

News story: Boost for national mission to improve early literacy and language

Parents who lack confidence with supporting their young children's early learning at home will benefit from projects being pledged by businesses around the country.

These will range from bookswaps in supermarkets and author ambassadors, to special training for staff in shoe shops.

Oxford University Press and HarperCollins are among businesses joining a roundtable discussion chaired by Children and Families Minister Nadhim Zahawi today (29 November), adding to almost 100 businesses, charities and public sector organisations who coming together to tackle the 'last taboo' in education, the home learning environment.

There are hundreds of educational apps on the market for parents to choose from when supporting their children's learning using mobile phones or tablets, but little advice about their quality. To help tackle this, the Department for Education will bring together a new advisory panel to assess existing apps, producing tips and guidance for parents on how to use them to aid their child's learning, and to help them make informed decisions about which have the most educational value.

Children and Families Minister Nadhim Zahawi said:

We want to create a generation of confident learners who can read and communicate effectively – these are vital skills that children need to grasp from the earliest opportunity in order to succeed.

There's no instruction manual for being a parent. For some who left school a long time ago or who have low confidence in their own abilities, it can be overwhelming to know where to start with supporting children's learning at home before they start school – and we know that too many children are arriving at school already behind their peers.

By working with a growing number of businesses, charities and experts, we're making it easier for parents to kickstart this early development – helping to take forward our national mission to boost children's early development. New projects are being set up all over the country and our expert panel will create trusted tools that parents can be confident using, so that every child develops the skills they need to thrive.

Representatives from eight organisations including the Lego Group, Clarks, EasyPeasy, HarperCollins, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), British Land, Oxford University Press and KPMG attended the roundtable, led

by the National Literacy Trust's Chief Executive Jonathan Douglas, the next step in the Government's campaign to tackle concerning rates of early literacy and communication among disadvantaged families.

It builds on the Education Secretary Damian Hinds' [ambition](#) set out in July last year to halve the proportion of five-year-olds not meeting expected standards in these skills by the time they finish Reception.

The nine businesses join others already involved in work to support parents with improving the home learning environment. These include Addo Foods and HarperCollins, whose projects in this area will range from upskilling their own staff to improve their interaction with disadvantaged families, to providing tools and resources that encourage parents to incorporate reading and communication in everyday activities.

Pledges from businesses already signed up include:

- Clarks – where its 6,500 staff will be trained in children's speech, language and communication development and how to engage with families in stores across the country;
- HarperCollins – driving a love of reading through author ambassadors, book donations and grants for independent bookshops to support events targeted at children under five and their parents;
- Addo Foods – supporting its employees with children aged 0 to five to use its language lab facilities at its Nottingham headquarters to encourage improved communication skills;
- WHSmiths – supporting literacy programmes in Swindon, where there are high levels of illiteracy, including bringing parents into nurseries to help advise on how to support their child's literacy and language development; and
- British Land and Penguin Random House – working together to provide high-quality children's books for bookswap schemes launching in three British Land retail sites, building on British Land's work to reach more than 34,000 primary school children to improve their literacy.

Analysis from the National Literacy Trust suggests that 7.1 million adults in the UK have very poor literacy skills, so pledges focused on improving the training available to adult employees, particularly those who are parents, will play a key role in boosting literacy and language skills among young children.

Professor Jackie Marsh, Chair of the advisory panel, said:

I am delighted to take on the role of Chair of the panel on early years, language, literacy and communication apps. Young children are immersed in a digital world from their earliest years and have access to many apps on tablets and smartphones.

There is a need to identify the features of high quality apps that support their learning and to offer parents, carers and teachers guidance on how to select and use apps effectively. The government

has rightly identified this as a priority and I look forward to working with the members of the panel on undertaking this important task.

Further information

The new advisory panel will consist of:

- Professor Jackie Marsh, Chair: Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield and a leading figure in children's digital literacy;
- Olivia Dickinson, Deputy Chair: Digital consultant specialising in children's and educational digital media, with experience working for Nickelodeon, BBC, Discovery Education, Sky Kids and Amazon;
- Peter Robinson: Global Head of Research and Company Director of Dubit Limited, specialising in digital entertainment and education for children;
- Antonio Gould: Executive Director of Teach Monster Games, a not-for-profit education technology company responsible for the 'Teach Your Monster To Read' app, boasting a monthly reach of more than one million children;
- Dr Rosie Flewitt: Co-Head of Research, Department of Learning and Leadership at UCL Institute of Education and Co-Director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy, with 20 years' experience in early communication, literacy and language research;
- Sandra Mathers: a former primary teacher and now Senior Researcher at the University of Oxford, with expertise in child learning and development, including the ways in which this can be supported through technology;
- Jonathan Douglas: Director of the National Literacy Trust, responsible for the Trust's 'Literacy Apps' resource for parents and teachers, and a key advocate of the Government's work to improve the Home Learning Environment; and
- Jane Lewis: Head of Programme Development and Quality at Save the Children UK. She is responsible for programme development and innovation, focused on the home learning environment and supporting parents' engagement in their children's early education.