporting oral language development. This covered both the national and international evidence base, and then we checked our understandings with Aotearoa New Zealand experts.

In our fieldwork, we asked ECE teachers and leaders about the practical ways that they bring evidence-based oral language practices to life in their early childhood service. Their ideas, strategies, and stories can be found in our companion report, *Good practice: Oral language development in the early years*.

Which teachers will find these practices useful?

This chapter of the report is focused on early childhood teaching practice – we draw from evidence and fieldwork around teaching and learning for children in early learning contexts.

However, new entrant teachers, and other school teachers who work with students within Level 1 of the New Zealand Curriculum, may also find this chapter and companion report useful for their practice.

There are five key areas of teaching practice

These practice areas are ways that teachers can actively support children's oral language development in the early years. Each of these is broken down into a few 'key practices', which we set out later in the chapter. These are drawn from the established evidence base as well as advice from Aotearoa New Zealand experts.

The five key practice areas are:

Practice area 1	Teaching new words and how to use them
Practice area 2	Modelling how words make sentences
Practice area 3	Reading interactively with children
Practice area 4	Using conversation to extend language
Practice area 5	Developing positive social communication

There are four key supports for good teaching practice

Key supports are the foundations that need to be in place before teachers can do their best work in supporting oral language. Each of these is broken down into a few 'elements of good support', which we set out later in the chapter. These are drawn from the established evidence base as well as advice from Aotearoa New Zealand experts.

The four key supports are:

Support 1	Early childhood education service leadership and priorities
Support 2	Teacher knowledge and assessment
Support 3	Partnership with parents and whānau
Support 4	Working with specialists

In this chapter, we provide summary overviews of the five practice areas and four key supports, that together make a positive difference to children's oral language learning and development. For more detail including practical strategies from ECE leaders and teachers, refer to our companion report.

Practice area 1: Teaching new words and how to use them

This practice area is about deliberately teaching and modelling words to children through everyday interactions. This includes intentionally using words to build a child's understanding of words (their 'receptive vocabulary', or listening skills) and encouraging them to use and apply words in the right context ('expressive vocabulary', or speaking skills).

Key teacher practices are:

- a) Naming
- b) Labelling
- c) Explaining
- d) Showing
- e) Repetition
- f) Extending

Why are these important?

Adults teaching and modelling different words for children is necessary for children to be able to build and use a larger vocabulary themselves.⁵⁰ This means children are increasingly able to comment on and describe things around them, interpret their world, and use more specific words (rather than general terms).⁵¹ Repeatedly naming and labelling the things children take an interest in helps them understand new words and store them in their memory. It also helps children understand that words can mean different things in different contexts.

Practice area 2: Modelling how words make sentences

This practice area includes intentionally using language to show how words are linked to make sentences (grammar), and providing opportunities for children to practice this in their own speech.

Key teacher practices are:

- a) Storytelling
- b) Songs
- c) Questioning
- d) Sequencing
- e) Recapping

Why are these important?

Teaching and modelling how words link together helps children become familiar with the different sounds in words, rhythm, and rhyme, gain an interest in storytelling, and be able to be creative and expressive through describing and telling stories.⁵² These learning outcomes and strengths are emphasised in *Te Whāriki* and are pivotal to children's ongoing literacy learning.

Practice area 3: Reading interactively with children

This practice area is about involving children in the process of reading aloud from books. This means encouraging children to be active participants during teachers' book-reading.

Key teacher practices are:

- a) Questioning
- b) Recalling
- c) Expanding
- d) Extending
- e) Explaining
- f) Retelling
- g) Rereading

Why are these important?

Reading with children supports children to use oral language to create and retell stories. Oral language is foundational to literacy and it helps children to enjoy and experience poetry, stories, and pūrākau, and encourages them to be confident storytellers.⁵³ Following up by asking questions, explaining in further detail, retelling the story, and reading it again make the process of reading more interactive.

Practice area 4: Using conversation to extend language

This practice area is about teaching through purposeful discussions with children. This means intentionally using language to engage children in challenging activities which encourage them to hear and use language to understand and share ideas, as well as reason with others.^{54,55}

Key teacher practices are:

- a) Making links
- b) Evaluating
- c) Testing working theories

Why are these important?

Teaching through discussions with children allows children to increase their language ability and use language to communicate complex information and engage in problem-solving.⁵⁶ Talking together helps children make connections between different concepts and ideas, make evaluative judgements, and test out their ideas about how the world works. These skills are foundational to their ongoing learning.

Practice area 5: Developing positive social communication

This practice area includes providing opportunities for children to learn social 'norms' (the ways we tend to talk with each other in social situations) and rules of communication. Positive social communication is both verbal and non-verbal, and will help them to navigate interactions with others in education contexts and beyond. This includes children building skills like changing the words they use, how quietly or loudly they speak, and how they position themselves when they listen and communicate with others.

Key teacher practices are:

- a) Social rules of communication
- b) Waiting
- c) Body positioning
- d) Mirroring
- e) Gesturing
- f) Reminding

Why are these important?

Social communication is an important skillset, and the key to success in a range of life and learning areas. Teaching and modelling how to communicate well with others helps children to be responsive and reciprocal in their interactions (for example, by taking turns to talk and listen).^{57,58} A lot of social communication is picked up through interactions, but deliberate and purposeful teaching is needed too. When teachers role-model good social communication – such as using gestures to complement oral language, eye-contact with a conversational partner, and mirroring body language – children can pick up these unspoken rules and social norms and learn to apply them independently.

Alongside the above five practice areas, teachers need four key supports to be in place, to set the foundations for good teaching practice.

Support 1: Early childhood service leadership and priorities

This support is about prioritising oral language teaching and learning, and making sure that teachers are set up with what they need to deliver good oral language support. This includes service leaders setting clear expectations for teachers, ensuring they have the right tools and resources, arranging staff appropriately, and providing learning opportunities. Service leaders can prioritise professional learning that is specifically about children's oral language development, so that teachers can increase their knowledge and extend children's oral language with evidence-based strategies.⁵⁹

Key leader practices are:

- a) Leaders set clear expectations for teaching and learning
- b) Leaders ensure teachers have the right tools and resources
- c) Leaders provide appropriate staffing
- d) Leaders provide opportunities for staff to learn

Why are these important?

Service leadership and priorities have a powerful influence on the overall quality of early childhood services and the oral language support that happens there.⁶⁰ When service leaders share their expectations for teaching and learning oral language in a structured way, it reduces the chance of misunderstandings and ensures a consistent standard of teaching practice across the service.

It is important that – alongside the right professional learning – teachers have the right tools and assessments to use, and time to analyse the data they collect from these. This way, teaching can be informed by tools and assessments to deliberately support and improve children's oral language skills. Appropriate staffing allows teachers to spend more time focusing on oral language within quality interactions, rather than managing the environment.

Support 2: Teacher knowledge and assessment

Teachers need sufficient knowledge about the development of children's oral language, to help them observe, monitor, and support children's progress across the aspects of oral language development. For example, teachers can learn about the different sounds, speech patterns, and other cues that children typically display at different stages of their oral language learning development.

This might include service leaders working to weave together the learning outcomes from *Te Whāriki* with the *New Zealand Curriculum (2007)*, to support smooth pathways of teaching and learning between early childhood education services and schools and kura.⁶¹

Support 2: Teacher knowledge and assessment (*continued*)

Key teacher practices are:

- a) Teachers understand how children's language develops
- b) Teachers know the indicators of progress
- c) Teachers assess children's progress
- d) Teachers know how to identify and address language difficulties
- e) Teachers know strategies for teaching oral language

Why are these important?

Good teacher knowledge is strongly linked to teacher capability.⁶² Teachers need specific knowledge, skills, and supports to be able to support oral language successfully and this learning needs to be developed deliberately over time. When teachers have a good evidence-based understanding of oral language progress indicators, this helps them to recognise evidence of progress within interactions and to adapt their strategies in response. Ongoing professional learning in this key area of teaching should build on the foundations of initial teacher education.⁶³

Support 3: Partnership with parents and whānau

Teachers can partner with parents and whānau to create the best learning outcomes for children's oral language – at the early childhood service and at home. This includes teachers talking with parents and whānau about children's progress, and sharing resources, observations, and knowledge.

'Talking' with parents and whānau refers to finding ways to share information – while it's ideal to speak with them directly, emails, texts, notebooks etc. can be useful as well. Service leaders and teachers can explore multiple ways to communicate with parents and whānau in ways that work for their community.

Key teacher practices are:

- a) Teachers talk with parents and whānau about children's progress – at home and early childhood education service
- b) Teachers share resources, so parents and whānau can support children's learning at home

Why are these important?

Partnering closely with parents and whānau promotes consistent practices for children, between home and the service. Teachers can partner with whānau by regularly sharing information about children's changing interests, needs, and learning outcomes.⁶⁴ In this way, family knowledge can be incorporated into teaching and learning practices.

Support 4: Working with specialists

This includes teachers knowing when and how to seek advice from specialists, how to arrange more targeted and intensive support from specialists where needed, and how to work effectively with specialists. To support teachers, service leaders might follow a model of support that involves a speech-language therapist providing professional learning for teachers.

Key teacher practices are:

- a) Teachers know when to refer children to specialists
- b) Teachers work effectively with specialists

Why are these important?

Working with specialists allows children the best chance at improving their oral language skills, by having the expertise and knowledge of their teachers supplemented with expert advice and guidance. For the best support, teachers need to know who their local specialists are, know when to talk to a specialist, and be committed and confident to adapt their practice according to specialist advice. Timely support prevents further oral language difficulties that will have ongoing impacts on children's learning.

Conclusion

Oral language is foundational for children's ongoing learning, through and beyond their early years. ERO reviewed international and local evidence to find the most powerful practices that teachers can use to support children's oral language development, setting them up for better outcomes in school and beyond. The five practice areas and four supports outlined in this chapter, and detailed in our companion report *Good practice: Oral language development in the early years*, have the power to make a real difference to children's oral language.

In the next chapter, we share what ERO found out about how confident ECE and new entrant teachers are in the five key practice areas, and how often they use them.



Chapter 4: How well are teachers supporting children's oral language development?

Teachers in ECE and new entrant classrooms play a critical role in supporting children's oral language progress. To do this well, teachers need to understand and be confident in their use of the teaching practices that make a difference, embedding them in everyday practice.

In this chapter, we outline what we found out about how confident ECE and new entrant teachers are to support children's oral language learning, and how often they put good strategies into practice. We also note some key differences in different groups of ECE teachers.

What we did

To understand how well teachers support children's language development we looked at:

- international and local evidence around good teaching practices
- our surveys of ECE teachers, new entrant teachers, and parents and whānau
- our interviews with ECE teachers, new entrant teachers, and parents and whānau
- our observations of practice in ECE services and schools.

This section sets out what we found about:

- 1) How confident teachers are to support oral language development, across ECE and new entrant classes
- 2) How often teachers use the five key teaching practices that make the most difference
- 3) What makes it easier or harder for teachers to use key teaching practices
- 4) How often teachers use the five key teaching practices by:
 - teacher professional knowledge and qualification
 - ECE service type
 - socio-economic community.

What we found: an overview

The evidence is clear about the practices that matter for language development, and most teachers report using them frequently.

International and Aotearoa New Zealand evidence is clear that the practices that best support the development of oral language skills are:

Practice area 1	Teaching new words and how to use them
Practice area 2	Modelling how words make sentences
Practice area 3	Reading interactively with children
Practice area 4	Using conversation to extend language
Practice area 5	Developing positive social communication

ECE and new entrant teachers that we surveyed reported they use these evidence-based practices often. ECE teachers reported that they most often teach new words and how to use them (96 percent), use conversation to extend language (95 percent), and read interactively with children (95 percent). New entrant teachers we surveyed reported they most frequently read interactively with children (99 percent), teach new words and how to use them (96 percent), and model how words make sentences (95 percent).

Teachers' practices to develop social communication are weaker.

ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed both reported to us they develop social communication skills least frequently.

Professional knowledge is the strongest driver of teachers using the evidence based practices. Qualified ECE teachers reported being almost twice as confident in their knowledge about oral language.

Qualified ECE teachers we surveyed are almost twice as confident in their knowledge about how oral language develops than non-qualified teachers. Most qualified ECE teachers (94 percent) reported being confident, but only two-thirds (64 percent) of non-qualified teachers reported being confident.

Qualified teachers reported more frequently using key practices, for example, using conversation to extend language (96 percent compared with 92 percent of non-qualified teachers).

ECE teachers who reported being extremely confident in their professional knowledge of how children's language develops were up to seven times more likely to report using effective teaching practices regularly.

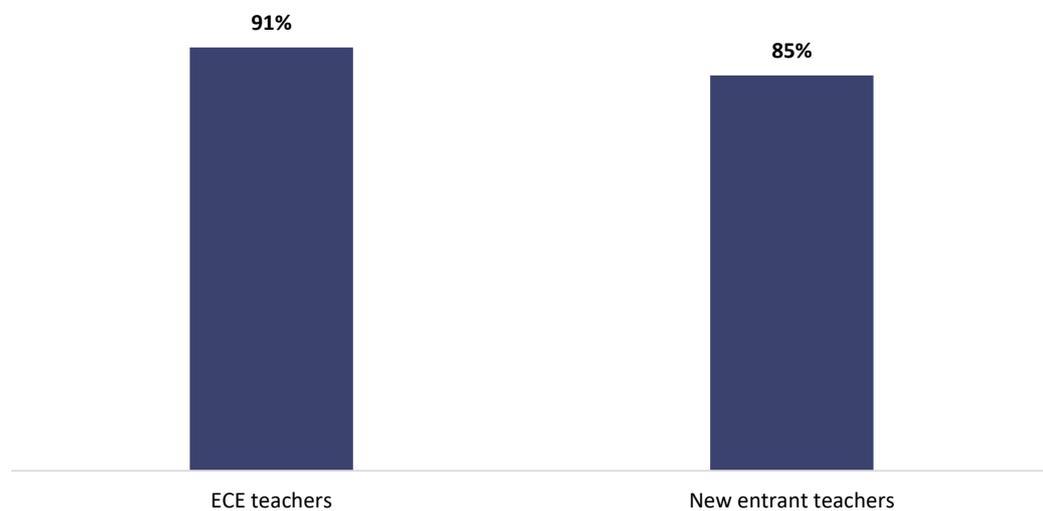
1) Teachers' overall confidence

We asked teachers how confident they are to support children's oral language development.

Most teachers are confident to support children's oral language development.

Overall, 91 percent of ECE teachers and 85 percent of new entrant teachers report they are confident to support children's oral language development.

Figure 10: *Proportion of teachers that report they are confident to support oral language development*



We heard that some new entrant teachers have seen an increase in lower levels of oral language in their classes, and are building up their practices to respond to this need. ECE teachers shared that, in general, oral language development and support has always been a significant part of their everyday role. This could explain this difference in confidence between ECE and new entrant teachers.

2) How often teachers use the key teaching practices

We also asked teachers about the teaching practices we know make a difference.

This section sets out what we know about how often ECE and new entrant teachers report using key teaching practices to develop children's oral language.

The teaching practices we look at are:

Practice area 1	Teaching new words and how to use them
Practice area 2	Modelling how words make sentences
Practice area 3	Reading interactively with children
Practice area 4	Using conversation to extend language
Practice area 5	Developing positive social communication

Descriptions of why these practices are important are in *Chapter 3* of this report, and expanded on in our companion report: *Good Practice: Oral language development in the early years*.

Our companion report *Good practice: Oral language development in the early years* is free to download from www.evidence.ero.govt.nz

Most teachers often use the key teaching practices.

Across the five key practice areas, most teachers report that they use these important practices often in their work with children. There are some practices that are used more consistently than others.

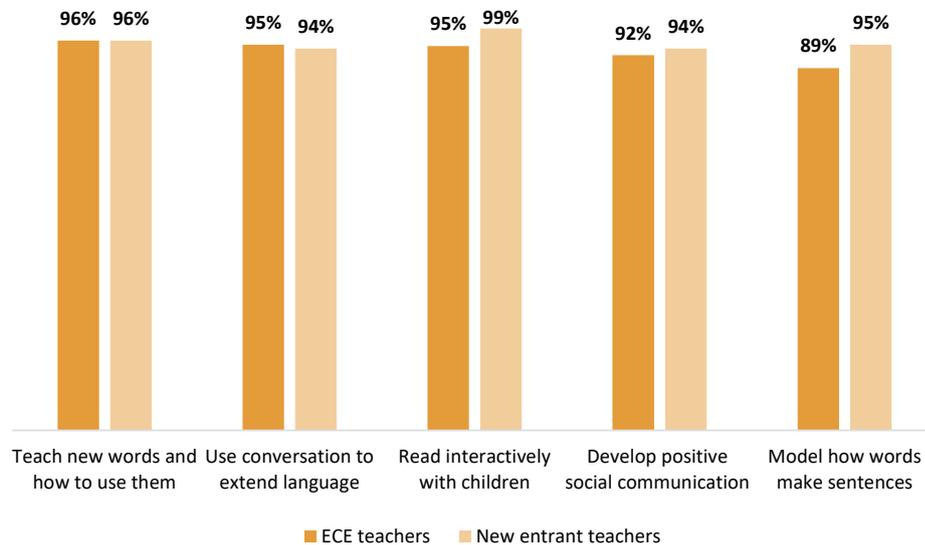
ECE teachers **most often** use these practices:

- Teaching new words and how to use them (96 percent use often)
- Reading interactively with children (95 percent use often)
- Using conversation to extend language (95 percent use often)

New entrant teaches **most often** use these practices:

- Reading interactively with children (99 percent use often)
- Teaching new words and how to use them (96 percent use often)
- Modelling how words make sentences (95 percent use often)

Figure 11: *Proportion of teachers who reported they often use key teaching practices*



But some practices aren't used as consistently.

ECE teachers **least often** use these practices:

- Developing positive social communication (8 percent do not use often)
- Modelling how words make sentences (11 percent do not use often)

New entrant teachers **least often** use these practices:

- Using conversation to extend language (6 percent do not use often)
- Developing positive social communication (6 percent do not use often)

The following section looks at each practice in more detail.

Individual teaching practices

This section outlines how confident ECE and new entrant teachers report they are to use each of the five teaching practices, and whether they use that practice often.

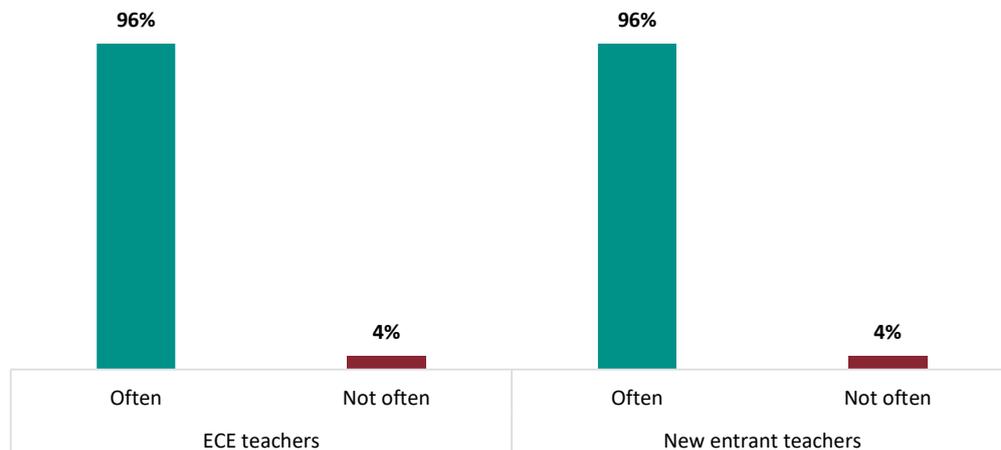
a) Teaching new words and how to use them

Teaching new words and how to use them includes intentionally using words to build a child's understanding of words (their 'receptive vocabulary' or listening skills) and encouraging them to use and apply words in the right context ('expressive vocabulary' or speaking skills).

Of all the practices, ECE teachers most often teach new words and how to use them.

Most ECE and new entrant teachers report they often teach new words and how to use them (96 percent). Only 4 percent of both teacher groups report that they don't often do this.

Figure 12: *How often ECE teachers and new entrant teachers teach new words and how to use them*



To support children to learn new words and their meanings, teachers use strategies like naming, labelling, explaining, showing, repetition, and extending. Repeatedly naming and labelling the things children take an interest in helps consolidate new terms in their memory. It also helps children understand that words can mean different things in different contexts.

“If it’s a play-based learning environment, they get used to working with other children and they hear other vocabulary. So that’s a gifting of vocabulary and practising their oral language skills.”

ECE TEACHER

Teachers use everyday activities and the environment around them to teach children new words.

Teachers told us they talk about what is in the service or school environment during daily activities with children. We saw teachers intentionally use care routines and meal times as an opportunities to engage in conversations that include labelling things in the children’s view. Teachers shared how they would support children to name, or understand the names of, objects within ‘serve and return’ interactions, pointing to clarify what they are naming. These interactions can stimulate and support oral language, even for infants and non-verbal children.

Teacher support children by modelling correct words after children make errors.

Teachers told us how they support children to use a more appropriate word when they made a labelling error. Teachers emphasise the correct word when they reply to children – for example, ‘That’s right, you’re going to the *library* this afternoon’.

Teachers expand vocabulary through repetition of words, and using different words to explain the same concept or idea.

We heard teachers encourage children to repeat new words, helping children to consolidate new vocabulary.

“I said, ‘Well, you can use your words. How could you say it?’ So, if she hasn’t got the word, I give her the words and I let her repeat the words.”

ECE TEACHER

Teachers shared that by using different words to explain the same concept or idea they have noticed children become more articulate because they’ve heard how to do describe concepts in a range of ways.

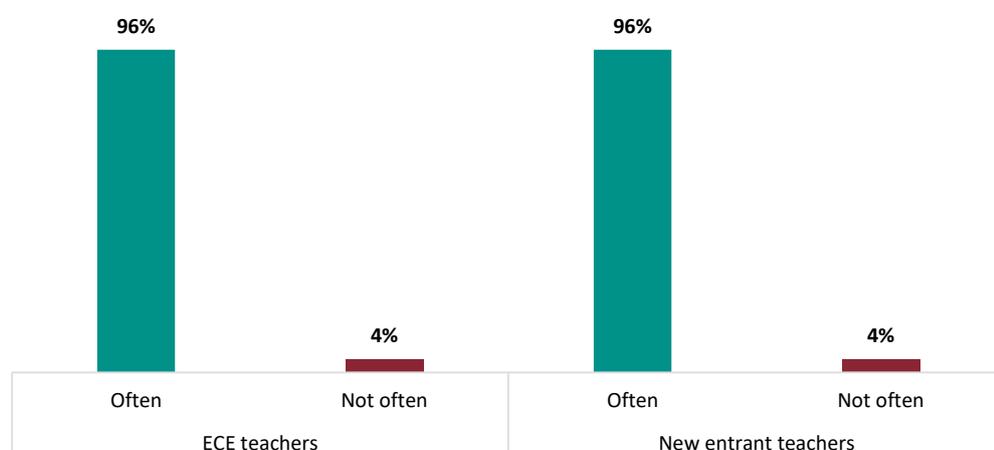
b) Modelling how words make sentences

Modelling how words make sentences includes intentionally using language to show how words are linked to make sentences (grammar) and providing opportunities for children to practice this in their own speech.

Of all the practices, ECE teachers least often model how words make sentences – one in 10 do not do this often.

Most ECE and new entrant teachers report they often model how words make sentences (89 percent and 95 percent), but some don’t (11 percent and 5 percent).

Figure 13: *How often ECE teachers and new entrant teachers model how words make sentences*



Teaching and modelling how words link together can involve using songs, nursery rhymes, and stories.⁶⁵ When teachers ask children follow-up questions and recap previous learning, this helps consolidate children's language. In Pacific language services, teachers might engage in talanoa with children to share stories and build language skills. Teachers might also use deliberate strategies to show how sequences and narratives work, and what to expect in a narrative. For example, emphasising words like 'then', 'next', 'just before', or 'finally'.

Teachers model how to make sentences by asking children questions.

Teachers told us that asking questions and waiting gives children time to think and engage with the question, and practice constructing sentences in response.

“They know that they are expected to speak, but we also give them that prep time beforehand. We do a lot of turning and talking, and so they have that time to turn and talk... And then you know that they've all had that processing time and then they can share.”

ECE TEACHER

Teachers model how to make sentences when teaching children songs and rhymes.

We saw teachers introduce songs to children, by talking them through the words of the lyrics, helping them see the way different words rhyme with each other.

“We have different songs for different seasons... So it's all linked with the rhythm of the earth.”

LEADER

Teachers also told us about using rhyme when giving instructions, which engages children in repeating sentences in rhyme structures.

“You would not say it, you sing it... in a gentle way... 'Wash the dishes, dry the dishes, turn the dishes over'... You sing songs while you do that... They sing all those songs now too, because they're used to it.”

LEADER

Teachers told us it is easier to use good teaching practices when there is explicit planning for oral language development, and they have the resources, time, and knowledge required.

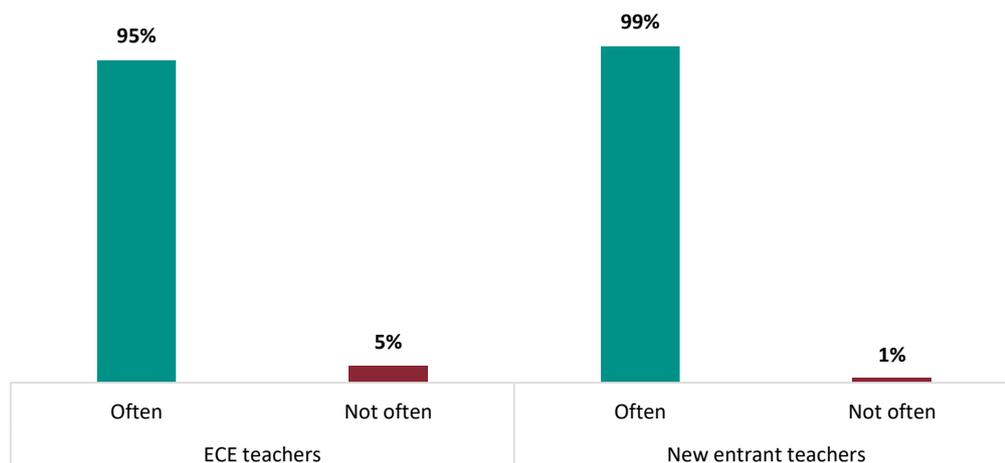
c) Reading interactively with children

Reading interactively with children encourages children to be active participants during book-reading. Teachers use prompts to encourage interactions and language use between children and the teacher reading the book.

Most teachers often read interactively with children.

Most ECE teachers report they often read interactively with children (95 percent). Only 5 percent report they don't. Nearly all of the new entrant teachers we surveyed report they often read interactively with children (99 percent). Only 1 percent report they don't do this often.

Figure 14: *How often ECE teachers and new entrant teachers read interactively with children*



When reading interactively, teachers use strategies like questioning, recalling, expanding, extending, explaining, retelling, and rereading. For example, teachers can ask questions to prompt discussion and encourage children to answer logically using clues from the book and its context – such as the title of the story – and also to answer creatively and use their imagination. Teachers can also intentionally extend on the specific ideas and themes in books to help children verbalise concepts that are familiar to them through stories they have heard or read.

“We got to know that he’s very interested in reading books, so it’s very easy for us to extend his language through reading books and showing the pictures. Now even his mum says that he can understand [English].”

ECE TEACHER

Teachers ask children open-ended questions when reading books to encourage conversation.

We heard that teachers ask children questions about the characters in a new story before reading. Guessing and imagining things about the characters is a way they can talk about the story before the actual storytelling has even begun. Teachers also use pictures within the book to prompt conversations with and between the children listening.

Teachers build children's vocabulary through books on topics of interest.

Teachers told us they will read stories that relate to children's interests, and create activities based on books children are interested in to extend similar ideas and themes. This helps children make connections and add words learnt from books to their own vocabulary.

We also heard about teachers using repeated book reading as an opportunity go into more detail about the story and characters with children, building their vocabulary and narrative capabilities.

Teachers extend language by being intentional about the books they read and make available.

Teachers told us they make deliberate decisions, that link to their planning discussions, about the books that are displayed in the environment. We also saw a range of environments that are set up to encourage a combination of teacher-led and child-led reading – for example, seating at different levels. Teachers told us that when books are accessible and inviting, children will revisit books regularly on their own, with peers, or with a teacher.

“Putting less out on the bookshelf but being more intentional about what it is, and leaving it there for a longer period of time, so that children are able to revisit and have those conversations again and develop those ideas further over time... That was something that sounds so simple, but it was a really big shift.”

ECE TEACHER

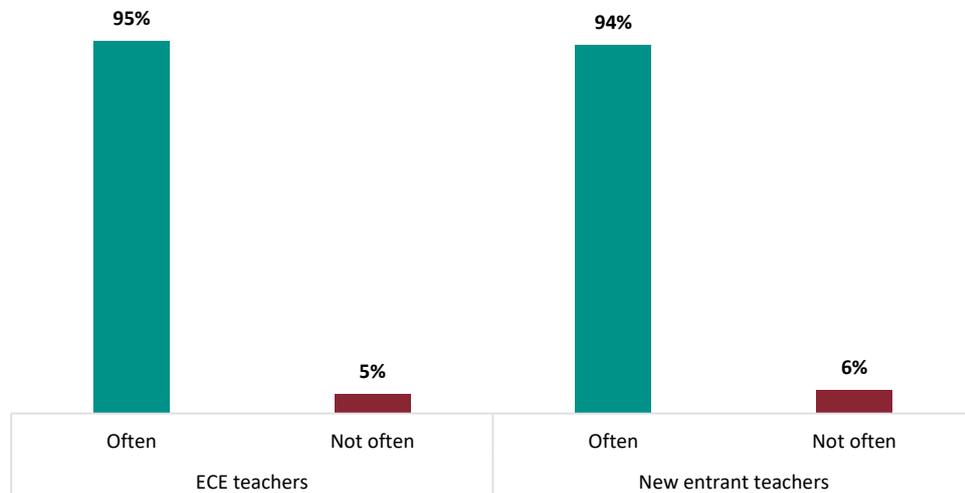
d) Using conversation to extend language

Using conversation to extend language includes intentionally using language to engage children in activities that are challenging for them. It encourages them to hear and use language to understand and share ideas, reason with others, and explore working theories.

Most ECE and new entrant teachers report they often use conversation to extend language.

Most ECE and new entrant teachers often use conversation to extend language (95 percent and 94 percent), but a small group don't (5 percent and 6 percent).

Figure 15: *How often ECE teachers and new entrant teachers use conversation to extend language*



Teachers can use conversations to encourage complex, descriptive, and expressive language. Teachers can help children make connections between different concepts and ideas, make evaluative judgements, and test out their ideas about how the world works. For example, intentionally starting conversations about topics that relate to children's own experiences.

Teachers support children to extend their language through conversation by asking questions.

We saw teachers start the morning by asking children about their evening or morning, prompting children to make links about the similarities and differences between their experiences. We heard that probing with 'why' questions give children an opportunity to think through and articulate their reasoning. Teachers help children unpack their thinking, for example asking, 'Why do you think that?'

Teachers support children to extend their language through conversation by encouraging them to share ideas, to talk about being unsure, and to disagree.

We heard that talking about being unsure helps children to feel safer to share their ideas, and to be open to discussing their own and others' working theories.

“If they don't have an idea they say, 'I don't have an idea'. That's huge. That's been a huge learning curve, actually a huge shift to the 'It's okay if you don't know' – that we all don't know something.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

We also heard that encouraging children to share and debate their ideas means they are more comfortable voicing their ideas to their peers.

“They’re not afraid to share with their peers, because they know their peers might be like, ‘I disagree with you,’ and that’s okay. That’s been our big one – that’s very powerful.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

e) Developing positive social communication

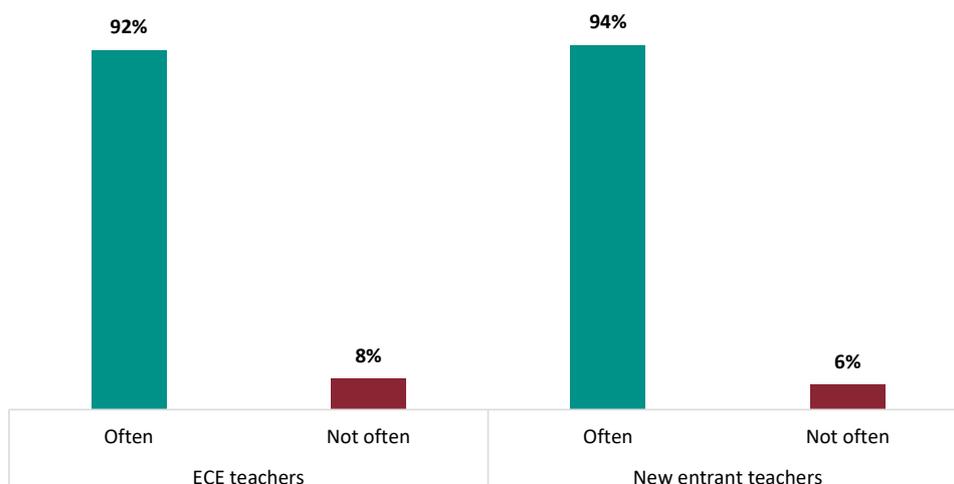
Developing positive social communication includes social norms and rules of communication – both verbal and non-verbal – which will help children navigate interactions with others in education contexts and beyond. This includes skills like changing the words they use, how quietly or loudly they speak, and how they position themselves when they listen and communicate with others.

Of all the practices, new entrant teachers least often develop positive social communication.

Although most new entrant teachers we surveyed report they often develop positive social communication (94 percent), 6 percent of new entrant teachers report they don’t often do this.

Other than modelling how words make sentences, ECE teachers also least often develop positive social communication. Most ECE teachers do it often (92 percent), but some (8 percent) do not.

Figure 16: *How often ECE teachers and new entrant teachers develop positive social communication*



This key practice involves establishing and clarifying the social norms, or expectations, of communication with children. For example, clearly and regularly talking about the service's expectations about how to talk kindly and respectfully to others, or expectations for listening to others. This might include having posters or pictures for children, for example, showing how children can raise their hand to ask a question during group times.

“You can't separate oral language and social competencies. They all kind of come together... And they complement each other.”

ECE TEACHER

Teachers told us that it's easier to develop positive social communication when there are embedded routines and norms at the service.

Teachers talked about using consistent language so children could become familiar with these rules, and having posters or pictures to show how to enact particular 'rules' at the service – for example, listening to others or greeting peers.

“They understand what a good listener is, what a good speaker is. It's being modelled all the time. It's being encouraged.”

ECE TEACHER

“We see a change in our playground behaviours. We've seen a change in children's wellbeing. They're actually expressing their feelings and needs... [they're] actually able to articulate and feel okay about going and articulating to people.”

LEADER

Teachers support positive social communication through explicit discussion.

We saw teachers deliberately discuss and demonstrate wait time and talk about the importance of patience and sharing.

“Introducing the language of sharing. Teaching them the words like 'wait', but you have actually got to show them what 'wait' means.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

“They’ve done a lot of work on wait time and processing, and now they’re actually giving each other wait time.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

We also observed teachers modelling what ‘mirroring’ looks like by actively engaging when listening to children. For example, nodding and maintaining eye contact, and mirroring children’s behaviour during conversation.

3) Where are the differences in how frequently teachers use the effective teaching practices?

This section sets out what we know about differences in how frequently teachers use the five teaching practices by:

- a) teacher professional knowledge and qualification
- b) service type.

a) Teacher professional knowledge and qualification

We compared how often qualified and non-qualified ECE teachers use each of the five teaching practices. We also looked at how ECE teachers’ confidence in their professional knowledge about how oral language develops impacts how often they use good teaching practices.

ECE teachers who are extremely confident in their professional knowledge are more likely to use good teaching practices frequently.

Teacher knowledge makes a big difference.^{66,67} Studies indicate that teachers’ self-assessments of their knowledge and ability in areas of teaching – how much they think they know – is connected to their actual practice.⁶⁸ This aligns with what we found in our study, when we asked teachers about their confidence in oral language teaching, and how often they report using key oral language practices.

We ran regression analyses of our survey responses, and found ECE teachers who are extremely confident in their professional knowledge of how oral language develops are up to seven times more likely to use key teaching practices frequently.

ECE teachers who are extremely confident in their professional knowledge^s are:

- Seven times more likely to develop positive social communication.
- Six times more likely to use conversation to extend language.
- Three times more likely to teach new words and how to use them, model how words make sentences, and read interactively with children.

^s We ran logistic regressions and used the odds ratios to say how many times more likely ECE teachers are to use key teaching practices when they are extremely confident in their professional knowledge. The results are significant.

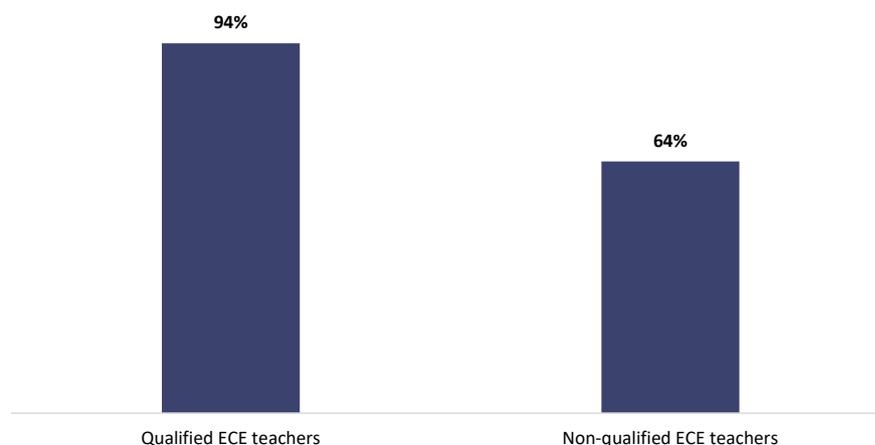
We heard from our interviews with leaders and experts that teacher knowledge is critical. When ECE teachers gain more understanding about the importance of oral language development in the early years and how it can be supported, it is likely they increase the frequency of their teaching practices to support this key area of learning and development.

Qualified ECE teachers are almost one and a half times more confident in their knowledge of oral language development.

Qualified staff make a big difference.^{69,70} An international review of the evidence around this found that ‘higher teacher qualifications are significantly correlated with higher quality early childhood education and care environments’.⁷¹ This aligns with what we found in our study, when we asked teachers about their qualification level as well as their confidence around oral language development. This makes sense, as it’s likely that qualified ECE teachers will have learned about oral language teaching and learning over the course of their initial teacher education, as well as in their ongoing professional learning. Non-qualified teachers will either be partway through completing their teaching qualification, or have not engaged in the initial teacher education process. We also heard that professional learning on the job helps to grow and support professional knowledge, for both qualified and non-qualified teachers.

Qualified ECE teachers reported they are one and a half times more confident in their knowledge about how oral language develops than non-qualified teachers. Most qualified ECE teachers (94 percent) are confident, but only two-thirds (64 percent) of non-qualified teachers are confident.

Figure 17: *ECE teachers’ reported confidence in their professional knowledge of how oral language develops, qualified compared with non-qualified teachers*



Qualified ECE teachers reported they read interactively with children and use conversation to extend language more often than non-qualified ECE teachers.

Ninety-five percent of qualified ECE teachers reported they often read interactively with children, compared with 92 percent of non-qualified ECE teachers. This is a statistically significant difference.

A higher proportion of qualified ECE teachers also reported using conversation to extend language often than non-qualified ECE teachers. (96 percent compared with 92 percent).

b) Service type

We looked at different types of early learning services.

We heard from teachers in kindergartens and education and care services about how often they use teaching practices. While we also heard from home-based services and playcentres, they were removed from the analysis that compared service type, due to low numbers.

We found no significant differences between kindergartens' and education and care services' use of teaching practices.

Conclusion

Across both ECE and new entrant settings, teachers are generally using the key practices that support children's oral language development. However, there is variation in how confident teachers are with these practices, how frequently they use them, and how much they understand about the way that oral language can and should be supported in the early years.

Our study shows that ECE teachers use most practices confidently and frequently, and new entrant teachers are responding to increased need in their classrooms by building their own practice. Developing positive social communication is the practice area where teachers tend to have lower confidence, and use less frequently.

For ECE teachers, we can see that having strong professional knowledge matters, and being qualified makes a difference. These were key drivers for teachers using key practices more confidently and often. The following chapter expands on the supports teachers need to use good teaching practices, and what makes it harder for them.



Chapter 5: How well are teachers set up and supported?

To do their best work, teachers need to be equipped with the right knowledge, skills, and conditions. There are some key supports that need to be in place, particularly good leadership, a solid base of teacher knowledge, ways to partner with parents and whānau, and access to specialist support such as speech-language therapists.

In this section, we share what good evidence-based supports look like, and what we found out about these reports in Aotearoa New Zealand services and schools.

What we did

To understand the supports and barriers for teachers supporting children's language development, we explored:

- what the existing evidence says about good supports for effective teaching practice
- what these supports look like in our Aotearoa New Zealand context, and across a range of early childhood education service types and regions, and schools
- what useful insights, strategies, and stories we can gather for the early childhood sector – teachers, service leaders, parents and whānau, and early intervention services. (These are set out in more detail in our companion good practice report.)

This section sets out what we found about

- leadership and priorities (in ECE services)
- professional knowledge to understand and assess oral language development
- partnering with parents and whānau
- working with specialists
- differences by:
 - service type
 - teacher qualification.

What we found: an overview

Teachers and parents and whānau often do not know how well children's oral language is developing, and this matters as timely support can prevent problems later.

Not all ECE and new entrant teachers are confident to assess progress. Of the new entrant teachers we surveyed, a quarter reported not being confident to assess and report on progress in oral language development. The lack of clear development expectations and indicators of progress, and lack of alignment between *Te Whāriki* and the *New Zealand Curriculum*, makes this difficult. Half of parents (53 percent) reported that they do not get information from their ECE service about their child's oral language progress.

Being able to assess children's oral language progress and identify potential difficulties is an important part of teaching young children. However, not all ECE and new entrant teachers are confident to identify difficulties in oral language (15 percent of ECE teachers and 24 percent of new entrant teachers surveyed report not being confident).

For children who are struggling, support from specialists, such as speech-language therapists, who can help with oral language development is key. But not all teachers are confident to work with these specialists, with 12 percent of ECE teachers and 17 percent of new entrant teachers reporting not being confident.

ERO identified four supports that that need to be in place for teachers to do their best work in developing oral language.

The four supports are:

Support 1	Early childhood service leadership and priorities
Support 2	Teacher knowledge and assessment
Support 3	Partnership with parents and whānau
Support 4	Working with specialists

What these supports look like and why they are important can be found in *Chapter 3* of this report, and unpacked in more detail our companion good practice report: *Good practice: Oral language development in the early years* along with real-life examples that show what these supports can look like in practice.

Support 1: Early childhood service leadership and priorities

This support is about early childhood service leaders taking action to support teachers with what they need to deliver good practice for children's oral language development.

This support includes four elements of good support.

- 1) Service Leaders set clear expectations for teaching and learning
- 2) Service Leaders ensure teachers have the right tools and resources
- 3) Service Leaders provide appropriate staffing
- 4) Service Leaders provide opportunities for staff to learn

In our interviews and observations, we heard from teachers and leaders, and observed how well these elements of support are going in ECE services.

Many leaders clarify their expectations for key teaching practices at the service.

We found that oral language is a priority for many services. Leaders shared that, in their experience, teachers benefit from clear expectations as soon as they join the team about 'what good looks like' in this area of teaching and why it is so important. We also heard that linking oral language outcomes to the service's philosophy statements can help get buy-in from teachers.

We found that it is harder to prioritise oral language development when there is no clarity around why it is important, and when teachers don't have sufficient time to focus on oral language learning and planning.

“When we first bring people into our service, it [good oral language support] is not embedded in practice. It can be quite a journey, through PLD and building their practice.”

LEADER

“We have a huge buy-in from the teachers. The teachers want to learn. They know that this is a centre that prioritises that.”

LEADER

Leaders provide tools and resources, but teachers need more clarity around which resources they should use and when.

We found that many leaders provide tools and resources to help teachers with their oral language teaching practice. We heard about the importance of teachers being provided with the right tools and assessments to use, good training to implement them as intended, and time to analyse the data they collect from these. This way, teaching can be informed by tools and assessments that purposefully support and improve children's oral language skills.

“Sometimes it used to feel awkward talking to the children and not getting the language back. And throughout that [professional learning] workshop, I guess it helped overcome these sorts of barriers, because you know that you are using this strategy that is researched and proven to work.”

ECE TEACHER

However, we also heard that having too many resources available without clear guidance about them is creating some confusion, where teachers don't know which ones to use for what purpose. Teachers benefit from professional learning around tools and resources to understand the 'how and why' of them.

Higher teacher-child ratios can present challenges for teachers.

In our interviews and open-ended survey responses, teachers and leaders told us that the most challenging aspect of staffing is having teacher-child ratios that support teachers to develop children's oral language. The issue that came through most strongly was an inability to have one-on-one conversations with children, due to the demands of higher ratios.

“High ratios mean one-on-one opportunities are limited. So, children who are in need of more interactions must contend with groups of children getting the same attention.”

ECE TEACHER

“Quality one-to-one time to interact and assess and support language is challenging.”

ECE TEACHER

Evidence shows that unhurried interactions between teachers and a small number of children, which are sustained for more than just a few minutes, are highly effective for supporting children's oral language development. Service leaders can support teachers to do this through rostering and arranging staff to enable some smaller, slower-paced interactions alongside larger group activities.

“Part of our curriculum that allows them to have...that time in the centre where they're in a small group of children with a shared interest or a shared learning experience happening... And the teacher is dedicated to those children at that time... That teacher is really there to give their full attention to those children – and I think that's quite important in a busy space.”

LEADER

Where leaders learning opportunities, there is a positive impact on staff motivation and practice.

We found that teachers that had engaged with oral language professional learning and development (PLD) had strengthened their commitment to putting good practices into action.

“I’ve actually seen great results... I’ve got one child in the toddlers’ room that’s really keen to speak, and he keeps repeating everything we say. [He’s] really determined to use the language. He would point at his shoes and say, ‘On the shelf, up, up there, up there’. Then from this... I’d give him extra words and a week later he would say, ‘My shoes, they are up there’ – which was incredible.”

ECE TEACHER

“We had a lot of PLD for all of our teachers, on how to integrate poetry and music and rhythm and rhyme. There’s lots of instruments and different materials, which was really nice.”

ECE TEACHER

We also heard from some services that PLD was difficult to find or access, which made learning provision harder.

Support 2: Teacher knowledge and assessment

This support is about teachers having sufficient knowledge about the development of children’s oral language, to help them observe and monitor children’s progress across the aspects of oral language development.

This includes teachers understanding how children’s language develops, knowing about indicators of progress, assessing children’s progress, knowing how to identify and address minor language difficulties, and knowing strategies for teaching oral language. For example, teachers can learn about the different sounds, speech patterns, and other cues that children typically display at different stages of their oral language learning development. They can then carry this knowledge with them in their everyday interactions, using this knowledge to make informed in-the-moment decisions about how to extend children’s oral language learning through play.

There are five elements of good support.

- 1) Teachers understand how children’s language develops
- 2) Teachers know the indicators of progress
- 3) Teachers assess children’s progress
- 4) Teachers know how to identify and address language difficulties
- 5) Teachers know strategies for supporting children’s oral language

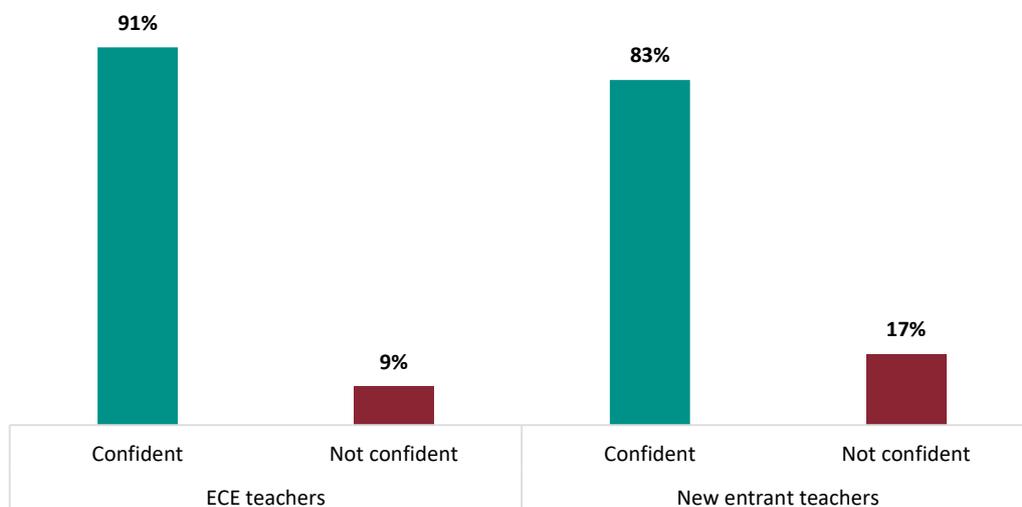
In our surveys and interviews, we asked about:

- teachers' confidence in their professional knowledge of oral language development
- teachers' confidence to assess and report on progress, and to identify language difficulties.

Most teachers are confident in their professional knowledge of oral language development, but one in 10 ECE teachers and one in five new entrant teachers are not confident.

We asked teachers about their confidence in their professional knowledge about how children's oral language develops. Most are confident (91 percent of ECE teachers and 83 percent of new entrant teachers we surveyed). But one in 10 ECE teachers (9 percent) and one in six new entrant teachers (17 percent) are not confident.

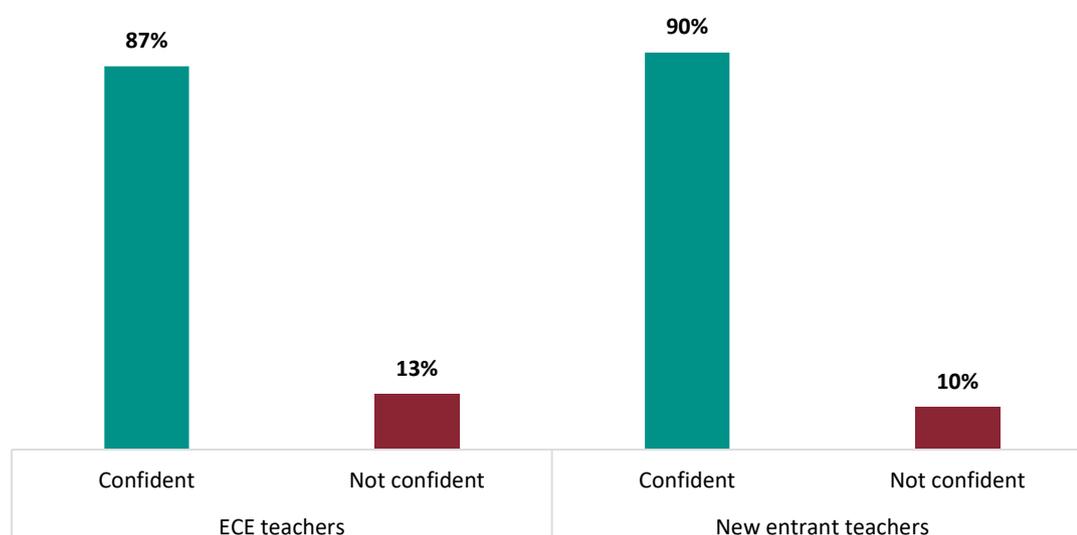
Figure 18: *ECE teachers' and new entrant teachers' reported confidence in their professional knowledge about how children's oral language develops*



Most ECE teachers and new entrant teachers are confident in their knowledge related to the age group of children they teach, but one in 10 are not confident.

We asked ECE teachers about their confidence in their knowledge of oral language development expectations for the age group they teach. Most are confident (87 percent of ECE teachers and 90 percent of new entrant teachers), but more than one in 10 teachers (13 percent of ECE teachers and 10 percent of new entrant teachers) are not confident.

Figure 19: *ECE teachers' and new entrant teachers' reported confidence in their knowledge of oral language development expectations for the age group they teach*



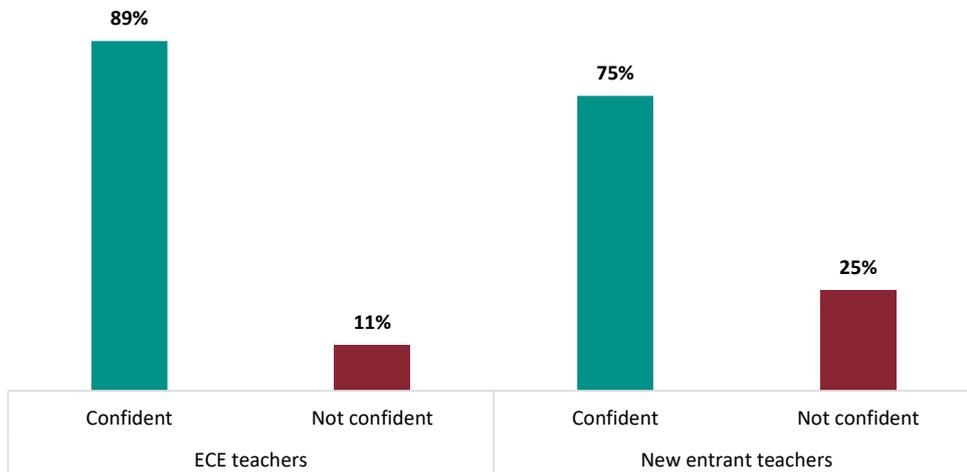
We also heard that new entrant teachers are finding that more children are coming into their classes with lower oral language levels (see Chapter 2). It may be useful for new entrant teachers to grow their understanding of developmental expectations below their students' age group as well. A lack of alignment between *Te Whāriki* and the *New Zealand Curriculum* may make this more difficult.

Most teachers report they are confident to assess and report on oral language progress, however a significant proportion do not feel confident to identify difficulties in oral language development.

We asked teachers how confident they are to assess and report on the progress of children's oral language development. Most ECE teachers report they are confident to assess and report on children's progress (89 percent), but one in 10 report they are not confident (11 percent).

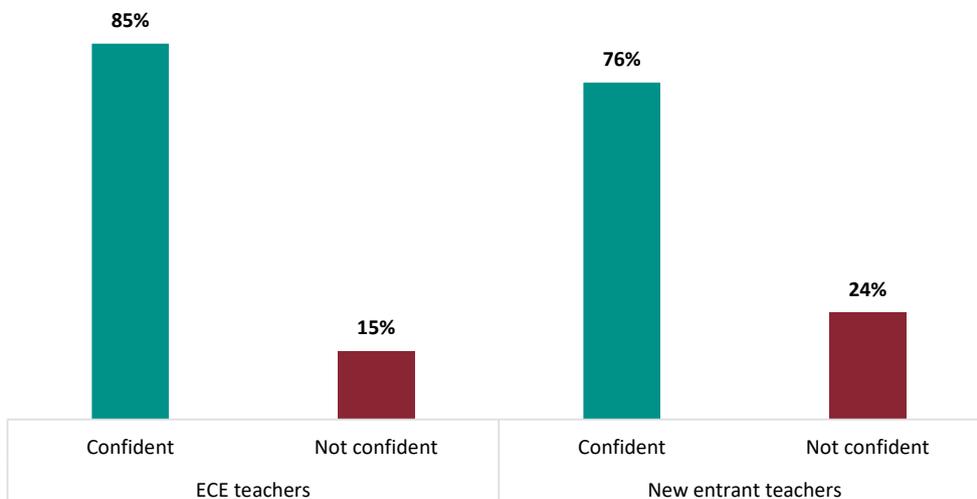
Concerningly, one-quarter (25 percent) of new entrant teachers we surveyed report they are not confident to assess and report on oral language progress.

Figure 20: *ECE teachers' and new entrant teachers' reported confidence to assess and report on the progress of children's oral language development*



We also asked ECE teachers and new entrant teachers how confident they are to identify difficulties in oral language development. ECE teachers are least confident in this area of their knowledge. Although most ECE teachers report they are confident to identify difficulties in children's oral language development (85 percent), a concerning proportion report they are not confident (15 percent). One in four new entrant teachers report they are not confident (24 percent).

Figure 21: *ECE teachers' and new entrant teachers' reported confidence to identify difficulties in children's oral language development*



Understanding how to assess oral language progress is an important part of identifying potential language difficulties that would benefit from specialist support. Increasing knowledge about assessing progress would support more teachers to recognise possible language difficulties.

We know that new entrant teachers are noticing more children have oral language needs in their classrooms than previously (see Chapter 2 of this report), so it is increasingly important that they are provided with the knowledge and tools that they need to grow their confidence in this key area.

Teachers benefit from clear messages around the purpose and usefulness of assessment.

We found that some ECE teachers are reluctant to engage in assessment practice around oral language, as they are worried about 'labelling' children or 'focusing on the deficit'. We heard that it is useful for leaders and guiding documents to clarify how and why assessments are used, and that they are intended to inform *teachers'* practice and responses. Many services saw positive changes when team discussions had focused on discussing concerns and clarifying that assessments "aren't about labelling children" (Service leader), but about knowing how to tailor their teaching for children based on evidence of what works best for those children.

We also heard that teachers had 'aha moments' when they thought carefully about individual children and what they could observe and hear (assess) about their oral language capabilities. Reflection and discussion about this helped teachers to understand their key role in noticing where children are, recognising their strengths and needs, and the importance of responding with intentional teaching.

“My first reaction was, because I came from primary, ‘Oh no, you’re going to do a testing regime for early childhood’... Because early childhood is so encompassing, and you don’t just look at one thing, you look at everything and everything is together... But then when we sat down with our other teachers... We didn’t realise how each child actually was, because sometimes you think you know a child and then when you’re sitting down and you think, ‘Do they actually ever rhyme? Do they actually ever have deep conversations about anything?’... That was actually eye-opening.”

ECE TEACHER

“[During professional learning] there were some groundbreaking things she said to us like, ‘Think about the particular child you’re working with and really take the time to analyse their current language level.’”

LEADER

“We track carefully how the children are going and so we can reflect on what are we doing that’s working and what are we doing that’s not working, what can we tweak?”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

We also heard assessing and reporting on children’s progress is easier when teachers can learn through their peers and are provided with structured tools for assessment, including ways to understanding what progress looks like for multilingual children. For example, teachers can consider whether their concerns about a child’s oral language is present in their first language as well as the language of instruction – they will develop at different paces, and that’s normal and expected.

Difficulties in oral language are not always identified and addressed early enough.

New entrant teachers report that children don’t always get the support they need early enough to address oral language difficulties. We heard that this is caused by a combination of limited teacher knowledge about how to identify potential language difficulties and when to seek support, as well as difficulties with the referral and support processes.

“Many are attending ECE, but not being referred early enough once the delay in oral language is noticed. Then when trying to get intervention, the wait times are too long and the support is inconsistent.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

“There is little support coming through from ECE. Early Intervention are closing cases before starting school which leads to less support in the transition coming to school. [There is a] backlog of cases and they are not receiving the outside support they need.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER

Professional learning can have positive impacts on teacher knowledge about assessment and identifying language difficulties.

We found that when teachers understand how oral language develops, they can be more mindful about the strategies they use in response to what they notice about a child’s skills and progress. For example, teachers told us that they have started to deliberately make an effort to watch out for children that aren’t using words, and not assuming that they are simply quiet or shy.

Support 3: Partnership with parents and whānau

This support is about teachers partnering with parents and whānau to ensure consistency across home and ECE (or school) environments.

The two evidence-based elements of good support are based in ECE contexts (but are also relevant to new entrant teachers).

- 1) Teachers talk with parents and whānau about children's progress – at home and at the ECE service (or school)
- 2) Teachers share resources, so parents and whānau can support children's learning at home

In our surveys and interviews, we asked about:

- how often teachers report they communicate with parents and whānau to support oral language development
- for parents and whānau, whether their child's early learning service shows them ways to support oral language development at home and helps them understand what that development looks like for their child.

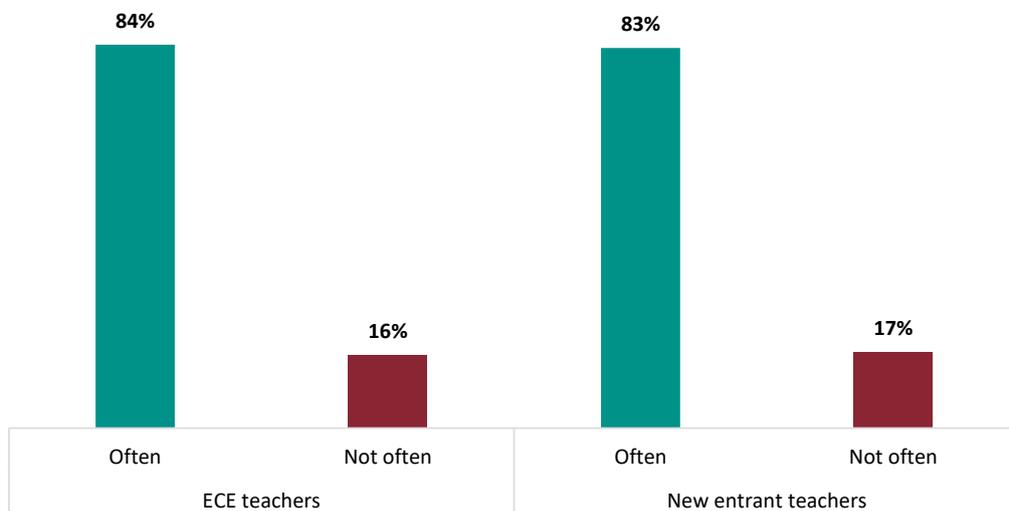
a) ECE teachers and new entrant teachers

We asked ECE teachers and new entrant teachers how often they communicate and partner with parents and whānau to support oral language development.

One in six ECE teachers and new entrant teachers report they do not often partner with parents and whānau to support oral language development.

Although most ECE teachers (84 percent) and new entrant teachers (83 percent) report they often communicate with parents and whānau about oral language, one in six do not do this often (16 percent of ECE teachers and 17 percent on new entrant teachers).

Figure 22: *How often ECE teachers and new entrant teachers partner with parents and whānau to support oral language development*



We heard that some ECE teachers find it difficult to communicate and partner with families and whānau when they have little face-to-face contact time (e.g., rushed pick-ups and drop-offs). However, we also heard from services who have found a range of ways to communicate about learning with families, for example, through online portals, text messages, phone calls, and notebooks.

Good relationships with parents and whānau make difficult conversations easier.

We heard that having a ‘key teacher’ building an ongoing relationship with parents and whānau made it easier to approach tricky conversations about how a child’s oral language development was going. We heard that these conversations can be ‘scary’ for parents and whānau, and teachers can be nervous about these conversations too.

“We would talk to the parents about what things look like at home and grow the areas that we believe need a bit of support, but it’s all very gentle because parents are always very worried.”

ECE TEACHER

Some ECE services share their professional knowledge with parents and whānau.

We heard from services about sharing what they have learned through PLD with parents and whānau. For example, sharing key resources or having a parent and whānau evening that focused on oral language development.

“Our service is currently working with Talking Matters [an organisation that provides spoken language resources and PLD for parents and whānau and ECE teachers], and we have learnt a number of talking tips and shared these with whānau.”

ECE TEACHER

“When a parent can reinforce what happened at the [service], [and] when we can reinforce what happened at home straight away, that's the most effective way.”

ECE TEACHER

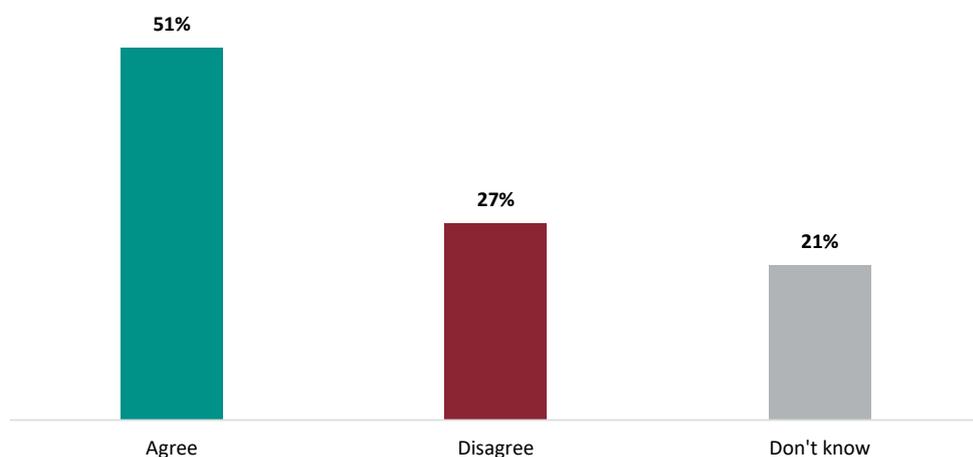
b) Parents and whānau

We also asked parents and whānau about their experiences with their child's early learning service. We asked if their child's early learning service shows them ways to support their child's oral language development at home, and whether they help them understand what oral development looks like for their child.

Only half of parents and whānau agree their child's early learning service shows them ways to support their child's oral language development at home.

Half of parents and whānau agree their child's early learning service shows them ways to support their child's oral language development at home (51 percent). Just over one-quarter disagree (27 percent), and one-fifth (21 percent) don't know.

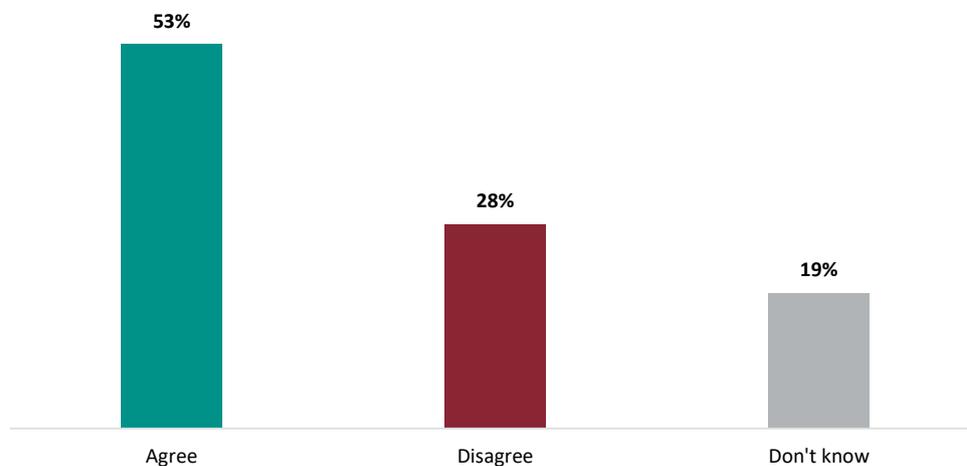
Figure 23: *Parents and whānau response to 'my child's early learning service shows me ways to support my child's oral language development at home'*



Similarly, only half of parents and whānau agree their child's early learning service helps them understand what oral language development looks like for their child.

Half of parents and whānau agree their child's early learning service helps them understand what oral language development looks like for their child (53 percent). Over one-quarter disagree (28 percent), and one-fifth (19 percent) don't know.

Figure 24: *Parent and whānau response to 'my child's early learning service helps me understand what oral language development looks like for my child'*



This is a concerning finding, as 84 percent of ECE teachers report that they often communicate with parents and whānau to support oral language development. This tells us that there is a gap between what teachers and parents believe is happening.

Good communication about clear indicators of progress helps parents to engage in oral language support.

Parents and whānau told us that information from ECE services is most useful when it includes clear messages about their child's progress and next steps, linked to development expectations and their aspirations.

“Earlier this year, I had some concerns about a stutter developing, but thanks to the teachers at the kindergarten [my child] attends I was better able to understand this developmental stage and how to support my child. The stutter stage was short-lived, and we are in a good place now.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU



“The learning stories about my child on [online portal] always refer to an aspect of my child’s oral language development. We were asked early in the year about our aspirations as parents, for our child, and I had expressed that her ability to communicate and express herself was an area we wanted to see her continuing to develop in. In a recent learning story, her early childhood centre had set up a library play provocation where she was exploring different books and using words to communicate the pictures she could identify.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU



Support 4: Working with specialists

This support is about teachers working together with specialists, such as speech-language therapists, to provide the best oral language support for children.

There are two elements of good support for this area.

- a) Teachers know when to refer children to specialists
- b) Teachers work effectively with specialists

In our surveys and interviews, we asked about:

- how confident teachers are to work with specialists.

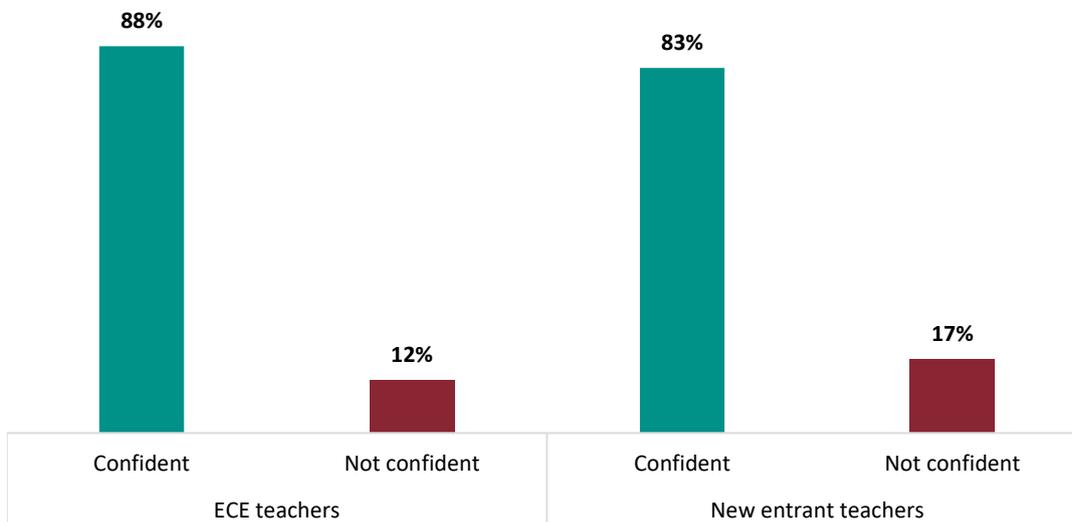
a) ECE teachers and new entrant teachers

Most teachers are confident to work with specialists who support oral language development, but one in 10 ECE teachers and almost one in five new entrant teachers are not confident.

Although most ECE teachers report they are confident to work with specialists (88 percent), one in 10 (12 percent) report they are not confident.

Most new entrant teachers report they are confident to work with specialists (83 percent), while almost one-fifth (17 percent) report they are not confident.

Figure 25: *ECE teachers' and new entrant teachers' reported confidence to work with specialists*



We heard from ECE leaders that some teachers may not have had opportunities to work directly with specialists, as often leaders or particular 'key teachers' will do the bulk of the contact with therapists and other experts.

Some schools have curriculum leaders or learning support leaders who work directly with specialists and then pass on strategies and guidance to teaching staff - which could mean that some new entrant teachers have had limited experience working directly with specialists and don't feel as confident.

Teachers need clear guidance on referral timelines and pathways, and good working relationships with local specialists.

We found it is easier when teachers can follow an established process for referring children to specialists. This can include staff discussions, engaging in targeted observations, and gathering evidence.

“That's the teacher saying, 'Hey... We've got a child here who we find has got some type of speech delay. Let's try and get a speech therapist straight away.' ...I find the teachers here very supportive.”

TEACHER AIDE

It helps when teachers, leaders, and families can be in regular contact with local specialists to get advice and to tailor resources.

“With [children’s] speech delays, it was a lot of observations at first ... We had some formal partnerships, so we immediately communicated our concerns and our observations of speech delays and other behavioural delays from these children.”

ECE TEACHER

“Really good relationship with the Ministry speech-language therapist. I had asked her to come in and do some PLD on Te Kōrerorero.”

ECE TEACHER

“The specialists will work with the families on site, and then the families will share with us what strategies we should use in the classroom. So, the families are kind of holding the knowledge – the power.”

LEADER

Long wait times for specialists make it harder to support children’s oral language development.

In some areas there are long waits between referrals to specialists and the child receiving support. We heard about a common sentiment that there is ‘no point’ in referring due to the problem not being ‘bad enough to qualify’, or being put off by the long wait times.

“With children we feel have speech delays or behavioural/learning delays, we usually start off by doing the ABC charts. We do that over a course of a week...We have to do the groundwork ourselves to provide [the Ministry] with the evidence that it’s really concerning.”

ECE TEACHER

We heard examples about services that have learning support leaders who have the specialist expertise to screen children and help with oral language development strategies while they were waiting to see a specialist. In some cases, parents and whānau choose to take their child to a private provider, which has associated costs, to avoid long waiting times.

1) Where are the differences?

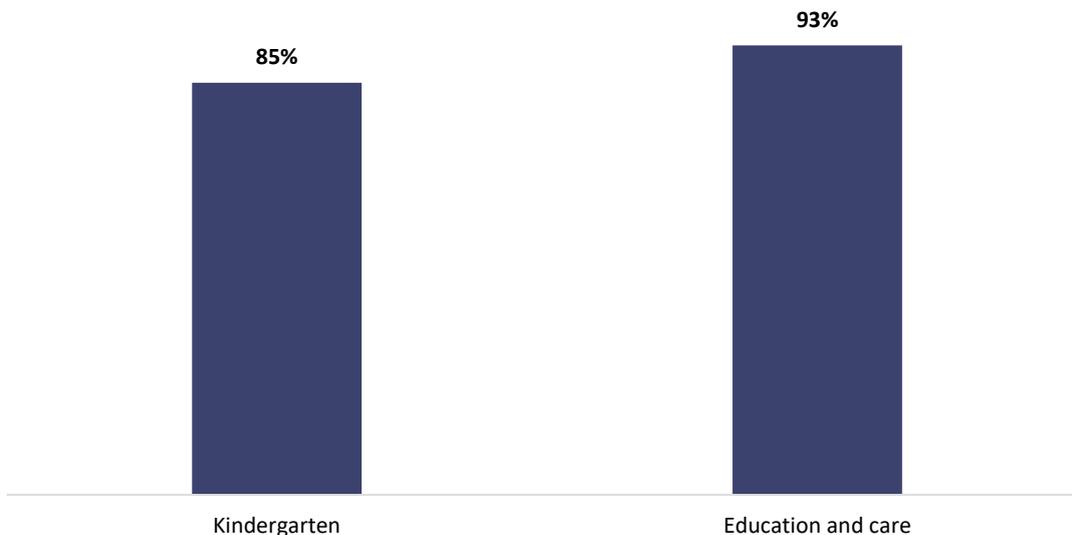
a) Differences by ECE service type

Teachers in kindergartens are less confident to assess and report on the progress of children's oral language development than teachers in education and care.

Fifteen percent of teachers in kindergartens report that they are not confident to assess and report on progress of oral language development. Eighty-five percent report they are confident.

Only 7 percent of teachers in education and care services report they are not confident to assess and report on the progress of oral language development. Ninety-three percent report they are confident.

Figure 26: *ECE teachers' reported confidence to assess and report progress of children's oral language development – the difference between teachers in kindergarten and education and care*

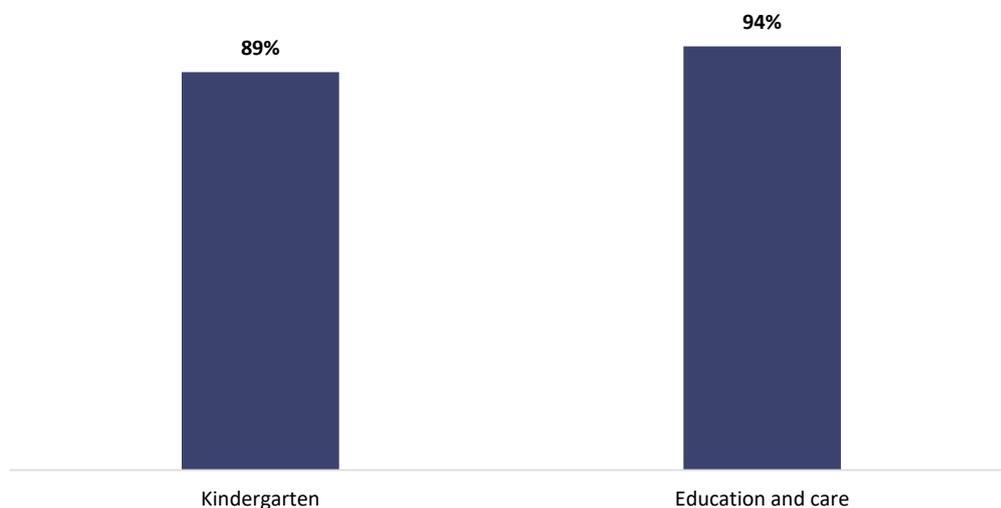


Teachers in kindergartens are less confident to communicate and partner with parents and whānau than teachers in education and care.

Most teachers are confident to communicate and partner with parents and whānau about oral language development, but one in 10 teachers in kindergartens report they are not confident (11 percent). Eighty-nine percent report they are confident.

A smaller proportion of teachers in education and care services report they are not confident to communicate and partner with parents and whānau (6 percent). Ninety-four percent report they are confident.

Figure 27: *ECE teachers' reported confidence to partner with parents and whānau – the difference between teachers in kindergarten and education and care*



b) Differences by qualification

International studies find that qualified ECE staff, in the most effective settings, make more curriculum-related activities available to children, provide the most instruction, are most effective in their interactions with children, and encourage children to engage in challenging play.⁷²

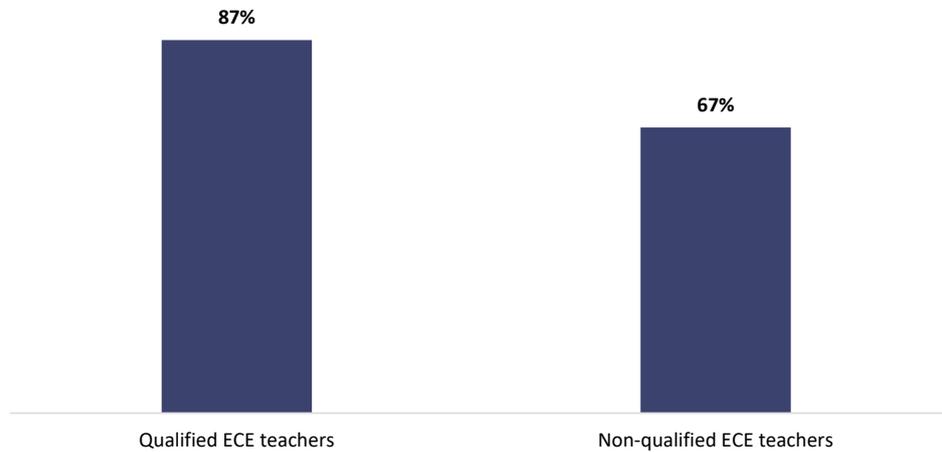
We found that qualified ECE teachers are more confident in their professional knowledge than non-qualified teachers, and generally report they are more confident in their knowledge of children's oral language development.

Higher confidence in qualified teachers is likely to be related to the learning that has occurred through their initial teacher education programmes, which will generally cover oral language development. Non-qualified teachers will either be partway through completing their teaching qualification, or have not engaged in the initial teacher education process. We also heard that professional learning on the job helps to grow and support professional knowledge, for both qualified and non-qualified teachers.

Qualified teachers report they are more confident to identify difficulties in children's oral language development - only two-thirds of non-qualified teachers are confident.

Qualified teachers report they are more confident to identify difficulties in children's oral language than non-qualified teachers. Most teachers that are qualified report they are confident (87 percent), but only two-thirds of non-qualified teachers are confident (67 percent).

Figure 28: *ECE teachers' confidence to identify difficulties in children's oral language – the difference between qualified and non-qualified teachers*

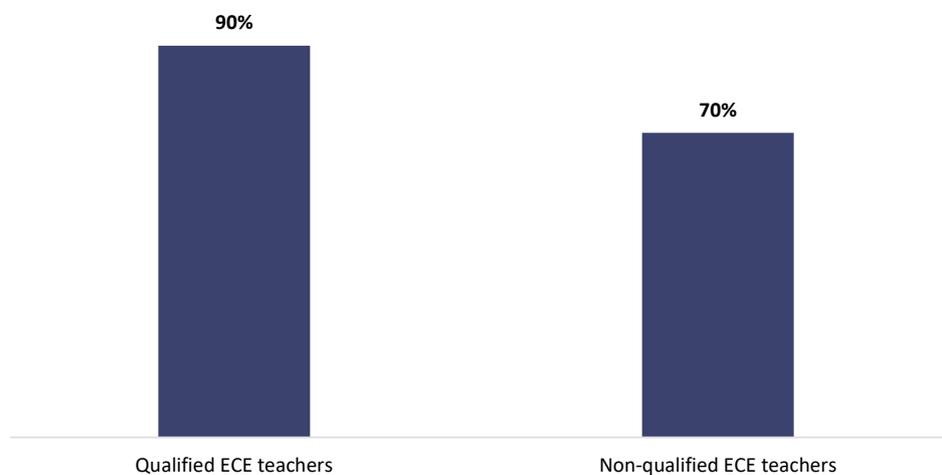


Qualified ECE teachers report they are more confident to work with specialists than non-qualified ECE teachers.

Most qualified ECE teachers feel confident to work with specialists (90 percent), but one in 10 report they are not confident (10 percent).

Most concerningly, three in 10 non-qualified ECE teachers report they are not confident to work with specialists (30 percent).

Figure 29: *ECE teachers' reported confidence to work with specialists – the difference between qualified and non-qualified teachers*



This lower confidence could be because working directly with specialists is delegated to more experienced or qualified colleagues, meaning that non-qualified teachers have more limited experience working with specialists to draw from.

Conclusion

Teachers need to have the right supports in place to effectively promote children's oral language development and progress through good practices. There are some key supports that need to be in place - particularly good leadership and priorities a solid base of teacher knowledge, ways to partner with parents and whānau, and access to specialist support.

We found that many services and schools have good supports in place to enable their teachers to do their best work. However there is room for improvement in the provision of focused professional learning for all teachers (including non-qualified ECE teachers), clear and shared messages about what oral language progress looks like for teachers and families, and more consistent understandings of when and how to seek specialist support.

The next chapter outlines ERO's findings and recommendations from our evaluation.



Chapter 6: Findings and areas for action

The five questions we asked for this evaluation have led to 18 key findings that sit across this work. Based on these findings, we have identified five areas for action, which together have the potential to improve children's oral language development in Aotearoa New Zealand. This section sets out our findings, areas for action, and recommendations for improvement.

This evaluation looks at the current state of oral language in the early years and what can be done to improve children's oral language. Across this work, we answer five key questions.

- 1) What is the current level of oral language development (for 0 to 7-year-olds)?
- 2) What impact has Covid-19 had?
- 3) How can ECE support oral language development and what does good practice look like?
- 4) How well are teachers in ECE and new entrant classes supporting oral language development?
- 5) What could strengthen oral language development in ECE?

Our evaluation led to 18 key findings

Oral language is critical for achieving the Government's literacy ambitions.

Finding 1: Oral language is critical for later literacy and education outcomes. It also plays a key role in developing key social-emotional skills that support behaviour. Children's vocabulary at age 2 is strongly linked to their literacy and numeracy achievement at age 12, and delays in oral language in the early years are reflected in poor reading comprehension at school.

Most children's oral language is developing well, but there is a significant group of children who are behind and Covid-19 has made this worse.

Finding 2: A large Aotearoa New Zealand study found 80 percent of children at age 5 are doing well, but 20 percent are struggling with oral language.^t ECE and new entrant teachers also report that a group of children are struggling and more than half of parents and whānau report their child has some difficulty with oral language in the early years.

^t Growing Up in New Zealand (GUINZ) is Aotearoa New Zealand's largest longitudinal study of child health and wellbeing, following the lives of more than 6000 children and their families.

Finding 3: Covid-19 has had a significant impact. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (59 percent of ECE teachers and 65 percent of new entrant teachers) report that Covid-19 has impacted children's language development. Teachers told us that social communication was particularly impacted by Covid-19, particularly language skills for social communication. International studies confirm the significant impact of Covid-19 on language development.

Children from low socio-economic communities and boys are struggling the most.

Finding 4: Evidence both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally is clear that children from lower socio-economic communities are more likely to struggle with oral language skills. We found that new entrant teachers we surveyed in schools in low socio-economic communities were nine times more likely to report children being below expected levels of oral language. Parents and whānau with lower qualifications were also more likely to report their child has difficulty with oral language.

Finding 5: Both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, boys have more difficulty developing oral language than girls. Parents and whānau we surveyed reported 70 percent of boys are not at the expected development level, compared with 56 percent of girls.

Difficulties with oral language emerge as children develop and oral language becomes more complex.

Finding 6: Teachers and parents and whānau report more concerns about children being behind as they become older and start school. For example, 56 percent of parents and whānau report their child has difficulty as a toddler (aged 18 months to 3 years old), compared to over two-thirds of parents and whānau (70 percent) reporting that their child has difficulty as a preschooler (aged 3 to 5).

Finding 7: Teachers and parents and whānau reported to us that children who are behind most often struggle with constructing sentences, telling stories, and using social communication to talk about their thoughts and feelings. For example, 43 percent of parents and whānau report their child has some difficulty with oral grammar, but only 13 percent report difficulty with gestures.

Quality ECE makes a difference, particularly to children in low socio-economic communities, but they attend ECE less often.

Finding 8: International studies find that quality ECE supports language development and can accelerate literacy by up to a year (particularly for children in low socio-economic communities), and that quality ECE leads to better academic achievement at age 16 for children from low socio-economic communities.⁷³

Finding 9: Children from low socio-economic communities attend ECE for fewer hours than children in high socio-economic areas, which can be due to a range of factors.

Finding 10: International and Aotearoa New Zealand evidence is clear that the practices that best support the development of oral language skills are:

Practice area 1	Teaching new words and how to use them
Practice area 2	Modelling how words make sentences
Practice area 3	Reading interactively with children
Practice area 4	Using conversation to extend language
Practice area 5	Developing positive social communication

Finding 11: ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed reported they use these evidence-based practices often. ECE teachers reported that they most often teach new words and how to use them (96 percent), use conversation to extend language (95 percent), and read interactively with children (95 percent). New entrant teachers we surveyed reported they most frequently read interactively with children (99 percent), teach new words and how to use them (96 percent), and model how words make sentences (95 percent).

Teachers' practices to develop social communication are weaker.

Finding 12: ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed both reported to us they develop social communication skills least frequently.

Professional knowledge is the strongest driver of teachers using evidence-based good practices. Qualified ECE teachers reported being almost twice as confident in their knowledge about oral language.

Finding 13: Qualified ECE teachers we surveyed reported being almost twice as confident in their knowledge about how oral language develops than non-qualified teachers. Most qualified ECE teachers (94 percent) reported being confident, but only two-thirds (64 percent) of non-qualified teachers reported being confident.

Finding 14: Qualified teachers reported using key practices more frequently, for example, using conversation to extend language (96 percent compared with 92 percent of non-qualified teachers).

Finding 15: ECE teachers who reported being extremely confident in their professional knowledge of how children's language develops were up to seven times more likely to report using effective teaching practices regularly.

Teachers and parents often do not know how well their children are developing and this matters as timely support can prevent problems later.

Finding 16: Not all ECE and new entrant teachers are confident to assess oral language progress. Of the new entrant teachers we surveyed, a quarter reported not being confident to assess and report on progress. The lack of clear development expectations and milestones, and lack of alignment between *Te Whāriki* and the *New Zealand Curriculum*, makes this difficult. Half of parents and whānau (53 percent) do not get information from their service about their child's oral language progress.

Finding 17: Being able to assess children's oral language progress and identify potential difficulties is an important part of teaching young children. However, not all ECE and new entrant teachers are confident to identify difficulties in oral language (15 percent of ECE teachers and 24 percent of new entrant teachers surveyed report not being confident).

Finding 18: For children who are struggling, support from specialists, such as speech-language therapists, who can help with oral language development is key. But not all teachers are confident to work with these specialists, with 12 percent of ECE teachers and 17 percent of new entrant teachers reporting not being confident.

Areas for action

ERO has identified five areas to support children's oral language development.

Area 1: Increase participation in quality ECE for children from low socio-economic communities

- 1) Increase participation in quality ECE for children from low socio-economic communities through removing barriers.
- 2) Raise the quality of ECE for children in low socio-economic communities – including through ERO reviews and Ministry of Education interventions.

Area 2: Put in place clear and consistent expectations and track children's progress

- 3) Review how the *New Zealand Curriculum* at the start of school and *Te Whāriki* work together to provide clear and consistent progress indicators for oral language.
- 4) Make sure there are good tools that are used by ECE teachers to track progress and identify difficulties in children's language development.
- 5) Assess children's oral language at the start of school to help teachers to identify any tailored support or approaches they may need.

Area 3: Increase teachers' use of effective practices

- 6) In initial teacher education for ECE and new entrant teachers, have a clear focus on the evidence-based practices that support oral language development.
- 7) Increase professional knowledge of oral language development, in particular for non-qualified ECE teachers, through effective professional learning and development.

Area 4: Support parents and whānau to develop language at home

- 8) Support ECE services to provide regular updates on children's oral language development to parents and whānau.
- 9) Support ECE services in low socio-economic communities to provide resources to parents and whānau to use with their children.

Area 5: Increase targeted support

10) Invest in targeted programmes and approaches that prevent and address delays in language development (e.g., *Oral Language and Literacy Initiative* and *Better Start Literacy Approach*).

Conclusion

Oral language is a critical building block for all children and essential to setting them up to succeed at school and beyond. Most children's oral language is developing well, but there is a significant group of children who are behind (including children in lower socio-economic communities), and Covid-19 has made this worse. Quality ECE can make a difference.

We have identified five key areas of action to better support children's oral language development. Together, these areas of action can help address the oral language challenges children face.





Appendices

Appendix 1: Oral language development - previous ERO findings

In 2017, ERO found the following:

- To support oral language, leaders and teachers in early learning services need to know how children's oral language develops, recognise the fundamental ways the curriculum can promote rich oral language learning, and use deliberate teaching strategies.
- Professional and pedagogical leadership was critical in building capability/capacity of teachers to promote and support children's oral language.
- Improvements were needed in many early learning services to support oral language, including:
 - leadership capability to support teachers to design and implement effective curriculum for oral language
 - evaluating the impact of practices/strategies on improving oral language outcomes
 - capitalising on 'home languages' as foundation for other language learning
 - being prompt and proactive where concerns are identified about children's oral language learning and development.

ERO recommended that leaders and teachers in early learning services and schools should:

- use resources to evaluate the extent to which their curriculum strengthens overall oral language learning and provides evidence of children's progress and achievement
- make better use of existing resources to promote and support children's oral language learning
- use assessment approaches and tools, based on shared understandings and expectations for oral language learning, to notice, recognise, and respond to the linguistic strengths and needs of all learners
- offer rich, broad learning opportunities to support children's oral language learning and enable them to develop oral language capabilities foundational to their learning across the curriculum.

ERO recommended that the Ministry of Education should develop a more coherent and systematic set of curriculum expectations, assessment tools, and resources for oral language in the early years (0-8 years) to support children's learning across the curriculum.

Appendix 2: Methodology

ERO used a mixed-method approach to explore how well children are developing oral language, key teaching practices in use by teachers to develop oral language, and how well teachers are supported. This report draws on survey data, site visits to schools, as well as the voices of teachers, ECE leaders, parents and whānau, speech-language therapists, and sector experts.

This section covers:

- design
- analysis
- ECE teachers survey
- new entrant teachers survey
- parents and whānau survey
- site visits and interviews
- limitations.

Design

ERO used a mixed-method approach to explore how well children are developing oral language, key teaching practices in use by teachers to develop oral language, and how well teachers are supported. We collected both qualitative and quantitative data. The target population was ECE teachers, new entrant teachers, new entrant teacher aides, ECE and school leaders, and parents and whānau. We also talked to experts. Data was collected through reviews of literature, surveys, administrative data, site visits, and interviews.

When designing both survey and interview questions, we undertook an in-depth review of literature on evidence-based teaching practices for supporting children's oral language development in the early years (including Education Endowment Foundation research).

Analysis

Quantitative survey analysis

Quantitative data was statistically analysed using STATA and Excel software. Differences between groups were identified through non-parametric statistical tests. Non-responses and 'don't know' responses were excluded from response totals when calculating percentages and running statistical tests. Numbers and percentages are rounded to the nearest full number, except where rounding errors lead to incorrect totals. In these instances, the numbers are rounded to minimise rounding error.

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data were analysed by an experienced team. All focus groups were recorded, and extensive notes were taken. Following each focus group, interviewers immediately sorted information into predetermined domains (adjusting and creating more as needed), and useful quotes were identified and documented from verbatim records.

Review of good practice literature

As part of developing our practice areas and key practices, we reviewed the local and international literature on good practice for supporting children's oral language development. This included meta-analysis research conducted by the Education Endowment Foundation. Our refined practice areas are the result of combining the analysis of the literature, with input from experts. These practice areas formed the framework for sorting and analysing our site visit and focus group data into collections of 'real-life strategy' examples.

Sense-making

Following analysis of the data from the surveys and focus groups, sense-making discussions were conducted to test interpretation of the results, findings, and recommendations with:

- ERO specialists in reviewing school practice
- the project's Expert Advisory Group, made up of sector experts
- the project's Steering Group.

We then tested and refined the findings and recommendations with the following organisations to ensure they were useful and practical:

- Ministry of Education
- Peak bodies e.g., NZEI Te Riu Roa.

Parents and whānau survey

Surveys

ERO conducted three surveys using Survey Monkey. The surveys collected both quantitative and qualitative information, and were in the field from 1 November 2023 to 12 January 2024 (spanning parts of Term 4 and the term break).

ECE and new entrant teacher surveys

We emailed 600 ECE services asking them to share the survey link with their teachers. We had a total of 306 responses from ECE teachers. At the same time, we also emailed 400 primary school principals^u to share the survey with their new entrant teachers. We also called school principals to boost answers to the new entrant teacher survey. We had a total of 105 new entrant teacher participants. No weighting was applied to the responses of ECE and new entrant teachers.

^u Excluding principals of Māori-medium and private schools.

Parents and whānau survey

We emailed 600 ECE services, asking them to share the parents and whānau survey link with families in their weekly newsletter. We had a total of 540 parents and whānau participants. No weighting was applied to the responses of parents and whānau.

Site visits

ECE services and schools displaying good teaching practice for oral language development were identified and recommended by expert ERO Review Officers and Evaluation Partners, to create a short-list for site visits and interviews. ECE services and schools were then contacted and recruited by the research team.

We conducted site visits to classrooms in 10 ECE services and six primary schools between 10 October 2023 and 26 January 2024 (spanning parts of Term 4 and the term break). Site visits were always undertaken in pairs. Different combinations of team members conducted site visits, following a set protocol which included notes on:

- the activity conducted by the teacher
- what the teacher was doing during the activity
- the teaching practices used during the activity
- what resources were being used in the activity
- which resources were accessible to children
- the layout of the learning environment
- what the classroom environment looked like
- documents available for children to review or revisit their learning.

Qualitative information from observations during site visits was analysed using thematic analysis. Teaching practices were coded based on areas of good teaching practice for oral language development in the early years, as defined by the Education Endowment Foundation.

- Teaching and modelling vocabulary⁷⁴
- Teaching and modelling language⁷⁵
- Interactive reading⁷⁶
- Teaching through collaborative talk⁷⁷
- Teaching and modelling social communication skills⁷⁸

Teaching practices observed during site visits were used to illustrate examples of good teaching practice.

Interviews

We conducted interviews between 10 October 2023 and 26 January 2024 (spanning parts of Term 4 and the term break) with:

- eight ECE leaders
- eight school leaders
- 35 ECE teachers
- ten new entrant teachers
- seven new entrant teacher aides
- 15 parents and whānau participants.

Interviews were held in person or over the phone and run as flexible, semi-structured discussions. Participants were invited to take part in interviews when ERO staff conducted site visits. Interviews always included two ERO staff. Participants consented their participation to the interview via email and by submitting a written consent form to ERO. Their verbal consent was also sought to record their interview.

Interviews with ECE and school staff focused on:

- learning environment
- teacher capability on oral language development
- teaching practice on oral language development (including narrative assessment)
- working with parents and whānau or service
- working with specialists
- Covid-19 impact on oral language
- challenges to practice on oral language development
- recommendations to practice on oral language development.

Interviews with school staff also included a question about children's transition from ECE services to school.

Interviews with parents and whānau focused on:

- the oral language development of their child
- practices used by parents and whānau to develop oral language
- information and knowledge on oral language development provided by their child's ECE service
- whether parents and whānau had any concerns about their child's oral language development
- Covid-19 impact on their child's oral language
- whether parents and whānau were satisfied with how teachers supported their child's oral language development.

Qualitative information from interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Teaching practices were coded based on areas of good teaching practice for oral language development in the early years, as defined by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)^{79,80, 81,82,83}. Quotes from interviews were used to illustrate examples of good teaching practice.

Information and consent

All interview participants were informed of the purpose of the evaluation before they agreed to participate. Participants were informed that:

- participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time
- permission to use their information could be withdrawn at any time
- this evaluation was not an evaluation of their individual service or school, and their service or school would not be identified in the resulting national report
- their information was confidential and would be kept securely subject to the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982, Privacy Act 1993, and the Public Records Act 2005 on the release and retention of information.

Limitations

As with all research, there are some limitations to our methodology and methods.

In terms of scope, this research:

- does not examine development on other oral languages than English
- does not explore literacy
- does not include children's views on their oral language development
- does not focus on primary school classes other than new entrant classes
- does not include Kōhanga Reo, Māori-medium services or schools, Te Kura, and secondary schools.

In terms of the data collection:

- **ECE and new entrant teacher surveys:** Initially, we did not include a question in the survey which enabled us to calculate the socio-economic level of the school in which ECE teachers and new entrant teachers worked. Due to this limitation, only 47 percent of ECE teachers and 56 percent of the new entrant teachers were assigned an EQI band or quartile^v. Thus, analyses including EQI are based on the answers of 144 ECE teachers and 59 new entrant teachers.
- **Parents and whānau survey:** The majority of parents who responded to the survey were mothers (92 percent) who had a university or postgraduate degree (64 percent). In line with international evidence, a larger percentage of parents with a lower qualification reported that their child has 'at least some difficulty' with their oral language. This finding suggests that analyses could be biased towards a more positive view on oral language development as 64 percent of parents had a university or postgraduate degree.

^v To measure disadvantage in this report, we use the Equity Index (EQI) which is used to determine a school's level of equity funding, based on the socio-economic barriers faced by the students at the school. The EQI replaced the decile system from the beginning of January 2023 (see the Ministry of Education website for more). Low socio-economic communities refer to schools in the bottom two quartiles and high refers to schools in the top two quartiles.

- **Site visits:** We were mainly interested in finding out what was working well for ECE services and new entrant classes in developing oral language during the early years. To gather examples of strategies that work, we intentionally went to services and schools that were known to be doing this well. This meant that the qualitative data we collected in observations was not representative of all services' and schools' experiences.
- **Interviews:** It is also possible participants provided socially desirable responses in the interviews. We mitigated this risk by ensuring that all data would be treated confidentially, and no identifiable information would be disclosed.

In terms of data presentation:

- **Survey data is sometimes simplified for readability:** In our survey analysis, when considering the views of ECE and new entrant teachers, we have combined levels of the Likert responses to depict positive (strongly agree and agree) and negative (disagree and strongly disagree) points of view. When considering the responses of parents and whānau in relation to the level of difficulty their child has on specific components of oral language, a dichotomous scale was designed with 'no difficulty' as the lowest point and 'at least some difficulty' as the highest. This is to highlight the responses we have observed amongst different participant groups.

Appendix 3: ECE teacher survey

Demographic questions

- 1) Where are you currently teaching? (tick all that apply)
 - Kindergarten
 - Home-based service
 - Playcentre
 - Education and care service
 - Bilingual service
- 2) Which region do you work in? [region drop-down options]
- 3) Are you a qualified ECE teacher?
 - Yes
 - No
- 4) Please select the ethnic group(s) with which you identify. (Tick all that apply)
 - New Zealand European/Pākehā
 - Māori
 - Samoan
 - Cook Island Māori
 - Tongan
 - Niuean
 - Fijian

- Tokelau
- Tuvalu
- Other Pacific
- Chinese
- Indian
- Other Asian
- Other European
- Middle Eastern
- Latin American
- African
- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

5) Which languages do you speak? (Please tick all that apply)

- English
- Te Reo Māori
- Cook Island Māori
- Samoan
- Tongan
- Fijian
- Niuean
- Tokelau
- Tuvalu
- Other Pacific
- Northern Chinese
- Hindi
- Yue
- Sinitic
- Tagalog
- Punjabi
- Korean
- Fiji Hindi
- Afrikaans
- Gujarati
- Spanish
- German
- Japanese
- French

- Dutch
- Arabic
- Tamil
- Malayalam
- Portugese
- Bengali
- Other (please specify)

6) Which languages do you speak with children in your service? (Please tick all that apply)

- English
- Te Reo Māori
- Cook Island Māori
- Samoan
- Tongan
- Fijian
- Niuean
- Tokelau
- Tuvalu
- Other Pacific
- Northern Chinese
- Hindi
- Yue
- Sinitic
- Tagalog
- Punjabi
- Korean
- Fiji Hindi
- Afrikaans
- Gujarati
- Spanish
- German
- Japanese
- French
- Dutch
- Arabic
- Tamil
- Malayalam

- Portugese
- Bengali
- Other (please specify)

7) Are you:

- Female
- Male
- Gender diverse
- Prefer not to say
- Other

8) Which age group of children do you most often work with? (Tick all that apply)

- 0 - 18 months
- 18 - 36 months (1.5 - 3 years old)
- 3 - 5 years old

Oral language questions about children aged 0-18 months

9) Approximately what percentage of children (0 - 18 months) you work with most often are not meeting Oral Language development expectations?

- Less than a quarter of the children (25% or less)
- About half of the children (50%)
- Most of the children (75% or more)
- Don't know

For question 10, respondents could select from: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know.

10) For the following statements, select how much you agree with each statement for those children you work with most often, **who have below expected levels** of Oral Language. Most children (0-18 months) with Oral Language below expected levels:

- Do not use sounds (e.g., aaa, eee, ooo) to express themselves as expected for their age
- Do not use gestures (e.g., pointing, waving) as expected for their age
- Do not understand and use some words as expected for their age
- Do not enjoy and interact when stories are told or read as expected for their age
- Do not respond to questions and express their needs using words, sounds or gestures (e.g., me want) as expected for their age.

Oral language questions about children aged 1.5 – 3 years old

- 11) Approximately what percentage of children (18 - 36 months / 1.5 - 3 years old) you work with most often are not meeting Oral Language development expectations?
- Less than a quarter of the children (25% or less)
 - About half of the children (50%)
 - Most of the children (75% or more)
 - Don't know

For question 12, respondents could select from: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know.

- 12) For the following statements, select how much you agree with each statement for those children you work with most often, **who have below expected levels** of Oral Language. Most children (18 - 36 months / 1.5 - 3 years old) with Oral Language below expected levels:
- Do not add and use new sounds to express themselves as expected for their age
 - Do not use gestures to communicate with others as expected for their age
 - Do not rapidly learn and use a range of new words as expected for their age
 - Do not combine words to form short sentences as expected for their age
 - Do not tell their first stories and answer simple questions as expected for their age
 - Do not follow simple verbal instructions as expected for their age.

Oral language questions about children aged 3-5 years old

- 13) Approximately what percentage of children (3 - 5 years old) you work with most often are not meeting Oral Language development expectations?
- Less than a quarter of the children (25% or less)
 - About half of the children (50%)
 - Most of the children (75% or more)
 - Don't know

For question 14, respondents could select from: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know.

- 14) For the following statements, select how much you agree with each statement for children you work with most often, **who have below expected levels** of Oral Language. Most children (3 - 5 years old) with Oral Language below expected levels:
- Do not understand that sounds combine to make words as expected for their age
 - Do not make up their own rhymes (e.g., bees knees) as expected for their age
 - Do not use gestures as part of their communication with others as expected for their age
 - Do not understand and use a range of new words and are not building on the number of words they can use as expected for their age

- Do not combine words to form longer sentences as expected for their age
- Do not make sentences that are nearly all grammatically correct as expected for their age
- Do not tell longer stories as expected for their age
- Do not change their language depending on who they are talking to as expected for their age

Open text question

- 15) Have you noticed any patterns among the children who have below expected levels of Oral Language? Please tell us:
- 16) Approximately what percentage of children in your early learning setting are bi-lingual or multi-lingual?
- None
 - Less than a quarter of the children (25% or less)
 - About half of the children (50%)
 - Most of the children (75% or more)
 - Don't know
- 17) Which areas of Oral Language development are progressing well for most children (75% or more of children)? (Tick all that apply)
- Vocabulary (e.g., knowing and using words correctly)
 - Grammar and syntax (e.g., putting word/sentences together)
 - Social language (e.g., initiating conversation)
 - Listening and comprehension skills (e.g., following instructions)
 - Sounds/speech and rhythm (e.g., speaking clearly)
- 18) Which areas of Oral Language development are of concern for most children (75% or more of children)? (Tick all that apply)
- Vocabulary (e.g., knowing and using words correctly)
 - Grammar and syntax (e.g., putting word/sentences together)
 - Social language (e.g., initiating conversation)
 - Listening and comprehension skills (e.g., following instructions)
 - Sounds/speech and rhythm (e.g., speaking clearly)
- 19) Approximately what percentage of children about to start school (4.5-5 year olds) are not meeting Oral Language development expectations? (If this is the age group you work with)
- Less than a quarter of the children (25% or less)
 - About half of the children (50%)
 - Most of the children (75% or more)
 - Don't know

Questions about teaching practice and knowledge

For question 20, respondents could select from: *extremely confident, somewhat confident, a little confident, not at all confident, don't know.*

20) How confident do you feel in:

- your professional knowledge about how children's Oral Language develops?
- your knowledge of typical Oral Language development?
- your knowledge of Oral Language development expectations for the age group you teach?

For questions 21 and 22, respondents could select from: *very capable, capable, a little capable, not capable at all, don't know.*

21) How capable do you feel:

- to notice, recognise, and respond to support children's Oral Language?
- in assessing and reporting on progress of Oral Language development (e.g., Learning Stories)?
- in identifying any delays in Oral Language development?
- working with specialists (e.g., speech language therapists, early intervention services)?

22) How capable do you feel to:

- Intentionally use words to build children's understanding of words (e.g., labelling)
- Intentionally use language to show how words form sentences and give children opportunity to apply it (e.g., explaining)
- Encourage children to actively participate while 'reading' a book (e.g., asking questions)
- Use language to extend interactions by encouraging children to make links, give reasons, etc.
- Give children opportunities to learn the social rules of communication (e.g., adjusting words or volume based on the context)
- Give children opportunities to experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures
- Communicate and partner with parents and whānau to support oral language development

For question 23, respondents could select from: *almost always, often, sometimes, rarely, never.*

23) How often do you use the following practices to support oral language development:

- Intentionally using words to build children's understanding of words (e.g., labelling)
- Intentionally using language to show how words form sentences and give children opportunity to apply it (e.g., explaining)

- Encouraging children to actively participate while ‘reading’ a book (e.g., asking questions)
- Using language to extend interactions by encouraging children to make links, give reasons, etc.
- Give children opportunities to learn the social rules of communication (e.g., adjusting words or volume based on the context)
- Giving children opportunities to experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures
- Communicating and partnering with parents and whānau to support oral language development

24) Please rank these in order of how important you think they are (for the age group you work with):

- Intentionally using words to build children’s understanding of words (e.g., labelling)
- Intentionally using language to show how words form sentences and give children
- opportunity to apply it (e.g., explaining)
- Encouraging children to actively participate while ‘reading’ a book (e.g., asking questions)
- Using language to extend interactions by encouraging children to make links, give reasons, etc.
- Giving children opportunities to learn societal rules of verbal and non-verbal communication, so they can best engage and communicate with others (e.g., adjusting words or volume based on the context)
- Giving children opportunities to experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures
- Communicating and partnering with parents and whānau to support oral language development

Questions about the impact of Covid-19 restrictions

25) Do you think the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on children’s Oral Language development?

- Yes
- No
- Don’t know

26) If it has had a negative impact, please tell us how: (free text response)

27) If it has had a positive impact, please tell us how: (free text response)



Questions about challenges and useful resources

- 28) What are challenges you experience as a kaiako/teacher in supporting Oral Language development? (free text response)
- 29) What resources do you find useful for supporting Oral Language development? (free text response)

Closing question

- 30) Is there anything else you would like to tell us about children's Oral Language development?

New entrant teacher survey

Demographic questions

- 1) Do you teach new entrants or Year 1 learners (5–7-year-olds)?
- Yes
 - No
- 2) Which region do you work in? [region drop-down options]
- 3) Do you teach in a bilingual unit?
- Yes
 - No
- 4) What teaching qualification do you have? [qualification drop-down options]
- 5) Please select the ethnic group(s) with which you identify. (Tick all that apply)
- New Zealand European/ Pākehā
 - Māori
 - Samoan
 - Cook Island Māori
 - Tongan
 - Niuean
 - Fijian
 - Tokelau
 - Tuvalu
 - Other Pacific
 - Chinese
 - Indian
 - Other Asian
 - Other European
 - Middle Eastern
 - Latin American
 - African

- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

6) Which languages do you speak with your learners? (Please tick all that apply)

- English
- Te Reo Māori
- Cook Island Māori
- Samoan
- Tongan
- Fijian
- Niuean
- Tokelau
- Tuvalu
- Other Pacific
- Northern Chinese
- Hindi
- Yue
- Sinitic
- Tagalog
- Punjabi
- Korean
- Fiji Hindi
- Afrikaans
- Gujarati
- Spanish
- German
- Japanese
- French
- Dutch
- Arabic
- Tamil
- Malayalam
- Portugese
- Bengali
- Other (please specify)

- 7) Are you:
- Female
 - Male
 - Gender diverse
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other

Questions about the oral language development of children in the teacher's class

- 8) Approximately what percentage of children in your class are bi-lingual or multi-lingual?
- None
 - Less than a quarter of the children (25% or less)
 - About half of the children (50%)
 - Most of the children (75% or more)
 - Don't know
- 9) This year, approximately what percentage of children started school with Oral Language at a level expected for 3–4 year-olds, **below** expected levels for new entrants?
- Less than a quarter of the children (25% or less)
 - About half of the children (50%)
 - Most of the children (75% or more)
 - Don't know

For question 10, respondents could select from: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know.

- 10) For the following statements, select how much you agree with each statement for those children in your class **who have below expected levels** of Oral Language.
- Most children with Oral Language below expected levels:
- Do not understand that sounds combine to make words as expected for their age
 - Do not make up their own rhymes (e.g., bees knees) as expected for their age
 - Do not use gestures as part of their communication with others as expected for their age
 - Do not understand and use a range of new words and are not building on the number of words they can use as expected for their age
 - Do not combine words to form longer sentences as expected for their age
 - Do not make sentences that are nearly all grammatically correct as expected for their age
 - Do not tell longer stories as expected for their age
 - Do not change their language depending on who they are talking to as expected for their age

- 11) This year, approximately what percentage of children started school with Oral Language at a level expected for 5-7 year-olds?
- Less than a quarter of the children (25% or less)
 - About half of the children (50%)
 - Most of the children (75% or more)
 - Don't know

For question 12, respondents could select from: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know.

- 12) For the following statements, select how much you agree with each statement for those children in your class **who have below expected levels** of Oral Language.

Most children with Oral Language below expected levels:

- Do not tell a story using a wide variety of words in the right context as expected for their age
- Do not initiate and have conversations as expected for their age
- Do not have the language to express their feelings and emotions as expected for their age
- Do not have clear speech as expected for their age
- Do not understand what is said to them, in the language of instruction in the classroom, as expected for their age

Open text question

- 13) Have you noticed any patterns among the children starting school with below expected levels of Oral Language? Please tell us:
- 14) Which areas of Oral Language development are progressing well for most children (75% or more of children)? (Tick all that apply)
- Vocabulary (e.g., knowing and using words correctly)
 - Grammar and syntax (e.g., putting word/sentences together)
 - Social language (e.g., initiating conversation)
 - Listening and comprehension skills (e.g., following instructions)
 - Speech and rhythm (e.g., speaking clearly)
 - Don't know

15) Which areas of Oral Language development are of concern for most children (75% or more of children)? (Tick all that apply)

- Vocabulary (e.g., knowing and using words correctly)
- Grammar and syntax (e.g., putting word/sentences together)
- Social language (e.g., initiating conversation)
- Listening and comprehension skills (e.g., following instructions)
- Speech and rhythm (e.g., speaking clearly)
- Don't know

16) Do you think the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on children's Oral Language development?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

17) If it has had a negative impact, please tell us how:

18) If it has had a positive impact, please tell us how:

Questions about teaching practice and knowledge

For question 19, respondents could select from: extremely confident, somewhat confident, a little confident, not at all confident, don't know.

19) How confident do you feel in:

- your professional knowledge about how children's Oral Language develops?
- your knowledge of typical Oral Language development?
- your knowledge of Oral Language development expectations for the age group you teach?

For questions 20 and 21, respondents could select from: very capable, capable, a little capable, not capable at all, don't know.

20) How capable do you feel:

- to support Oral Language development?
- to assess and report on progress of Oral Language development (e.g., narrative assessments or Learning Stories)?
- to identify any delays in Oral Language development?
- to work with specialists (e.g., speech language therapists, learning support)?

21) How capable do you feel to:

- Intentionally use words to build children's understanding of words (e.g., labelling)
- Intentionally use language to show how words form sentences and give children opportunity to apply it (e.g., explaining)
- Encourage children to actively participate while 'reading' a book (e.g., asking questions)

- Use language to extend interactions by encouraging children to make links, give reasons, etc.
- Give children opportunities to learn the social rules of communication (e.g., adjusting words or volume based on the context)
- Give children opportunities to experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures
- Communicate and partner with parents and whānau to support oral language development

For question 22, respondents could select from: almost always, often, sometimes, rarely, never.

22) How often do you use the following practices to support oral language development:

- Intentionally using words to build children's understanding of words (e.g., labelling)
- Intentionally using language to show how words form sentences and give children opportunity to apply it (e.g., explaining)
- Encouraging children to actively participate while 'reading' a book (e.g., asking questions)
- Using language to extend interactions by encouraging children to make links, give reasons, etc.
- Give children opportunities to learn the social rules of communication (e.g., adjusting words or volume based on the context)
- Giving children opportunities to experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures
- Communicating and partnering with parents and whānau to support oral language development

23) Please rank these in order of how important you think they are (for the age group you work with):

- Intentionally using words to build children's understanding of words (e.g., labelling)
- Intentionally using language to show how words form sentences and give children opportunity to apply it (e.g., explaining)
- Encouraging children to actively participate while 'reading' a book (e.g., asking questions)
- Using language to extend interactions by encouraging children to make links, give reasons, etc.
- Giving children opportunities to learn societal rules of verbal and non-verbal communication, so they can best engage and communicate with others (e.g., adjusting words or volume based on the context)
- Giving children opportunities to experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures
- Communicating and partnering with parents and whānau to support oral language development

Closing questions

- 24) What are challenges you experience as a kaiako/teacher in supporting Oral Language development? [free text response]
- 25) What resources do you find useful for supporting Oral Language development? [free text response]
- 26) Is there anything else you would like to tell us about children's Oral Language development? [free text response]

Parent and whānau survey

Demographic information

- 1) Are you:
 - Female
 - Male
 - Gender diverse
 - Other
 - Prefer not to say
- 2) How old are you?
 - Under 16 years
 - 16 - 20 years
 - 21 - 30 years
 - 31 - 40 years
 - 41 - 50 years
 - Over 50 years
 - Prefer not to say
- 3) What is your highest educational qualification?
 - Left school without any qualification
 - High school qualification
 - Trades qualification
 - University graduate
 - University postgraduate
 - Other (please specify)
- 4) Please select the ethnic group(s) with which you identify. (Tick all that apply)
 - New Zealand European/Pākehā
 - Māori
 - Samoan
 - Cook Island Māori
 - Tongan

- Niuean
- Fijian
- Tokelau
- Tuvalu
- Other Pacific
- Chinese
- Indian
- Other Asian
- Other European
- Middle Eastern
- Latin American
- African
- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

5) Which languages do you speak with/in front of your child/ren? (Please tick all that apply)

- English
- Te Reo Māori
- Cook Island Māori
- Samoan
- Tongan
- Fijian
- Niuean
- Tokelau
- Tuvalu
- Other Pacific
- Northern Chinese
- Hindi
- Yue
- Sinitic
- Tagalog
- Punjabi
- Korean
- Fiji Hindi
- Afrikaans
- Gujarati
- Spanish

- German
- Japanese
- French
- Dutch
- Arabic
- Tamil
- Malayalam
- Portuguese
- Bengali
- Other (please specify)

- 6) Which region of New Zealand do you live in?
- 7) How many children are you the primary caregiver for?
- 8) How many of your children are under the age of 7?

Questions in relation to the respondent's youngest child

- 9) What is your relationship to this child?
- Mother
 - Father
 - Other (please specify)
- 10) Is this child:
- Female
 - Male
 - Gender diverse
 - Other
 - Prefer not to say
- 11) How old is this child?
- 0 - 17 months
 - 18 - 35 months (1.5 - just under 3 years old)
 - 3 - 4 years (just under 5 years old)
 - 5 years old
 - 6 years old
 - 7 years old

For questions 12 to 15, respondents could select from: no difficulty, some difficulty, a lot of difficulty, cannot do at all, don't know.

12) *[Infants 0-17 months only]* How difficult does your child find it to:

- Use sounds (e.g., aaa, eee, ooo) to express themselves
- Use gestures (e.g., pointing, waving)
- Understand and use some words
- Enjoy and interact when stories are told or read
- Respond to questions and express their needs using words, sounds or gestures

13) *[toddlers 18-35 months only]* How difficult does your child find it to:

- Add and use new sounds to express themselves
- Use gestures to communicate with others
- Rapidly learning and using a range of new words
- Combine words to form short sentences
- Tell their first stories and answer simple questions
- Follow simple verbal instructions

14) *[preschoolers 3-4 years only]* How difficult does your child find it to:

- Understand that sounds combine to form words
- Make up their own rhymes (e.g., bees knees)
- Use gestures as part of their communication with others
- Understand and use a range of new words and are building on the number of words they can use
- Combine words to form longer sentences
- Make sentences that are nearly all grammatically correct
- Tell longer stories
- Change their language depending on who they are talking to

15) *[5-7 years only]* How difficult does your child find it to:

- Understand and use sounds to combine and form words
- Make up their own rhymes (e.g., bees knees)
- Use gestures as part of their communication with others
- Understand and use a range of new words
- Ask complex questions
- Combine words to form longer and more complex sentences
- Tell stories with a clear beginning, middle, and end
- Express their feelings and ideas through words
- Follow two-step instructions

For question 16, respondents could select from: extremely happy, quite happy, a little happy, not happy at all.

16) How happy are you with your child's level of Oral Language development?

For question 17, respondents could select from: not concerned, a little concerned, somewhat concerned, extremely concerned, don't know.

17) Please tell us which areas you are most concerned about by indicating the level of concern.

- My child's ability to understand and use sounds
- My child's ability to understand and use words
- My child's ability to combine words to form sentences and questions
- My child's ability to tell stories
- My child's ability to express their feelings and needs

18) My child's early learning service or school tells me where to go for help/support about Oral Language if needed

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Does not apply to me

For question 19, respondents could select from: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know.

19) I know what to expect at each stage of my child's Oral Language development.

20) Have you participated in any parenting programs for Oral Language development?

- Yes
- No

21) Has your child's early learning service or school shared any information about Oral Language development?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

For question 22, respondents could select from: extremely useful, somewhat useful, a little useful, not useful at all, don't know.

22) How useful have you found this information to support your child's Oral Language at home?

For question 23, respondents could select from: strongly agree, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know.

23) My child's early learning service or school:

- helps me understand what Oral Language development looks like for my child
- shows me ways to support my child's Oral Language development at home

For questions 24 and 25, respondents could select from: extremely confident, somewhat confident, a little confident, not confident at all, don't know.

24) How confident do you feel about:

- supporting your child's Oral Language development at home
- helping your child learn and use new words
- helping your child combine words to form sentences
- helping your child tell stories
- helping your child express their needs and wants.

25) Overall, how confident do you feel about supporting your child's Oral Language at home?

26) Is there anything else you would like to tell us about how your child's early learning service or school is supporting your child's Oral Language?
[free text response].



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