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‘How was school today?’ Using Talking Mats to support family chat



‘I get it right for Finlay, happy home :-)’

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Summary

'You think you're having a conversation and then you do a Talking Mat and you learn so much more'
Parent of an 8 year old

This report details a National Lottery Community funded pilot project to support parents of primary aged children who have SLCN (Speech Language and Communication Needs) to have better conversations with their child about their school day. Talking Mats is a proven communication and thinking tool which is used internationally and with a range of people. Training is key to effective use of the tool and is based on best practice interview techniques. By far the most people who participate in Talking Mats Foundation training are professionals working in a variety of roles. The aim of this project was to evaluate its suitability for parents whose children have SLCN.

Eleven parents were trained to use Talking Mats to support conversations with their child. Some of them attended a face to face group training over 2 sessions and some did the course in an online format. As part of the learning they were required to make a film of their use of Talking Mats for reflection and feedback. They evaluated the existing training considering if all the content was relevant for parents and what extra information would be helpful.

Six parents who attended the face to face training met for another session to plan a new Talking Mats resource on the topic of school, with the aim of supporting their question 'How was school today?' The resource was trialled at home and feedback given.

The initial group of parents diminished and not all gave feedback. It was evident during the training that some of the children involved would take time to learn how to do a Talking Mat and were not ready to trial the resource. Other families withdrew because of external challenges. Those parents who did complete (8), evaluated all sections of the Foundation training as essential to their learning, apart from the section on research.

The school resource created was also given to 3 children's workers for further trialling and they demonstrated it to parents, some whose children do not have communication needs. Further feedback on the resource was gained. This raised the question about whether a coaching model could be an alternative to group training. A future project should explore the effectiveness of coaching in comparison to attending a training course as an option for parents to use Talking Mats.

Parents require detailed information about the skills required to do a Talking Mat before committing to training.

The 'How was school today?' resource should be trialled with a larger number of families before Talking Mats social enterprise can invest in it as a product for sale.

'(Talking Mats..... Lovely way of talking with E. in a relaxed way. She loves it'- parent of an 11 year old

Background

There is growing evidence about the impact of early communication difficulties not only on children's learning, but on the development of relationships and wellbeing. Speech, language and communication skills are vital for children and young people to reach their full potential.

The statistics for speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are stark. The most recent statistics from the Department for Education reveal that it is now the most common primary type of need reported in schools. *Ican*¹. Almost half (48%) of parents who said there was a lack of support available for their child with SLCN and stated this had a negative effect on their child's education. 42% of this group said it had a detrimental effect on their child's mental health.

A critical time is when a child starts school. The parent can have more difficulty understanding what their child is trying to tell them as the network of activities and people widen. This can leave the parent feeling 'helpless'. There is a tendency for home-school diaries to focus on the child's activities and behaviour, and not include his or her view of their day. The information is from the staff members point of view. Parents can give up asking their child about school because they know their child either doesn't have the words, sentence structure, or has unclear speech which leads to frustration on both parts. This can set up a low expectation on both parts for having the kind of conversations which deepen the parent child relationship. The long term impact of this on the well being of the young person contributes to the high incidence of mental health issues evident in young people with SLCN (81% of children diagnosed with social, emotional and behavioural disorders have language difficulties, sometimes unidentified) *Bercow report*²

What supports children's mental health and emotional wellbeing?³

- Secure attachment experiences - developing good relationships and bonding with key people in their lives.
- Good communication skills - being able to understand what's being said, express themselves and how they are feeling, get their message across and get on with other people.
- Having a belief in control - feeling that they have a say in things and can make choices. They might be simple choices such as choosing what to eat, drink or do.
- Experience of success and achievement - everyone needs this whether the achievements are big or small. This helps develop our sense of self and self esteem.
- The ability to reflect - being able to look back on things, think about them and work out why something happened and if they might do or say something different in the future.

Some, but not all of these positive factors, depend on language and communication skills. In the primary school years, it tends to be parents or key family members who through conversations help their son or daughter develop their understanding and reactions to situations. In the absence of a communication difficulty when you ask a child: "How was your day in school", a child often answers: "It was okay!", which could mean many things, e.g. "I have no words for it to explain; It was an awful day, and I do not want to tell you; I do not want to tell you, because then you will ask more; If I tell, you will use it against me; You always misunderstand everything."

The principles of Talking Mats⁴ supports children with and without SCLN to have better quality conversations. It is used by a wide range of people from aged 3-93 with differing levels of communication skills. It changes a conversation by providing a physical space (the mat) and breaking down a topic (e.g. school) into individual aspects. Pictures are used to represent each element within the topic. Open questions are used which give the child more control, and results in the adult listening more than asking, giving time, and not assessing the answers but more likely facilitating reflection by the child.

¹ www.ican.org.uk

² www.bercow10yearson.com

³ <https://ican.org.uk/media/1296/language-and-mental-health.pdf>

⁴ www.talkingmats.com

It was designed by speech and language therapists and supports communication, thinking and decision making. It uses pictures and a scale to help the person think about a topic. The research evidence shows that it increases the quantity and quality of information people give.⁵



The Talking Mats Foundation training course is well established for a range of professionals and not only trains them how to use the tool but to be an open listener and allow the young person doing the mat to think and reflect without influence. One teacher commented after the training that it encourages the adult to *'remain open-minded and allow child to take lead.The importance of listening'*

It is important that families are supported to have good conversations with their children. However our training courses tend to be attended by the people who are in a professional role with children with SCLN. A small number of parents have attended our programme of training with one parent commenting after using Talking Mats with her daughter who has a learning disability that she 'couldn't be without the tool'.

In this pilot project we wanted to explore parents' views about our existing training programme and any adaptations that might make it more accessible/meaningful for families

Project aims

The project aims were to support families to have an easy conversation with their child about their school day using Talking Mats. This in turn would foster the parent's confidence in having a more detailed conversation and support the young person's well-being by engaging in a more reflective way about their school day. The pilot project planned to work with a small group of parents of primary aged children who have SLCN (Speech Language and Communication Needs) and use their feedback to develop a new Talking Mats parent training course in a parent accessible format. With this small group we would coproduce a Talking Mat set about 'How was school today?'

Methodology

- 1) **Talking Mats training** for parents. This would take place over 2 sessions, 4 weeks apart to give time for practise. Phone support would be offered
- 2) Evaluation would include what was relevant/not relevant in the existing content and what else would have been useful. Other formats would be discussed that might be more suitable for example, workshop/elearning/ DVD

⁵ <https://www.talkingmats.com/projects/publications/>

- 3) A third session would co-produce the concepts and images to **create a Talking Mat** set for 'How was school today?'
- 4) Parents would be provided with a set to use at home. Feedback about the trial set would inform its suitability as a set for Talking Mats to produce and sell.



Training

11 parents completed the Foundation training as part of the project.

Session 1 of Talking Mats Foundation training.

Content

- Principles of using the tool
- Reflection on listening skills ,
- Background to Talking Mats
- Resources available.

Session 2 of Foundation training. All had made a film of their use of Talking Mats.

Content

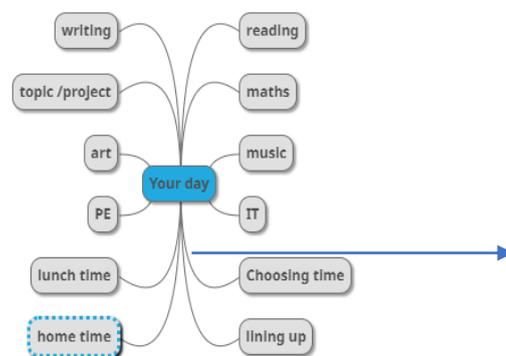
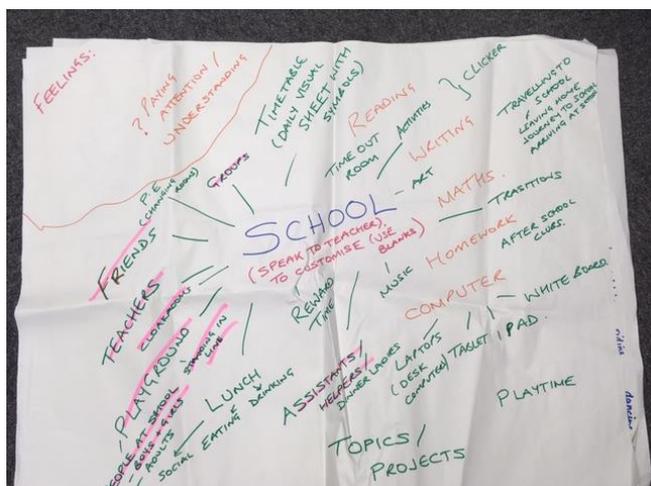
- Making a Talking Mats film
- Reflecting on film
- Sharing film
- Seeing other peoples' films
- Creating a new topic

Creating a Talking Mats resource to support conversation about the school day

6 parents who completed the training met with 2 Talking Mats staff to plan a Talking Mat which would support their conversation about how their child felt about their school day. They were encouraged to think about what aspects of school they would want included in a conversation.

The individual concepts were themed and 3 topics were identified.

- School activities i.e. timetable ,
- places in school and
- people in school.



Talking Mats symbols typically have the written word under the image



One parent commented that her son focused on the written word under the card and if it didn't match the concept he was familiar with, it would result in confusion. For example- *Learning assistant* versus *Classroom Helper*; *Out of school care* or *Kids club*. The words used with the cards have to be meaningful to each child.

For this reason, the words were omitted from the symbol cards and a dictionary of intended meanings was provided.

Results

Feedback on Training

6 attendees completed evaluations on each section of our standard foundation training. 2 gave feedback on the online training

Session 1 content	<i>essential</i>	<i>Interesting but not essential</i>	<i>Not relevant</i>	
Talking Mats research	3	3		
Demonstration of a Talking Mat including how to be an active listener	6			
Trying it out in pairs	6			
Watching films of talking mats in action	6			
Effectiveness framework - e.g when is it working and when is not reliable as that person's view				Not covered. Ran out of time as discussion seemed a greater priority
Talking Mats resources	6			
Session 2 content				
Making a film	6			
Reflecting on film	6			
Sharing films	6			
Creating a new topic	6			

2 parents commented on the cost of the training as being prohibitive for a lot of families

comments

It's hard; Staying neutral is hard

I am glad to finally see there is an opportunity to go beyond the 'how was school?' 'fine' kind of talk. Seems this will give me an opportunity to understand a bit more about his day and more especially allow him to communicate with me

It affords you a chance to see yourself and gives pointers to where you might improve your style of asking questions as well as what works.' 'I didn't want to make the film but Im glad I did'

You can learn other strategies that you might not have considered yourself. It widens the context and you can experience different ages and stages of children using mats. You are not personally involved so you can view it from a different angle.

Feedback of Talking Mats school resource

Trial set of symbols with information

Completed mat from N aged 10-

My school day - what went well/what didn't go well



In total 9 parents gave feedback on the school set.

One of the parents who attended the training didn't use it as she felt it was too basic and didn't add to the conversations she had with her daughter about school. However she is keen to use Talking Mats to explore other areas with her daughter e.g. puberty.

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>comments</i>
How many times did you use the resource each week?	Ranged from once a week to every day for the trial period	
What was the shortest length of time it took to have a satisfactory conversation? What was the longest conversation you had?	Ranged from 3 minutes to 40 minutes to do one mat	The family who used the mat daily spent less than 10 minutes each time.
Did your child share information using the set that otherwise you might not have heard?	8 parents said yes	
What was missing from the resource?	All families felt their son/daughter had shared information which they would not typically have done	One family commented that the conversation was in more detail than normal
How useful was this set for your family conversations about school?	4 families reported the set as being essential for family conversations around school and 4 reported it as a really useful tool.	
How useful do you think this would be for other families?	3 thought it would be an essential tool for other families to use and 5 thought it would be really useful.	

The set was used by a mum whose 2 sons have autism. English is not her first language. The family worker said it 'gave her a structured way in'. Despite a home school diary being used by her son's teacher she had no idea he was doing a topic on Pirates. When using the mat, he told her that he had made jam sandwiches that day at school, because pirates love jam sandwiches!

'not only do you gain new information, it's the ease that it flows'

it's the first time we've spoken about school without arguing

using the (Talking) Mat meant we made time to talk"

One mum wanted to use it with her son in Primary 7 who doesn't have communication difficulties. She then also used it with his younger brother who is in Primary 2. Typically when they come home from school they go straight to their games consoles, then later go to after school activities. Using the School Talking Mat has changed that routine by putting in a structured conversation time. She is really pleased about that.

Discussion

Is it necessary for parents to attend a Talking Mats Foundation Training course to use the Talking Mats School resource with their child?

The parents who completed the training either in a group or the online version felt the information presented and the making of a Talking Mats film was essential to their learning. 2 parents commented on the standard cost of the training being prohibitive for a lot of families. Some parents who gave feedback and found real benefit from using the School resource did not do the training, but had Talking Mats and the resource demonstrated by a professional they know and trust. This has made us consider if a coaching model would be enough for some parents to use Talking Mats? A certain level of understanding is key. Conversations are 2 way and the listener is required to make judgements during the conversation. Is coaching enough for a Talking Mat to be effective? Without the background information for example, about why the listener hands over the cards one at a time, may make the conversation less effective.

Is the resource only helpful for children who have SLCN?

The resource was intended to support children who have SLCN, but an unintended outcome was that families whose children don't have identified communication needs also found it beneficial. Conversations can be difficult for a variety of reasons and Talking Mats is a way of changing conversations.

Why did we lose families during the project?

From the initial interest and enthusiasm for training it became difficult for families to commit to the whole project. Timings for training to suit a group are difficult and school pick up times meant discussion and evaluations were time limited. Priorities change and life events can make it hard to commit. This is especially so for families where their child has additional needs. The project training focused on parents whose children have significant communication difficulties and other difficulties, such as learning and autism. For these families the need to find a tool to support conversations is more obvious and urgent. Perhaps the timing wasn't right for all the children and families?

Does the training course content need to be different from the course for professionals?

The only section of our core training that was not felt to be essential by all was the section on research. It is felt that reducing the content would weaken the learning experience for parents. What they did say would be helpful is:

- 1) additional information before the training about who can and can't use the mats. ie what stage of learning does their child need to be at.
- 2) more practical examples / video examples
- 3) If doing the online foundation training, having the facility to share films
- 4) Support during practise e.g. via Facebook closed group.

What is different in a Talking Mat when the listener is a parent, as opposed to a professional?

Some parents commented on the difficulty of staying neutral in conversation with their child.

'I found it hard not to impart what I already know about x into the conversation (she really doesn't like taking part in sport and exercise at school)' –

Staying neutral is one of the core Talking Mats principles. The important aspect is that the parents are now more aware of when they might be leading a conversation and not staying neutral. That is valuable learning.

Is the 'How was school today?' trial resource ready for Talking Mats social enterprise to produce and sell?

Professionals who are trained in Talking Mats and have heard about the project are requesting to trial the resource. There is a consensus that the topic is useful for primary aged children with and without communication difficulties. The set needs to be seen as a starting point to open up a conversation about school so the number of published core symbols would and should be, small in number. Although 3 school topics emerged from the planning session 1. **School activities**; 2. **People at school**, and 3. **Places in school**, one parent said that having one topic would be enough. Another parent commented that she created one set from the 3 which she used regularly. The idea needs to remain that *People* and *Places* may need to be explored in more depth and are topics in their own right. The published resource needs to be at a financial level to be viable for Talking Mats to produce and distribute.

Recommendations

- 1) Talking Mats should explore a new strand of training for extending the use of Talking Mats to support family conversations, such as how their child feels about school. One option is for Talking Mats to produce an eLearning module for families. Another is for professionals who have completed the foundation training to coach parents to use specific Talking Mats resources. These options would need to be trialled to evaluate the level of detail needed.
- 2) The opportunity for the person who has been coached or completed an introductory eLearning course, to upgrade to a full training should still be available and promoted to families. A route for providing reduced cost training for families to access should be sourced.
- 3) Any future project involving families with children with SLCN should include information about skills needed for the child to be able to do Talking Mats
- 4) Information about a young person's readiness to use Talking Mats should be made available on the web-site to families, in order for them to know if the timing for training is right. This should include filmed examples which parents from the project have offered to provide. Some on the project reported it is difficult for them to make a judgement about their own child's ability so a list of the pre-requisite skills required was recommended. The timing of when to introduce Talking Mats has to be right for both the child and the parent.
- 5) The 'How Was School Today?' Talking Mats resource needs to be trialled with a larger group of families who have primary aged children both with and without SLCN, before we know if it is a viable product for selling. The resource should have the range of cards included in the trial set, with the recommendation to select the most relevant cards to have one initial conversation. The other cards could be useful if one area needs to be discussed in more detail, for example *friends*

Acknowledgements

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Staff at Talking Mats

Adam Murphy the artist, who creates the Talking Mats images

