

Key Guidance: Foundations for Language

Research has highlighted the ‘strong link between children’s early language and their future academic achievement’ (Snowling & Hulme, 2011). As well as having a positive impact on academic outcomes, focusing on language also helps children: express their needs and wants; build strong and secure relationships; and develop their imagination.

Neuroscience has shown us that the ‘growth of children’s language is linked to the quality of back-and-forth interactions’ they have with their caregivers (Romeo et al., 2018). Within these quality interactions, children learn best when they are explicitly taught vocabulary and are provided with a good model of grammar. Both the quantity and quality of our talk matters.

Foundations for Language forms part of the Little Wandle Foundations programme. It provides you with resources and training to support you to develop your children’s language. Foundations for Language has been designed to be used alongside Foundations for Phonics and Foundations for a Love of Reading, as part of your wider Communication and Language and Literacy provision.

What will my children learn with Foundations for Language?

By using Foundations for Language in your setting, your children will benefit from practitioners who are skilled at using interactions to develop language. Foundations for Language is not a planning tool or set of teaching resources. Rather it is a framework for thinking about quality talk.

Through using this approach, your Nursery children will learn:

- new vocabulary
- appropriate grammatical structures
- turn-taking in conversations
- to become confident communicators.

These skills are aligned with the communication and language focus outlined in Development Matters. Three- and four-year-olds should be learning to:

- Use a wider range of vocabulary.
- Use longer sentences of four to six words.
- Be able to express a point of view and to debate when they disagree with an adult or a friend, using words as well as actions.
- Start a conversation with an adult or a friend and continue it for many turns.
- Use talk to organise themselves and their play: 'Let's go on a bus ... you sit there ... I'll be the driver.'

Development Matters, (DfE) 2021

How do I fit Foundations for Language into my weekly provision?

As Foundations for Language is an approach to interactions, it can and should be used throughout the day. This is dependent on three important prerequisites:

1. Secure and trusting relationships between practitioners and children

Children will only talk freely with adults with whom they feel safe. Time spent getting to build relationships between key workers and their children must be the priority as children join the setting.

2. A language-rich environment

Creating a language-rich environment does not simply mean displaying key words or ensuring that there are books in every area of learning (although they do both have a part to play). Rather, we need to think about the following areas of our environment to ensure our children are truly surrounded by language:

- **Physical space:** Are there clear zones, including quieter, more enclosed places that encourage talk? Is background noise kept to a minimum?
- **Resources:** Are there interesting objects and activities available to provoke talk? Are there plenty of opportunities to role-play with costumes, puppets and props?
- **Book and rhymes:** Are children able to access a wide range of books? Do practitioners regularly read to children individually and in small groups?
- **Print awareness:** Is print displayed around the setting in a meaningful and purposeful way (e.g. resource labels)? Are authentic texts incorporated into role-play areas (e.g. menus)?
- **Adult interactions:** Do all practitioners get down to the children's level and pay children their full attention?

3. Sufficient time in the day for practitioners to talk to children

We understand that nurseries are busy places with lots of children demanding time. For this reason, it is even more important to ensure that your timetable allows for extended periods of play, uninterrupted by adult-led activities. It is often during child-initiated time that skilful practitioners can develop language that is in context and therefore more likely to 'stick' in children's brains.

Don't forget that some children might need more time for talking than others. As the Education Endowment Foundation reminds us:

'Adults should ... consider dedicating more of their time to children whose understanding and range of vocabulary is more limited or who are experiencing poverty, and further time still if they are experiencing both risk factors; targeting at-risk pupils has been shown to be effective in narrowing the gap.'

Education Endowment Foundation, 2023

What is included in Foundations for Language?

Foundations for Language is a framework designed to support practitioners to understand and use a range of evidence-informed interaction techniques to develop pupils' language. As well as this guidance, you can access:

- Staff training video: 'Getting Started with Foundations for Language'
- 10 x interaction technique posters for display in your setting
- 10 x interaction technique prompt cards for use in staff training
- 10 x 'How to' videos exemplifying each interaction technique.

How do I implement Foundations for Language?

You can introduce Foundations for Language at any time. There are several suggested implementation options outlined in the document 'Little Wandle Foundations CPD Plan'.

Once the 'Getting started with Foundations for Language' training is complete, the interaction techniques are designed to be used with your setting as a shared language for ongoing CPD and to support with the induction of new staff.

We suggest that you display the interaction technique posters around your setting as prompts for your team to maximise opportunities to develop pupils' language throughout the day.

How can I involve families with Foundations for Language?

The help that families give their children at home can have a significant positive impact on their children's learning. All families should be encouraged to, first and foremost, chat, play and read with their children.

Some families might not appreciate the importance of these actions and be keen to push their child to do more traditionally obvious forms of learning, such as reading and writing. Reassure them that focusing on talk, play and books in Nursery is the best possible foundation for children's later literacy learning in Reception and beyond.

'Language is the foundation of children's thinking and learning.' *Development Matters*, DfE, 2021

To help families understand the Little Wandle Foundations for Language approach, we provide the following resources for you to share with families:

- Foundations for Language parent presentation
- Foundations for Language parent handout.