# Realising the Potential: Early Childhood Forum

## How can I help language flourish?

## Session transcript

This podcast is one of a series of recordings made at Realising the Potential Early Childhood Forum, presented by the Department of Education and Training on Friday the 8th of June 2018 at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Our breakout session on How Can I Help Language Flourish will feature the following speakers:

* Dr Anne Kennedy, Consultant, Trainer, Writer and Researcher in early childhood education;
* Associate Professor Patricia Eadie from Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne; and
* Professor Sheena Reilly, Pro Vice Chancellor Health at Griffith University.

## David Worland

Good morning everybody. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy weeks to join us at today’s conference. My name is David Worland and three weeks ago I was appointed CEO at the Early Learning Association Australia. So I’ve also had some time in the sector. You know, it’s all very new and exciting for me at the moment. I’m thrilled to be here.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we’re meeting today, the people of the Kulin nation. I would also like to pay my respects to their elders past and present and their elders from other communities who may be here today. And I think specifically to, you know, speaking on behalf of ELAA, the opportunity to be co-branded with the event and the long-term support of the Department for ELAA as an Association we deeply appreciate that, so thanks on that front.

I’d like to welcome you all today to the first concurrent session. And it’s focused on how we can help language flourish. We know that language development is a critical part of child’s overall development. It contributes to their ability to manage emotions and communicate feelings, establish relationships, and to learn to read and write. And language is both a vehicle for and a contributor to secure attachment.

Research shows that parents and early childhood practitioners play a crucial role in improving child language and communicating skills. The quantity and quality of language that children are exposed to, will have implications for their language and long-term development.

In this session today we are going to hear from three experts. They will each share their thoughts on how early childhood professionals can help language flourish.

I’d also like to remind everyone that we have an active social media present at the conference, and whilst we’d like you to turn off your phones and keep them silent, we have @detvic on Twitter, and I encourage you to share your conversations using the hashtags #realisingthepotential; #earlychildhoodforum; and #vicedu.

It’s time now to introduce our speakers. I would like to give a warm welcome to Dr Anne Kennedy who is a Consultant, Trainer, Writer and Researcher in early childhood education. We will then be welcoming Associate Professor Patricia Eadie, Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, followed by Professor Sheena Riley, Pro Vice Chancellor at Griffith University.

To maximise time I won’t be coming back to the stage until the presenters have done their presentations, but at that time we’ll open the floor up to some Q&A. So without further ado could you welcome Anne.

## Anne Kennedy

Good morning, lovely to be here with you. And this is the speed dating session on language development because I’ve got 15 minutes which is not much time. But I’m thrilled to be here and thrilled to be talking about such an important topic.

Helping children’s language to flourish requires those things. It needs knowledgeable professionals, collaborative planning, intentional teaching, and ongoing monitoring and assessment. And I feel like I was on the right page when I heard Sharon speak this morning in highlighting those four important elements.

It’s very important for early childhood professionals to be knowledgeable about the ways children learn additional languages, particularly in a country like Australia where we have hundreds of community languages spoken. And many of you work in services where children speak two or three or more languages. So the Victorian Framework reminds us that we have to understand about additional language learning and what that means for us as educators or professionals working with children.

One of the key pieces of research that’s come out of early language development, and I’m sure Trish is going to talk a bit more about this, is this notion of what we call serve and return. Think about the French Open, lots of serving lots of returning, and that’s what language should be like when we’re working with babies, toddlers, pre-schoolers and school aged children. So they serve we return, they return we serve. And it’s that two-way rich interaction that makes a huge difference to how children learn, how their language will flourish.

When you have the opportunity to be with a child and you’re engaged with that child, there’s some sort of little tips that can help you and can help ensure that those interactions are really meaningful, and they include clarifying and extending the children’s talk with some comments, some questions, using open-ended questions, adding your own ideas - oh I was thinking whatever. Thinking aloud, I wonder what would happen if you - showing real interest and enjoyment. And allow unhurried time, I guess that’s the hardest one to do is to find that unhurried time, but it’s so critical. We have to build that time in.

I can remember when I was a kindergarten teacher, the hallmark of a good kindergarten teacher in those days was how many tabletop activities you had, and the more you had the better the teacher. But what that meant was myself and my co-educator ran around like chooks with our heads chopped off, putting out the spot fires, trying to keep all the activities tickety-boo. Pack away lots of those activities, have some rich open-ended materials and you will have that unhurried time to spend talking in meaningful conversations with young children.

I guess the message is always loud and clear on this, but we do need to read to children. Their story is just beginning and they can benefit so much from daily exposure to books, shared, read, told, repeated, favourites again and again. Those of us who have read bedtime stories to children and grandchildren we get sick of them. True? And if you try and short-change them they let you know. They know you’ve missed important bits. That’s really important. That’s a real foundation for early literacy to know how a book works, to know about the language of the book, to know about the characters in the book and how the plots work. So read to me every day it’s so important.

I think when we’re planning for young children we need to think about group times particularly. We need to plan for one-to-one time. We need to plan for two at a time. And we need to plan for small groups. And I would minimise the amount of large group times together. I know there is a purpose for that and there is a time for that, but particularly for under threes I don’t see much value at all in meeting and bringing them all together, because the talk time will be your time not their time. So that’s something to really think about.

You need to ask yourself in your setting who does all the talking and how do you know that. And if we came in and we filmed you, and video record you, what would we - whose voice would we hear the most? Would it be your voice dominating? Or would it be the children’s chatter with the adults interacting richly and frequently but not dominating.

There is a suggestion that I saw from some American literature, that we could replace teachers with a device. Well that’s a worry, because the device can’t do the rich quality and quantity of interactions and conversations and talk. So we need to check that we don’t run the risk of being replaceable with a device if we don’t do that kind of unhurried talk, small talk with young children.

An excellent way to promote talking for children is to use puppets. And you can use puppets with very young children and right through into the school. They encourage creative language. They encourage thinking. They encourage concepts and vocab. And they can be very good for children who are finding - who are learning English as an additional language too because they can switch in and out of their home language and into English more confidently.

I think you need to build a toolkit of language games. When I trained initially, and it’s so long ago, we had to have a whole folder completely full of language - what we called language games. And I don’t - that’s not the work now of universities, you don’t have time for that kind of practical work, but I would encourage every educator and professional to have a toolkit of language games which start off simply with babies and toddlers, face games, finger plays, those sorts of things. And then build up into other more complex games like magic bag. So we had something in the bag and you say, ‘I’ve got something in my bag and it’s round and it’s soft’. And let the child have a guess, no, it’s not that, it’s round and soft and it’s got two ears. And let the child - and that sort of thing. And I went shopping, great one to play in the car too, I went shopping and I bought milk. And the next person says I went shopping and I bought milk and carrots. And just see how far - good for memory, good for cognitive flexibility, but also good for language. And charades, another good game. I’ve just listed that small number but you need a whole repertoire that you can draw on at all the - across the day, across the week, across the year, with any age group.

I think we need to look for language opportunities in every day. Somebody sent me this photo. I was asking for a photo and I thought it was a child on a poker machine. I really did. I got such a fright. I thought why have they sent me one of a child on a poker machine. I don’t think I can use that. I don’t think that’s appropriate. But it’s actually a child at the checkout and, you know, which I’ve just, actually I have to confess, I’ve only just learnt to do because I got frustrated with the queues at Coles. It’s actually quite clever. And our children are growing up with this of course, they’re digital natives, they understand all this technology. They’re swiping when they’re bubbies. Hand them a phone and they’ll swipe and they’ll do this sort of thing. And it’s great for literacy, good for language, particularly if you engage with them. So cooking, shopping, washing clothes, everything has potential for language and for interactions.

Dramatic plays have been at kind of at the bedrock of early childhood program and curriculum. And it’s there for a whole lot of reasons, it’s why early founders of early childhood, the kind of gurus of our sector way, way back, why they promoted it, because they knew it could develop children holistically, particular in language and literacy. I think it’s hard as an educator to find the balance. You do have to find the balance between being in that play and supporting the language and the learning, and being out of the play and doing the deep observation that Sharon was talking about this morning, where we really observe children and listen and hear what they’re saying, and what they know, and how we might then build on that and share that with their families.

We have to encourage the story lines and the plots, the characters, the concepts, and the vocab. Sometimes the play gets stale or repetitive, or the superheros start to get quite aggressive. Though I wouldn’t ban the superheroes but I would rechannel or reframe the play so that it’s productive.

I remember having a friend who was teaching when the - is it the Ninja Turtles were in - and she had no idea what they were but the children were playing it everywhere. And as fast as she banned it, it would erupt somewhere else. So she thought well maybe I’d better watch it. So she watched it, and she rang me and she said, ‘Anne, did you know the superheros, the Turtles, were actually goodies’? She said, ‘I thought they must have been baddies because all the children at the kindy go around going arr-arr, like this’. So she used that very carefully. She just sat near the play when it was erupting and she said to them, ‘so what would Donatello do’? And the children, they were really shocked because she came into their world of that superhero play, and they didn’t know what was going on. How did she know about Raphael and Donatello and whoever else was in it? But that enabled her to redirect that play into something positive. How would they help? Superheroes help they don’t destroy. Well not the ones we want at kindergarten or childcare anyway. So dramatic play, we just have to hold onto that as a really important foundation for good work across the curriculum.

Some people worry that digital technology is one of the reasons why we’ve got an epidemic of language delay, and it probably is one of the reasons. But it also, of course, can support language learning and development. Can’t believe that I’m a great talker and I can’t talk. It all depends. I think the question, when people ask me I say well it all depends. It depends on the age. It depends on the apps. It depends on what they’re doing and when they’re doing it. It depends if we’re with them, if the adults are with them and engaging in the talk as they engage in digital technology. So we certainly should not be frightened of it, we should be - again that’s being knowledgeable as a professional, finding out what’s the research say? How can I support families with this issue too? And how can I ensure that when we’re using digital technology there’s plenty of talk happening as well?

And I think we’ve often avoided this in early childhood, in the sector before school, about thinking about phonemic awareness and its importance in literacy learning. And we shouldn’t, because it’s absolutely foundational to good literacy, and it begins with that learning about sounds. And baby’s learn to recognise their mother’s voice when they’re in utero, probably their father’s voice or other partner’s voices that they hear a lot. And they know what sounds they like, and they know what sounds they don’t like. So that starts in utero.

So certainly at birth they’re very tuned in and very ready for sound and for talk. And you know, there’s fabulous books where you can see photos of newborn babies gazing at a parent or an adult, a carer, gazing. And mimicking the mouth. I mean it gives me goose bumps to see stuff like that. So we should be building on that intense interest to be social, to engage with others, to talk with others, to mimic our faces, and to mimic the noises we make.

I can clearly remember being in a room down at my beach house, and there are people here who have been to my beach house, it’s a great gathering place Janet isn’t it? And all my sisters were there, and can you imagine the noise, and I had a baby grandson. And the louder we talked the noisier he got. And we were, what’s he doing? But he could hear that loudness and the laughter, and he - it just inspired him, and he just couldn’t stop. Then he got so worked up, and then I had to do my good early childhood calm the baby down trick. But it was just - it really hit me then. I thought I must have missed so much of my own babies, but I hope all the babies and toddlers that I work with, and that I support educators to work with, get, you know, have that support and understanding of how important it is to respond to sounds. That tuning into discriminating between sounds, qualities of sound, all those things, we do not have to get into formal phonic education in pre-school or childcare. But we will have children who are ready for some of that, who will say that’s the sound in my name, or that’s the letter of my mum’s name, and we should respond positively to that. But we really do need to do a lot more work in sound discrimination. A lot more work in that, and that will lay the foundations then for that more formal approach when they come to school.

These presentations I believe are going to be made available, and I have listed some resources. The Department itself has some fantastic stuff. FKA Children’s Services, marvellous for resources to do with community languages, books, plus consultancy can help you. Harvard Project Zero fabulous for language development and other areas. The Raising Children Network good, very practical resources for educators and for families, and the VCAA of course also has some good rich resources. So we have to keep up to date, we have to be knowledgeable, and these days there’s no shortage of resources. And I should add also, ‘cause I’m sitting looking at ECA, but ECA also has wonderful resources that I’ve been part of, and I’m proud to be part of.

There’s no shortage of resources it’s a matter of finding them, and making sure that you and your staff team are up-to-date with current ideas related to language development. And then we will be able to help children’s language to flourish. Thank you.

## Patricia Eadie

Just while we’re talking about resources, I should put in a plug for the lip language, or Literacy Teaching Toolkit, that has been launched for the primary years, and is very close to being launched for early childhood. And that contains a whole other set of resources around early language and literacy development. So that’s something to keep an eye out for.

I’d like to acknowledge how easy it is to come after Lynn Kagan’s speech this morning, and now Anne’s, because I guess what I get the opportunity to do is to unpack some of those strategies and some of the things that have been spoken about already.

So I think Lynn talked a lot about systems, and really this is where I wanted to kind of ground where I was coming from this morning. And I just want to do a little bit to start around child development more generally. And then I’m going to make some links to why language and why early childhood educators.

So it’s important to realise that obviously child development takes place in a nested structure. And developmental outcomes are the result of progressively more complex interactions between the child, their carers, the environment and the cultural context. And I think Lynn spoke to this system, and the fact that what we are talking about today cuts across both education, health and economics, in terms of our investments in the foundations of child outcomes, providing high quality early learning and development opportunities for all children, and by doing that we maximise health and wellbeing in adulthood, as well as children’s sense of themselves and identity.

We need to acknowledge that there’s great variation in the environments in which children live and grow. And it’s the interaction between genes and the environment that has the most significant impact on early development. And I know Sheena’s going to draw this point out a bit more.

Importantly, as Anne mentioned, play and human relationships form the common context for children’s learning. And that’s underpinned by secure attachment, and this relational piece, the responsive relationships and stimulating language and learning environments. And the platform for advancing children’s language is based in these relationships. So that’s really at the heart of what I want to speak about this morning.

Why does language get a Guernsey in one of these sessions? Well, I think there’s probably a whole range of reasons for that. But the really important thing, is that language we need to think of as the currency of learning. Language is both an outcome for children, but it is the tool by which they learn. And it underpins many, many of our skills as growing children and adults, and I’ve just put a few there.

Importantly, as Anne was just touching on, language links to literacy. It forms the foundations for good literacy development. And as children get older, those two things, language and literacy become increasingly inter-related. And language, not surprisingly with that list, is a really key predictor of achievement, and children’s social emotional outcomes.

So how is language learned? As adults we don’t actually teach language directly, particularly not to typically developing children. But as adults, we provide the input that’s adapted the child’s level of attention and comprehension. We reinforce their attempts, their early attempts to talk, and that encourages them to talk more. And we provide models and repetitions and expansions of their utterances.

This perspective is referred to as interactionist in the academic literature. But what it actually means is that children, these things will not be a surprise to this audience, that children are active learners. They’re predisposed for learning and particularly for learning language. Thinking and talking, watching and social interactions, is what enables children to make sense of their world and construct meaning. But the environment exposes the child to different purposes and contexts of language.

And research demonstrates that it’s the human interaction between young children and other people that advances their learning and development.

So Anne was right, we can’t be replaced. The human piece is really important. And I’ve got a link there that you will be able to see through the slides. I’m not going to show, this is a Ted Talk by a professor in the United States, but it speaks to the issue that Anne brought up about children recognising sounds and identifying sounds very early on in their lives.

So I’m particularly, if you haven’t already worked out, interested in the way interactions support language development in very young children.

Video screened featuring interaction between an educator and an infant who are blowing bubbles together and reacting to the activity with sounds and discussion.

When I show that video, we can often have 15 minute, 30 minute conversations about all of the things that were happening in that short piece. But it what it goes to - that little infant was 12 months old, just 12 months old, and it showed the intentionality. There were key features that were happening in that interaction. She regulated behaviour, and if I’d shown you the whole thing, she got even faster at handing the bubbles back to get more bubbles. She was requesting something to happen. She was interacting socially. She was smiling. There was, and in particular, and what I really want to draw on, is joint attention. That moment when she had the bubbles and she looked at Natasha, and they understood that what that was was bubbles, that was such an important piece of learning. Joint attention, that ability to get another’s attention, to comment on things, even without words to comment, is really at the heart of children’s early learning, and certainly at the heart of their early language learning.

So what comes next? It’s vocabulary. And there are some fundamental elements to vocabulary development. The first is the quantity of vocabulary that children hear at home, and in their early childhood settings. But it’s also about the sophistication of the words children are exposed to, because there are a number of less frequent or rare words, that really add to vocabulary, and the conversational support that we provide to those communication interactions. I haven’t used the phrase here, but Anne used the serve and return. This is about extending conversations, sustaining turns on a topic. They build vocabulary. They take children and us deeper into their learning and expand knowledge.

It sounds easy, it’s actually really, really hard. And to do that well takes a lot of focused attention on being able to do that in terms of adding vocabulary and grammar to what children are saying.

But I just want to drill down a bit into this notion of sophisticated vocabulary. A million words in English, most of us in this room have a vocabulary of about 20,000 words, well maybe not in this room but generally in the population there’s 20,000 words. Very few of those are these low frequency words. So there has been much work done taking into consideration the conversations between mothers and children, pre-schoolers. On average there’s less than 3,000 words in most of those interactions. But importantly, there’s only 23 of those almost 2900 words, are these sophisticated words that build vocabularies. 99% of the vocabulary we use with young children is from the 3,000 most frequently used words.

And it’s really important to understand this balance around quantity and quality, because quantity is important, but sometimes when we raise quantity, what we’re doing is just using those same 3,000 words. And so the balance is to think about how much we’re talking, but how rich that language is for young children’s development.

So when I speak to our teacher candidates at the University of Melbourne, I use this mantra with them. And we’ve all got slightly different ones. Anne had a version of it. But every day, with every child, in every situation language is used and they are opportunities for learning, and we need to maximise those opportunities as much as possible, because increasingly we’ve learnt that learning and development are strongly affected by relatively small shifts in the learning environment.

And I’m not going to go into those different models, but I think for many of you you’ll be aware of the home learning environment programs, the early childhood model programs, that speak to this point. I also imagine most of you will have seen these types of graphs around the 30 million word gap. And these are back from the 1990s in the United States, but they demonstrate that both in the words that children hear, the quantity, and then eventually the children’s own vocabularies are impacted. And there is this spread dependent upon advantage and disadvantage, that piece that Lynn spoke to around equity.

This is Australian data from the AEDC and what you see across the bottom are the most disadvantaged to the least disadvantaged communities, and this is language vulnerability. So across the whole spectrum children can be vulnerable in their language development, but what we see is the more disadvantaged you get the bigger the proportion of children who are vulnerable with their language skills. And we see this as well in their school readiness skills, in the things that are related to both language, concept development, identifying letters and sounds that we’ve already been talking about.

So if we know there are these differences, then it draws the question about equity. And I’m going to pretty much skip over this because I know Lynn dealt with it so well this morning. But the issue here is that we need programs and services and policies that are provided for all children and families, but with a scale and an intensity that’s proportionate to the level of need and vulnerability of individuals. And that’s what’s referred to as proportionate universalism. So all children get it, but you think about who needs more, or who needs something that’s a bit more intense.

I guess it begs the question about quality. And Lynn also spoke to quality this morning. And this is from the work of Collette Tayler and I’m about to show some data from the E for Kids Study which the Victorian and Queensland Departments partnered with NGSE and the University of Queensland to run that study.

But this gives us a sense a window into quality. And the quality that I really want to speak to in the next couple of slides, is the process quality, where the interactions are happening, where the relationships are occurring.

This is the E for Kids data, looking at the classroom assessment scoring system. Class looks at emotional support. It looks at classroom organisation. And it also looks at instructional support. And if we think about those, what we know both from this Victorian and Queensland data, but also this looks incredibly similar to international data, is as a sector we do emotional support and the classroom piece really well. But it speaks to my comment earlier about it.

We think language is easy to do with young children, but it’s actually really quite complex. And when we look at instructional support, around the world, instructional support is lower than those other two.

So, on the back of the E for Kids Study, in 2016 the Department, the Victorian Government, made a commitment to use the research findings that they’d partnered with, to develop policy and inform implementation that would actively support all young Victorian children’s health, learning and development. And out of that came the Every Toddler Talking research or initiative.

I’m going to do this very quickly because I think I’m very close to time. But Every Toddler Talking wanted to strengthen early childhood educator’s practice, to promote all children’s language and communication, identifying that this is a complex piece of work. This is complex work that we do with young children every day. Part of it was to create the opportunity for collaboration between early childhood educators and speech pathologists in particular. And ultimately, the goal is to improve those inequities we see in language and communication outcomes.

As part of the rapid review that was done by the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, the professional learning program that was wrapped, or was within the Every Toddler Talking initiative was Learning Language and Loving It. It’s a program, a manualised program out of the Hanen Centre in Canada. And it actually is a program that, as you will see there, is quite intensive. There’s a lot of professional learning. There’s a lot of individual video coaching that intersperses those professional learning programs.

As part of Every Toddler Talking, the Learning Language and Loving It - can I tell you that’s really hard to say too many times in a talk - but it was the goals there were mapped to the [0:35:42] and to the National Quality Standards. And Learning Language and Loving It embeds the responsivity that we’re looking for. It embeds the extended interactions. It provides opportunities to practice those skills.

And so I wanted to share with you some of the findings from the educators that participated in this initiative and in the research piece around Every Toddler Talking, because it’s really promising.

I’m going orientate you to this slide first. So the solid lines are those services, and those educators who were engaged in Learning Language and Loving It. The dashed line were are set of very generous services who sat still for a while and allowed us to compare their practice to those services who were undertaking Learning Language and Loving It.

There are a number of different versions of class depending upon the rooms you’re going into and observing practice. Class looks at rooms. It doesn’t look at individual educators. It looks at what’s happening in a room in a service. I’ve only got one pointer so I don’t know which way to go. But I’ll try - that’s not the pointer at all.

So before we did anything, what we see along these parts here and - hopefully you can orientate yourself there as well - we’re looking, we’re seeing scores that look almost identical to E for Kids data.

We’ve got mid to high scores in emotional support and classroom organisation. And these low scores around instructional support. About a month or two after Learning Language and Loving It finished, what you see is this rise in instructional support. What we were really excited about was that we don’t have the comparison group here, but we went back another six months later, and on both tools, both versions of the tool, what we see is a continued increase in instructional support, many months after this professional learning package had finished.

So what we’re seeing here is that with targeted professional learning we can enable educators to actually get to this instructional piece, and to be doing it well. And one of the key things that we found - I’m winding up - is that in fact, where we had educators from a room doing this professional learning together it worked best. Having that collegial and kind of buddy in the room with you, to be thinking about what this instructional support might look like.

There are a number of things we could talk about in terms of our key learnings from Every Toddler Talking, but there were some really unexpected outcomes around the support families received once early childhood educators and speech pathologists knew each other. They started - it wasn’t that referrals increased, it was that the referrals and the conversations were more meaningful, they were more targeted, they understood each other better. So there was a lot of really positive impacts of the collaboration and professional learning at a lot of different tiers.

And so I just want to say thank you and leave you with that thought.

## Sheena Reilly

So thank you Trish and Anne, it’s great to follow you both, and also fantastic to follow Lynne’s talk this morning, because I’m hoping that what I’m about to talk about is going to complementary.

So I want to just start by drawing a distinction between speech and language, something that people often don’t do. Speech disorders are really easy to spot because kids are saying sounds in rather unusual ways, or they’re saying words and you can’t understand them. We produce speech by producing sound, and that is shaped by our articulators, your tongue, your lips and so on.

Whereas language is how we convey meaning, and it can be oral, it can be written, gestural, signed, and we also need to think carefully about the fact that we have to understand language that is spoken to us, as well as it being our means of communicating with people.

I also want to set the scene about why there’s been increased recognition and interest in language and literacy. And this is because over the last few years it’s become increasingly recognised that we need good language, and we need to be literate in order to achieve our full potential. And there’s been discussion around the shift from brawn to brain, and I show you what I mean by that in a minute.

And having poor language and literacy 50 or 60 years ago, would not have been viewed as a disability. It would not have been an impediment to employment. But your language and your literacy skills are now highly desirable and they do determine your employment.

So if you have a look at this slide you can see there’s two lines that cross in the middle, and the crossed some time in the fifties. And what you can see is what’s happening to white collar service industries, and a rapid increase in those sorts of jobs over the last 50 to 60 years, versus a decrease in blue collar. And this is what I mean when I talk about the shift from brain to brawn.

Jobs that required brawn were very popular. And they were really a part of what our society was about. That’s really, really shifted. And what employers want now also is very different. That places demands on education, on student outcomes. And I want to bring that right back to the early years and talk about why this is a very important shift in how we think.

So the question that I’ve been asked to address, like the previous speakers, is how can you help language flourish. Well I think there’s three things that you need to do.

First of all you need to understand something about how language develops, what can go wrong, and why all of this matters. And I’ll come back to some of the points that Trish and Anne have made.

The previous speakers have already covered off on some of this, so I’m not going to do it in detail. But there’s a couple of things I really want to emphasise. And I want to draw your attention to pregnancy.

We think about language when kids start to talk, and when they start to put words together. Wrong. Language starts in utero. The auditory pathways in the brain, you heard Anne say this, are already being laid down. Children are orientating to voices. They’re recognising music. They’re recognising all sorts of things in their environment. So that is starting to already sculpture an infant’s brain.

By the time that infant comes into the world, those auditory pathways are ready to be enhanced and enacted, and that’s all happening in that early newborn period. And those very infants, as Anne mentioned, are able to orientate and recognise things that they heard in utero. And we know that through some really fascinating experiments that have been done.

And over the first couple of years of life, as you’ve already heard, the infant’s brain is developing at this unparalleled rate. It is amazing what’s actually happening. And all of that is being shaped by the infant’s early experiences. And this is the same for all development, but it’s particularly relevant for language.

Infants learn by observing, by doing things, by listening to speech and being read to. And when they don’t have those experiences, and they don’t have quality experiences in terms of interaction, they miss a whole load of experiences. So their exposure to quality parent/child interaction, the serve and return that we’ve heard about, play, exposure to books, reading, songs, social communication, all the things that you will hear about all the time are absolutely critical.

By three we heard this morning, that the infant’s brain is pretty well developed. Much of the structure and design is almost complete. It’s not finalised. Development goes on into adolescents, but there’s a lot that already there. So you have a really important role in shaping how these infants end up as competent talkers.

And we know from research, and this is a slide from [0:44:46], that parenting and early childhood education is so influential that it really can moderate the impact of quite significant disadvantage.

Anybody want to guess what this is? Got to be some neuron pathways. Absolutely. That’s exactly what it is. It looks a bit like, you know, electrician’s wires doesn’t it? And you can see how intricate these actually are. And they’re all marked by colour because they’re all doing different things.

And if we move onto the next slide the picture at the bottom is a picture of language connections in the brain. And when you look at something that sophisticated, it is really easy to understand that little things can go wrong that cause quite major problems. And getting the architecture and the sculpture of that brain, and laying down the pathways for that infant, is really, really important, because some of the brain research is suggesting that if you miss some of those critical periods for laying down those pathways, it’s pretty damn difficult to go back and get them set again.

So we all play a really important role in providing the right developmental experiences - sorry I don’t know what’s happening here - and shaping the capacity of that child. And if we don’t that there are life-long impacts, and I’ll come back to that. You have to help build those neuronal connections and the architecture of the brain. And there’s strong evidence that your environment and your experiences shapes those.

So what can go wrong? Well I’ve just told you. It’s an extremely complex process. There’s lots of pathways. So it’s not surprising that things can go wrong at lots of different stages, it’s the nature of language development. And Trish put it beautifully, this is actually a complex process.

So I want to get across the concept of we have to have a process of looking at language over a period of time. We don’t just look at it at one point and say that child is not doing very well therefore so-and-so, or they’re doing okay so we don’t have worry about them ever again. And I’ll show you some data to suggest the danger in doing that.

What we do know is about one in five children unfortunately start school with poor language development, and that means they’re not setup to really embrace their learning fully in the classroom. And that’s data that we’ve generated here, a number of other people in Australia have generated, and also was generated out of the UK and parts of Scandinavia, so we’ve got a problem that we need to fix. Underneath that clearly there’s lots of reasons why some of those children are entering school with insufficient language development, but they’re behind the eight ball immediately in terms of their learning.

So I want to just tell you a little bit about the Early Language in Victoria Study. Trish and I worked on this many years. Somehow she didn’t go grey but I did. And this was a longitudinal study of around 1900 children that were recruited across Melbourne. And I’m only going to just talk about that first phase there, phase one. The little girl that Trish showed you is one of the subjects from this study that we saw at 12 months of age. The kids are now teenagers which is pretty amazing. That’s why I’m grey.

So there are multiple waves of data, and all I’m going to focus on is just some data from these early waves. And you can see from that snapshot slide, we collected data from the parents, we saw the children face-to-face, later we collected data from teachers and so on. We’ve got more data than we know what to do with, but it’s a wonderful dataset to have.

So the first thing I want to talk about is some vocabulary data. Some of you may have seen this, and if you have bear with me. And the first point I want to make is the enormous range that we see in children’s development. And Lynne made that comment this morning.

So we had children at two years of age who had no words, so down this extreme end of the scale. And we also had some pretty precocious children who had hundreds and hundreds of words in their vocabularies at two years of age. On average, children had around 261 words. Girls, you won’t be surprised to see, had more words than boys.

And on average they had around 50, so there was a much bigger range between the girls and boys. And these are all important things that we should be thinking about when we’re looking at children.

We were interested in the children in that sample who might get a label of being late talkers because they didn’t have any words or not enough words. And we wanted to know a little bit more about that group of children.

Now if you consult Dr Google, there’s 350 million articles on late talking, as of last week when I put these slides together, and 79 million them go on to tell you about what to do and when you should worry. And it must be a nightmare for parents and early childhood educators. And they’ve all got these titles here. And you won’t be surprised to know that many of them conflict in the sorts of information that they tell you what to do.

So we wanted to know about these late talkers. We wanted to know how many of them there were. And most importantly, what did it mean for later language development, because this is a major milestone that lots of people hang their hats on.

There were about 20% of the kids who are late talking, and we all gulped and got very worried at the time. And that means that these children have much smaller spoken vocabularies than was average for children of this age. So you can see what that means for boys and girls there compared to the average. And we wanted to know does this predict children going on to have later language problems, because if it does, wow, we’re onto something, we can leap in and do something about this.

But that indicator alone is not a reliable predictor of children having later language problems and I’ll show you why. And I’ll just show you one snapshot of information around the children’s early development trajectories.

So under the two year heading there, you can see the group of children who we classified as late talkers, and you can see the children who were typical talkers at that age. And then you can see what they looked like at four years of age. And the critical take home here, is that not all the children who were late talkers at four were having any problems at four. In fact 50-60% of them were absolutely fine by four years age. So if you were going to put resources into play because you were a late talker at two, you’d probably risk wasting a lot of resources on kids who might not need interventions.

What was really worrying to us, and we did wonder if we’d find this, is that there were a whole heap of kids who were in the typical talking range at two, who actually did have impaired language at four years when we saw them. So they look like they’re doing quite well in the early years, but that changes over time.

So there’s a lot of data that underpins this slide, and I’ve just shown you one small piece of it. We’ve looked at these trajectories later throughout children’s development, and in fact Laura Conway who did some of that work is in the room listening, but trajectory and pathways, whatever word you want to use, is really important. Children can start slow and they can stay behind. They can be behind and they can catch up. They can be on track and stay on track, and that’s the vast majority of children of course. But importantly, children can be on track and then fall behind, different demands on their system later in their life.

So there’s a really important message here about thinking about how we look at language over a period of time, and not take small snapshots.

I was thinking about putting a slide in here on behaviour, and low and behold Pam Snow has just written a wonderful blog on behaviour as a form of communication in young children and in adolescents. And so I’ve just taken the one sentence from her blog which was wonderful, “Don’t overlook the role behaviour plays as a form of communication.” That is after all how children start communicating. The behaviour and the gestures are a very important part before their systems are sophisticated enough to actually produce spoken language.

And remember that many children who are struggling with their language don’t show outwards signs like you see in speech disorder, it can be really hard to actually pick up that some of these children are having problems.

So why does it matter? I’m going to go back to a couple of things that Lynn said this morning, and the previous speakers have picked up, and I just want to hammer home these points. It matters because oral and written language are the foundations by which you learn, that’s how your education proceeds. And we know from longitudinal studies that children who start school with poor language are less likely to be literate and numerate, they’re less likely to finish school and to gain a qualification. The outlook for some of those children can be quite bleak.

We also know that they’re more likely to have problems with behaviour and mental health in the early years, but through adolescence and into adulthood. And unfortunately we know that they’re likely to get into our juvenile justice and prison system. And some of the studies looking at those populations now suggest that as many as 50% of those people have previously undiagnosed language and learning problems.

It matters because this is really common, and yet it’s something that you don’t know about. Everyone knows about autism, everybody knows about dyslexia. And Dorothy Bishop does the taxi test, she’s a Professor at Oxford University, where she asks taxi drivers what they know about certain conditions. They can all give you their opinion on autism, on dyslexia, and a range of other childhood conditions. They will know nothing about developmental language problems that are far more prevalent and as problematic in the longer term.

Trish has just published some really important work, and I just wanted one slide on this today, just to demonstrate that as early as four years these problems are having an impact on the children. And what Trish’s important data has shown, that already we can detect differences in quality of life at four years of age, as reported by the children’s parents. And when Trish looked at the children from four to nine years, we can see that their quality of life continues to decline. So we really have to pay attention to these problems.

So how can you help language flourish? I’ve said you need to understand how it develops, when and why it can go wrong, and also be able to think about the importance of why this problem matters. And you have a really critical role to play in the promotion of language development in its early detection, and then later in the management.

So I want to just talk about a few recommendations and things to keep in mind. Fluidity is quite common in the early years. Children do develop at different rates, and we have to keep that in our head. And I would pretty confidently say now, for lots of children they fluctuate and there’s no one time when we can be really certain about whether that early behaviour is going to predict their later language. So we need to check progress regularly, we can’t rely on single indicators. Be alert, but not always alarmed, and take note and see what’s happening, and the rate of progress that’s happening with the children.

I just wanted to alert you to a group of websites in the UK that I actually find really useful. I refer lots of people to them, lots of parents, GPs, early childhood educators, and they’re called Progress Checkers. And they’ve set up this very, very nice system where you can actually go and get some basic information about your child’s language. You can choose which age you’d like to look at. And I’ve done a screen grab of the 12 to 18 months, and it gives you a little guide on what children might - what you might expect children to be doing. And then you can actually complete a progress checker. So parents can do this. Anyone can go on the website and do it.

And for the 18 months progress checker there are 11 items that it asks you questions, and they’re simple yes/no questions. And this one is ‘my baby can point to many things when he or she is asked. Things like body parts, familiar people and objects such as cars, books and coats.’ And you just simply answer yes or no. And at the end it totes up your responses. I have purposefully answered no to many of those questions, and it then gives you some advice. And there are three levels of advice. Your baby seems to be doing well. Perhaps there are some things that aren’t quite on target, why don’t you come back and complete the progress checker again in a couple of months. Or this set of advice where I answered no to many questions, where it suggests that you might like to seek some help. I think these are really practical things that health professionals, and early child educators, can also log into as well as parents. This is UK orientated so it talks about UK services, but I think it’s got some real application. Everyone’s got a mobile phone, everybody can get onto these checkers.

So positive parenting to promote quality interactions, universal promotion, Trish put this much more eloquently than I have, it certainly enhances and it’s not going to do any harm. Quality early childhood education is absolutely important. Yes, we need to target vulnerable populations, but we also need to think about the fact that language disorder targets all children, and that disadvantage can make the outcomes actually much poorer.

And finally, just acknowledge my many colleagues who have helped put together some of these slides. Thank you.

## David Worland

Thank you very much. Just sort of reflecting on that trajectory language thing and thinking I live with two teenage boys, and there’s a distinct drop off in the capability of those teenage years where it becomes grunting to most things.

Look I really wanted to thank each of the speakers today for their time and wonderful presentations. And I do have some questions, and if time permits we might go out to the floor for a couple more as well.

But I think, you know, quite often when we come to these presentations it’s great to get the theory, but I think, you know, there’s a lot of practitioners out there. And we talked about, you know, having a language toolkit. What are some of the things you’d recommend for the practitioners out there that they can put in their toolkits to, you know, make their lives easier when they’re working with kids.

## Anne Kennedy

Well I think I did give some clues. I think you need to have a good repertoire of language games, and depending on the age group you’re working with, I think you need to know those resource places, the internet places that we mentioned, that I mentioned and that Sheena mentioned. We need to - I think you need to be on the lookout all the time for contemporary articles, magazines like Every Child and other professional magazines, Rattler etcetera, that have articles on language development that are based on the research. So if you’re up for it go for the more academic articles, but a lot of good articles will be based on research and they’re practical. They give you the theory but they give it to you in a way that you can understand.

You have to be knowledgeable. If this is such a critical area that underpins so many other things for children’s wellbeing and for their learning and development, then you need to know stuff. And if you studied ages ago, or even recently, there are new findings all the time. So I think that’s part of your toolkit.

Lots of songs, rhymes, poetry. I’ve actually got a grandson that’s learning poetry every week and can now recite poems. I thought it was a dying art, dead art, but it’s not. There are some schools doing it, and it’s really a fabulous skill to have for language development, to be able to say poetry and understand how poems work, and the rhyme and the alliteration etcetera. So just all those practical things that can - - -

## Patricia Eadie

Can I make an addition there Anne, which is that there are so many routines within the days for young children that in fact, you talking with children during those routines is equally as important. So we have used a number of the abecedarian strategies with our teacher candidates at the Graduate School, and abecedarian speaks to enriched care giving. And really that’s about the language and the interactions, and the things we are talking about with young children through the routines. So yes, the toolkit is important, but there are so many times, washing hands, changing nappies, mealtimes, there’s - I don’t need to list them, but they are opportunities for language as well.

## Sheena Reilly

Look, I would totally endorse that, both sets of comments that are made. How many times do you go into someone’s home and they’ve got every whizz-bang toddler, early year toy going, and what’s the child playing with, a bit of cardboard, pot and a pan and a spoon out of the cupboard. And, though you don’t need highly sophisticated toys or approaches, it’s about actually expanding on every - making every day’s activity I think a language activity.

## David Worland

Well we touched, I can’t remember which presentation it was, but we certainly talked about the increased screen time that young children are getting these days, and how that may affect language development. I was just wondering, obviously they help occupy time, but it doesn’t provide the serve and return interaction. Now what messages should we be giving parents about this?

## Anne Kennedy

Well I think it can provide the serve and return time. It’s about quality screen time. You know, we said the same thing about television, it was going to be the death of conversation. Maybe it is in some places. But again it’s about the quality and whether you’re interacting with your child, whether two children are interacting. And there are some terrific resources around recommendations of games and books and interactive. So, you know, I think we’ve got to embrace it. It’s not going to change. Where it’s damaging is where you see a whole group of kids and a family sitting around they’re all on their phones, that’s not what we’re talking about. You know, we’re talking quality interactions using different forms of media.

## Patricia Eadie

All good early childhood professionals understand the balance. I mean a child sitting in the sandpit for a week is not a balanced engagement in the program, just as a child sitting on a screen all day is not a balanced life. Plenty of adults haven’t got a balanced life I think, because there’s too much of it. But I think, yeah, there are plenty of good options, plenty of good advice too again, on things like Raising Children Network etcetera, good advice. ECA has got a good policy document around wired up stuff. I think you just - you need to - again, you need to know. Because I think parents might be asking for that kind of support and advice, and you need to be able to either give that or to know where to send them for that advice.

There are recommendations about - from the paediatric people in the States etcetera about how much screen time, how many hours etcetera. But again, I think, you know, you have to empower people to make those decisions, things that suit their family etcetera, but balance is important.

## David Worland

Obviously most people in the room here are working very intensively with children, and we’ve talked about the risks in developmental language delays. What are perhaps some of the signs people should be looking for in identifying those, and perhaps how can they, you know, have some of those difficult conversations with parents that might emerge from identifying that?

## Sheena Reilly

I think there’s probably not one answer to that, but I think what it is about is observation and knowing the children that are with us on a daily basis and understanding a sense of what they are using for communication, because depending on their age there may be lots of gesture, lots of ways of communicating, the behaviour piece may be that.

Certainly the intentions of young children to start communicating begin early, and so if you have children that aren’t trying to get your attention, to interact with you, those are important signs.

Sometimes children’s behaviour, which is actually not what we would want it to be, is actually their way of communicating and trying to get their needs across. So sometimes the children that their behaviour is harder to manage, may actually be using that behaviour as a way of communicating with you.

And I think the expressive stuff is, you know, it’s a no-brainer it’s easier to pick up because you know a child’s not saying words properly, or you know they’re not saying words at all or putting words together, so some of those red flags that we rely on are easy to see.

What’s much harder to pick up in these children is whether they’re understanding their world, and are they really understanding the language that’s spoken to them. So that requires, I think, some extra attention to following instruction, recognition of items. And they’re the sort of children that, you know, you really do want to red flag, because the children who are having challenges around comprehension, understand spoken language, they are much more intractable problems to deal with in the longer term as well. Lots of the expression seems to catch up but the receptive language issues appear to be much more challenging.

## Anne Kennedy

I think you have to, - in our sector you have to particularly think about the cultural contexts where children are being raised, because there can be cultural expectations around language and speech that can differ. And so you need to be conscious of that as well and check in on that, and ask for help etcetera, if you’re not trained.

## Patricia Eadie

I agree. And with bi or multilingual children, they may - their language development in another language may be really quite advanced, so we have to also balance that out.

## David Worland

We’ve probably got time for just one more question. I was doing a bit of preparation for today’s session, and reading the more recent census results, and we’re living in a rapidly changing society, a bit more culturally rich. Over 30% of our community were born overseas. 20% of our households are speaking a language other than English at home. And I was looking at our economic trading partners, eight of those 10 top trading partners speak languages other than English. So are we doing enough as a community to prepare our children to be more, perhaps multilingual, and if so what could we be doing?

## Patricia Eadie

Well, when you travel overseas I always feel so ignorant because I’m monolingual. And in other countries it’s just the norm that people are raised speaking two, three languages in so many countries. So I think if we want that - if we want to serve our children well, if we want them to reach their potential as this conference is talking about, I think we do have to think about strategies, and policies, and funding which Victoria is doing, about how we empower them to be respectful of other languages, but also to perhaps learn other languages.

## Anne Kennedy

And I think we shouldn’t be concerned about whether children speak in two or more languages is going to set them back. I think that myth has pretty much died, but it’s worth probably just reiterating that it is much easier, and really very - it provides advantages in children’s cognitive development to be learning two languages. And that’s the cognition learning part. But there’s also the social connectedness and the cultural context of them maintaining a second language.

## Sheena Reilly

Imagine their brain pathways is what I would say. You know, little kids that can speak multiple languages. It’s just incredible. Yeah.

And I think I’m going to piggy-back on that and say and talk to your colleagues and tell them about these everyday situations and opportunities for every child.

## David Worland

Thank you. Well I think we have run to time, I just wanted to ask the audience if you could please thank Anne, Patricia and Sheena for their wonderful presentations.