

Talk With Tales For Children (TWiTCH)

Evidence, Theory and Impact

Introduction and background

The National Literacy Trust (NLT) have partnered with Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) to scale and deliver Talk With Tales for Children (TWiTCH). TWiTCH is an evidence based early years professional development programme that combines dialogic reading of stories and playful interactions to improve language outcomes and reasoning skills for 3–4 year olds.

SHU have delivered 3 phases of TWiTCH including a EEF pilot, and are now running an EEF [Efficiency trial](#)

Independently evaluated by Durham University the [EEF pilot evaluation report](#) of the pilot study showed positive outcomes for both practitioners and children.

‘...’with practitioners’ quantitative and qualitative data suggesting that the TWiTCH programme contributed to their increased knowledge and confidence in supporting children’s language development, and to changes in practice both during storytelling and general practice. Practitioners reported observing improvements in children’s communication, language, vocabulary, use of reasoning language, and confidence to contribute in a group setting, which they attributed to the programme. Practitioners felt that taking part in TWiTCH led children to have a better understanding of—and ability to retell—stories’

The National Literacy Trust have secured funding for 3 years to deliver the TWiTCH programme to 240 settings across the country working within targeted localities to respond to areas of need and inequalities in language development for vulnerable children.

The Need

There is a wealth of research and evidence which highlights the importance of story sharing and high-quality adult interactions which positively impact early language development and literacy skills. Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) demonstrate that the quality of adult to child interactions is one of the most significant in-setting factors influencing early language development. [High-quality interactions | EEF](#). Storytelling and shared reading activities have consistently been shown to improve children’s language comprehension skills. [The importance of reading in early years education | EEF](#)

However, the vocabulary gap between wealthier and poorer children is already apparent at 18 months of age (Fernald, Marchman & Weisleder, 2013) and, by the age of 5, the gap can be as much as 19 months (The Sutton Trust, 2017). This significantly affects a child's later literacy and their ability to learn, and increases the risk of their developing behavioural and mental health problems later in life (Law et al., 2017). Highlighting the need to continue to focus support in the early years and increase children's exposure to positive language and shared story experiences.

Why TWiTCH?

'The first few years of a child's life are hugely important in shaping their outcomes – both in the shorter term and later in life. TWiTCH focuses on improving children's outcomes through interactive reading and teaching through collaborative talk. There is strong evidence that interactive reading can improve language and communication in the early years.

The pilot evaluation of TWiTCH showed evidence of promise, with practitioner data indicating increased knowledge and confidence, as well as changes to storytelling and general practice to support children's language development. Practitioners observed improvements in children's language, vocabulary, reasoning, group confidence, and story retelling, which they attributed to the TWiTCH programme.

Early Years communication and language remain a key priority, and this programme addresses the need for professional development and coaching in this area. This efficacy trial will test the impact of this programme in a larger number of settings. Talk With Tales for Children (TWiTCH) – trial | EEF

1.Supporting the Best Start in Life (BSIL) :

The TWiTCH programme aims to reduce inequalities in language development for the most disadvantage children across areas of high deprivation through coaching practitioners to increase confidence in using dialogic strategies which have shown to strengthen children's language and communication skills.

This is in line with raising the quality of practice through evidence-based interventions and support to provide the 'golden thread' of high-quality evidence to underpin the training, support and development for people working in the early years' *Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life, DfE, 2025*

2.Evidence based EY Professional Development:

Sheffield Hallam University are currently running an EEF Efficacy Trial from 2026-27 following a successful EEF Pilot and the [evaluation report](#) showed positive outcomes.

TWITCH:

- Contributes to the overall development of high-quality practice and teaching in early years.
- Trains practitioners to develop further skills to ensure book sharing is purposeful and engaging.
- Upskills practitioners to plan and carefully scaffold language and narrative skills.
- Provides a framework to support practitioners but is flexible enough that practitioners can adapt the programme to support individual children.
- Builds a team of knowledgeable practitioners who can use the skills from the TWITCH programme across a variety of everyday situations.
- Provides opportunity for a TWITCH champion to develop leadership skills within the setting and drive good practice across the provision.
- Provides a structure for new and less experienced staff to ensure consistency of good quality practice across the setting.
- Brings books and story sharing back to the heart of high quality practice

2.Improving GLD outcomes and school readiness:

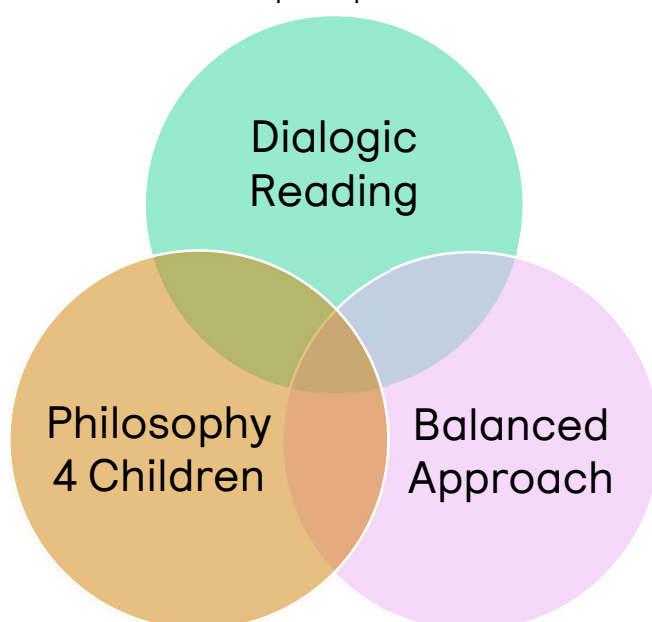
TWITCH provides:

- Opportunities for practitioners to support children to develop key language and communication skills, allowing children to be ready to thrive within a school environment, children will not just be school ready but reading ready!
- Support for children to develop expressive language skills in particular sequencing and narrative skills through retelling of traditional tales.
- Support for children to develop and deepen skills over time through playful and interactive repetition and revisiting of the story.

- Skills children need to become confident readers start in the early years... these include listening and attention, remembering, understanding and using language, phonological awareness.
- Opportunities for children to develop key skills in prime areas and early literacy skills set out in the EYFS *'Reading frequently to children, and engaging them actively in stories, non-fiction, rhymes and poems, and then providing them with extensive opportunities to use and embed new words in a range of contexts, will give children the opportunity to thrive. Through conversation, storytelling and role play, where children share their ideas with support and modelling from their teacher, and sensitive questioning that invites them to elaborate, children become comfortable using a rich range of vocabulary and language structures'* EYFS – Communication and Language Educational Outcomes
- Opportunities to develop understanding of narrative and story sequencing skills in preparation for later literacy skills and story writing. Before you can tell a story, you need to have explored and played with stories, their characters and structures, building language and narrative skills.
- Strengthening early years practice and places importance of developing early language and communication skills *'placing a strong focus on communication and language, which underpin all 7 areas of learning and development and are crucial for later success, including academic achievement and good health and wellbeing'* Ofsted Early years inspection toolkit
- Supports children to develop sustained shared thinking and using language to explore concepts and reasoning. Skills that are needed to develop emotional literacy and support in the management of the emotions and behaviour. *'Through supported interaction with other children, they learn how to make good friendships, co-operate and resolve conflicts peaceably. These attributes will provide a secure platform from which children can achieve at school and in later life'* EYFS – PSED Educational Outcome

Programme principles and theory

TWiTCH has been developed to address the inequalities in language developmental outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged children and uses key principles and theory at the heart of its core principles;



Dialogic Reading (DR)

‘Young children entering school with poor oral vocabulary skills may be “doubly disadvantaged.” Their poor oral vocabulary skills will likely impede their attempts to become proficient readers while also possibly increasing the frequency of their problem behaviours. Dialogic Reading is a scientifically validated shared storybook reading intervention that is known to boost at risk children’s oral vocabulary skills. As such, use of Dialogic Reading is one potential way to help children avoid both later reading failure and the negative outcomes associated with poor behaviour.’
(Morgan & Meier, 2018)’ *TWiTCH Practitioner Handbook*

TWiTCH uses the dialogic reading (DR) approach. The programme has been designed to support practitioners in using structured and guided conversations to talk about the story in order to support the development of children’s vocabulary, expressive language development and thinking and reasoning skills.

During the 3 week story cycles, practitioners will scaffold children's receptive and expressive language through repeated story sharing experiences to understand the story structure and narrative sequence. Practitioners will facilitate this through practical and playful interactions and using careful open ended questioning prompts to include;

- what and where questions (describing),
- how and when questions (retelling and predicting)
- why, what if.. (justification and inference)

Practitioners will use their knowledge of the child's level of understanding to pitch questions appropriate to their stage of development. Questions shared within the toolkit are a guide for practitioners and reflect the levels of questioning to support verbal reasoning skills set out in the Blanks Language Scheme (Blank, Rose and Berlin, 1978)

Practitioners also support the development of thinking and reasoning skills by facilitating and modelling open ended questions to reflect on children's own experiences and relate to the moral dilemmas within each story.

'Throughout the programme, practitioners and the children work together to think about and have good conversations about the stories' (TWiTH Practitioner Handbook) Developing opportunities for sustained shared thinking "an episode in which two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative, with both parties contributing and developing the thinking" (Sylva et al., 2004) a key aspect set out within the EYFS and characteristics of effective learning.

Philosophical dialogic pedagogy

In week 2 of the story cycles, practitioners are encouraged to use a range of playful interaction strategies to begin to help children explore 'big ideas' and moral dilemmas within the story and to talk about and reflect on their experiences.

The focus for this part of the programme is to help build children's abstract language and thinking skills.

Influenced by the **Philosophy for Children (P4C)** pedagogy, week 2 incorporates opportunities for practitioners to model and engage children in exploring dilemmas

and big ideas (such as good/bad) in stories and to employ facilitative questioning (such as why, what if) to develop children's language and reasoning.

Using distancing prompts (such as 'what if) is a highly valuable skill because evidence shows that when practitioners/adults 'think together with children about experiences removed from everyday experiences, language and vocabulary is strengthened".

A 'Balanced Approach' to Professional Development

The TWITCH programme follows the 'balanced approach' identified as effective practice is sustaining long lasting impacts and influencing change in practice as set out in The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) [Guide-to-Effective-Professional-Development-in-the-Early-Years.pdf](#)

'There is substantial evidence that shows the importance of supporting professional development through a 'balanced approach' that encompasses four key areas:

- A. Build knowledge*
- B. Motivate educators*
- C. Develop teaching techniques*
- D. Embed practice'*

The TWITCH Programme builds knowledge through initial training, resources, videos and guidance, **motivates educators** through engaging and practical activities which can be threaded into everyday practice, **develops teaching techniques** through bespoke coaching for each setting and **embeds practice** through TWITCH champion support and networks alongside continuous reflective practice.