

Early intervention and multi-agency work are two of the key themes of the current Government vision for SEN. Here, **Karen Unwin** describes a model project aimed at supporting young children with complex communication difficulties

The Early Communication and Autism Pilot (ECAP) was developed following a series of meetings involving professionals from a range of agencies concerned with improving services for young children with complex communication difficulties and their families. It was inspired by an action research project that had been carried out locally by The Early Years Diagnostic Centre (a facility operated by the Nottingham Regional Society for Adults and Children with Autism, NoRSACA). This project had reported very positive outcomes for two- and three-year-olds with autism, using what became known as the Frameworks for Communication approach.

ECAP is a genuine multi-agency partnership involving NoRSACA,

Nottinghamshire LEA, health services and social services and benefited from initial funding from the DfES small funds programme when it began in September 2001. The pilot aims to support young children (aged under four at the time of the initial referral) with complex, communication difficulties, their families and early years or school settings. The vast majority of these children come within

the autistic spectrum and therefore have difficulties with communication, social understanding and interaction and being flexible in their play and behaviour. A diagnosis of autism is not essential for access to the service.

Before the creation of ECAP there were services in place for these children, but all of the agencies were concerned about the intensity and co-ordination of the support being provided, particularly with an increasing number of children with a diagnosis of ASD.

Access to ECAP

ECAP is managed by an multi-agency Steering Group, which has representatives from all the key agencies. ECAP has a very high profile locally and the Steering Group is particularly conscious of monitoring and evaluating the outcome of the intervention. This is done by questionnaires distributed to families and schools as well as keeping

Sharing support



data on the developmental profiles and progress of the children. In addition, an independent evaluation has been commissioned from Sheffield Hallam University, which has a special research and teaching role in the field of autism.

Referrals to ECAP are received by a Consultancy Panel, which meets monthly and comprises professionals from NoRSACA, inclusion support service, speech and language therapy, educational psychology and a consultant paediatrician. They are a committed and influential group of people who have a particular expertise and interest in communication difficulties and autism. I was appointed by the Steering Group to my post as Specialist Teacher in charge of ECAP in September 2001.

The ECAP service

The service is now delivered by four practitioners, working from an office in one of the NoRSACA premises, who are guided and supported by the steering group. The ECAP team comprises two specialist



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teachers (seconded from the LEA) and two specialist teaching assistants (seconded from the specialist school run by NoRSACA). We have diverse professional backgrounds but all have a special interest in autism and have undergone specialist training in this area.

The service provides:

- Weekly home visits to work with the child and family
- Booklets specifically written for parents giving advice and strategies to use with their children
- Parent/carer workshops delivered over a period of 8-10 weeks
- Support, advice and training to early years settings and schools

The home visits

During the visits we carry out assessments based on play activities. We develop interactive play routines with the children and encourage the parents to copy and extend these routines. We carry out joint home visits with speech and language

therapists, educational psychologists and with staff from early years settings. This is an excellent way of working. It is supportive to all those working with the child and family and enables us to work together and set joint targets. Parents have valued this way of working. A parent whose child is on the pilot recently said, "We are now able to work together on the same agreed targets."

We will sometimes video the parent during the play sessions and then review the video to look at the way the parent and child are interacting and communicating with each other. Through this method we can praise and celebrate the things that are going well, thus increasing the parent's confidence. We can also make suggestions and set targets for areas that need extra input and practice. The home visits last approximately two hours and are weekly during term time. We are able to support the families well because of our knowledge and expertise in the field of autism (Below are two quotes taken from parents who took part in the evaluation carried out by Sheffield Hallam University)

"Teacher's marvellous – knows all about autism so anything I asked she knew."

"Through the teacher's experience of working with other children she was able to tell me things."

We also give the parents/carers emotional support, advice on behavioural difficulties and information on local services. We can



discuss any concerns with him has proved to be invaluable. It is very reassuring for the parents/carers and for us as a team to have regular access to a specialist with extensive expertise in the area of autism. We can also contact the consultancy teacher for autism based within the inclusion support service of the LEA for extra help and advice. These additional experts provide a unique support system for families on the pilot and for the professionals delivering the service.

The booklets

A series of booklets based on a successful research project carried out at The Early Years Diagnostic Centre is given to all parent/carers who attend the parent workshops or receive the home visits. The books are very user friendly and provide lots of practical advice and strategies for parents to use at home with their children. It is also a useful resource for early years settings and schools. The ECAP team base their approach on the methods provided in the literature.

Parent/carer workshops

These workshops are held on a Thursday evening over a period of eight weeks to enable both parents to attend and we help to provide childcare if this is needed. They are led by the different services involved in the pilot. This gives them a multi-agency

help them to find placements in early years settings and increase their understanding of how the education service can provide special needs support for their child. We provide them with information so that they are able to make informed choices.

The team has the additional support of Phil Christie, a specialist consultant in autism who is the Director of Child and Educational Services for NoRSACA. We meet with him approximately once a month and discuss any casework issues that are problematic for us, or any questions that the families we work with have asked us to raise. Having the opportunity to

feel and gives a strong message to the parent/carers that all the services are working together to provide support for them and their children. The workshops also enable parents to form friendships and to support each other. The workshops contain information about communication difficulties and autism. The presenters provide advice and practical strategies for parent/carers. We have run three sets of workshops and they have been very well received by parent/carers. When the workshops are completed we ask parent/carers to fill out an evaluation form and these are some of the comments we've received:

"We found the workshops to be excellent in every respect."

"Such a useful informative course – we have really enjoyed it and learned loads."

"I can't begin to tell you how much they have helped us to understand and cope with..."

"I have learnt lots from other parents and speakers."

"I feel far more confident about the whole issue now."

Support, advice and training

The ECAP team provide support, specialist training and advice to early year's settings and to the schools our children attend. A nursery teacher said about the input: "It's wonderful to at last have somebody with some skills coming into the facility to work with staff that perhaps have never had the opportunity of working with a child with autism." We are very proactive in ensuring that all the professionals involved with the child meet regularly with the family to plan and review targets. Because of our high level of input to the families and the schools we are often the first to know when sensitive situations/issues are beginning to develop between an early years setting/school and the parent/carers. We are able to take on the role of negotiator during these difficult times. We actively support children during transitions, mainly from early years settings into schools. These times can be particularly stressful for all those



involved and we hope that with our extra input we can make a positive difference.

Strengths

The strengths of the pilot are manifold. It brings together a multi-agency approach under one umbrella. This enables the service to be planned more effectively and efficiently. It provides professionals with differing perspectives, an arena in which to discuss, plan and review service delivery. There is genuine partnership work from referral (via the steering group and consultancy panel) through to the daily 'hands on' delivery from the ECAP team. This is also apparent in the multi-agency approach provided in the parent workshops.

An important element for many families has been that the Nottingham Regional Society for Adults and Children with Autism has been a main contributor to the pilot. NoRSACA has an excellent reputation in relation to its work with children with autism and their families. This specialist involvement has enhanced parents' trust and faith in our ability as a team to provide a service that is based on in-depth understanding of the needs of their children.

The ECAP team have many years of experience working with children with autism and their families. My experiences have been working with children from two to five in their homes and within local early years settings. My colleagues have worked with older children in specialist provision and including children into mainstream schools. Our differing backgrounds, experiences and knowledge give us a wider base of expertise to refer to and this has proven to be useful as we each have strengths in different areas.

ECAP has entered its third year of existence. It has undergone two evaluations carried out by Sheffield Hallam University, both of which were extremely positive. The main areas of strength highlighted by these evaluations were:

- An increase in parental confidence in managing their child and supporting them with their education and development programmes.
- An increased communication and sharing of expertise between health, the local

Case Study James McCulloch

James was the first child to receive the input provided under the pilot. He was 3 years 9 months when I began my home visits. James was diagnosed with autism when he was approximately 3 years and 6 months at Nottingham City Hospital. At that time he attended a private nursery for eight sessions a week and continued at this placement until he went into school full time (January 2003). James had an excellent relationship with his key worker at nursery, Karen Duffield. She was extremely supportive to the family and was very positive about the input from ECAP. This involved regular IEP meetings at the nursery and Karen and I worked together so that the targets on James' home programme and those on his IEP were related, if we felt that was appropriate. James has a younger brother called Ali.

James received 32 home/teaching visits each lasting 2 hours. In the sessions we (mum, Ali and myself) tried to engage and involve James as we played interactively. James also carried out more structured activities sitting on a chair at a table in the kitchen. In addition to the home support programme, I visited his nursery placement for IEP meetings, observations and to give the staff guidance and support in total 8 times during a 15-month period.

Enthusiastic

From the moment James was accepted onto the pilot both parents were very enthusiastic about the input. They followed the targets set in the home programmes and attended all of the parent workshops. The workshops enabled them to form a friendship with another family whose child is on the pilot, and these two families continue to meet on a regular basis. The family were extremely committed to working with James and keen to try out the strategies and ideas I suggested and because of this the partnership worked very effectively.

Mr and Mrs McCulloch visited a selection of schools before deciding on the

school that they wanted James to attend. I was involved in some of the discussions relating to school placement and was able to offer impartial advice without recommending a particular school. I had my first meeting with James' receiving school's SENCO ten months before James entered school. We then had a planning meeting for James the term before he was admitted into the school. Mr and Mrs McCulloch visited a selection of schools before deciding on this particular mainstream school. They felt that the head teacher was very welcoming and had a good understanding of autism. They liked the small size of the school and its calm atmosphere – these factors they felt would be key in enabling James to feel secure and to settle happily in his new environment. James carried out his initial visit to school in October 2002 accompanied by his mum and Karen, his key worker from the nursery. Karen or his mum then took James for a visit to school every week until the Christmas holidays.

James commenced school full-time in January 2003. James was allocated ten hours support time a week from a teaching assistant based at the school. He developed a good relationship with his class teacher and with his teaching assistant. I visited mum every two weeks and the school every two weeks and I continued with this level of support until the end of the spring term. By this time James was settling well into his new school and the school staff and mum were happy with the progress James was making. During my visits to observe





James at school he always seemed relaxed and happy. He was often playing and working alongside his peers asking them questions and joining in with the class activities. In the summer term I reduced my visits to the school and to James' home to monthly.

Changes

During my time with James and his family I noticed many changes in James' personality and development. When I first went in to play with James at home it was extremely hard work to engage him in the interactive play sessions/songs. He would often protest, withdraw and become upset. The last time I went in to play with James he requested the interactive singing and dancing first. We played a follow the leader type game using actions and the music. The four of us took turns being the leader and copying each other. James joined in, happily leading and then following the lead of others. He was very interactive, tried extremely hard (with actions that were really difficult for him – hopping for example) and was so flexible. James has made a vast amount of progress in so many ways and has made great strides with his social interaction. During my final term of home visits James would greet me when I arrived at the house and showed pleasure and excitement that I had come to play. He started to use my name and to instigate simple conversations with me and also with other adults and children that he knew. He started to ask questions when he was uncertain about how to carry out a specific task. He used his eye contact with more social understanding and had much more confidence. He was happier, less stressed and more relaxed. Just before the end of the summer term mum

telephoned me and was really excited. She had received the end-of-year school report for James and it was so positive. The head teacher had written, "A super report from a super pupil. We are delighted to have him in our school". Mrs McCulloch was extremely happy and relieved. She felt the report confirmed that the family had made the right choice of school for James.

It is often a worrying time for many parents when their children start full-time school but when the child concerned also has autism the parents need to feel confident that they have made the right choice. They need the opportunity to talk with school staff to share their concerns and also to celebrate their child's progress and successes. The family have been welcomed into the school and have felt that they are partners with the school staff in enabling James to receive an education that suits his specific needs.

Personally it has been a really positive experience to be given the opportunity to support James so intensely from the age of 3 years 9 months up to the end of the Foundation Stage (James was 5 years 7 months when I ended my support.) The pilot allows practitioners, because of the limited number of families they work with, extra time to carry out the intervention, support the family and to provide advice and input to the early years settings and the receiving school the child goes on to attend. My work with the family and school finished at the end of the Summer term 2003 when James moved into Key Stage 1.

Mr and Mrs McCulloch have asked me to come and see them if ever I'm in the area and I may take them up on that one day soon. Working so closely with a family over a long period of time enabled me to build a strong and trusting relationship with them. Mr McCulloch told me that he regarded me as a friend as well as a professional. When he said this to me I felt tremendously proud and also privileged that I had been given the time and opportunity to provide this enhanced level of support and to witness the fruits of my labour in James' improvement.

education authority, the Nottingham Regional Society for Adults and Children with Autism, and social services.

- An increase in confidence and understanding of nursery key workers and school staff. School staff valued the support given by ECAP which enabled them to identify the child's areas of strength and challenge.
- A spirit of shared learning between parent and professional and professionals of different disciplines.
- An increase in parental confidence in the ability of the mainstream school to meet their child's needs.
- Parents believed that the support from ECAP had contributed to the successful inclusion of their children into mainstream schools.
- School staff reported that a carefully planned transition facilitated by ECAP had been undertaken.

ECAP at the present time is delivered only in the south of Nottinghamshire. However because of its success, pilots are now established to begin a similar service in two additional areas of the county. This means that during the academic year (September 2004 – July 2005) the ECAP model will be used across the whole of Nottinghamshire.

This multi-agency approach has also been used over the past three years to develop:

- An early years training package which has been used to train early years practitioners, teaching assistants and teachers in early years settings and mainstream schools who are supporting and working with children who have autism.
- An ASD information booklet for parents and carers.

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The photographs show James McCulloch working and playing with fellow pupils in his mainstream school.