



# Let's keep talking:

## Oral language development in the early years

### SUMMARY



Language is the foundation for children's learning and success. Children use oral language to become good thinkers and communicators, and to develop the literacy skills they need to achieve well in school and beyond. This report draws together a range of evidence to look at how well children are developing the oral language skills they need when they start school. We also look at how early childhood education (ECE) can help children to develop these important skills.

ERO found that while most children's oral language is developing well, there is a significant group of children who struggle, and Covid-19 has made this worse. Quality ECE makes a difference, and the evidence shows there are key teaching practices that matter. We recommend five key areas of action to support children's oral language development.

---

### What is oral language?

Oral language is how we use spoken words to express ideas, knowledge, and feelings. Developing oral language involves developing the skills and knowledge that go into listening and speaking. These skills are important foundations for learning how to read and write. ERO looked at eight areas of language development:

<b>Gestures</b>	Using and adding gestures as part of communication
<b>Words</b>	Learning, understanding, and using a range of words
<b>Sounds</b>	Adding, using, and understanding sounds
<b>Social communication</b>	Changing their language, using words to express needs
<b>Syntax</b>	Combining words to form sentences
<b>Stories</b>	Enjoy listening to, being read to, and telling stories
<b>Grammar</b>	Constructing nearly correct sentences and asking questions
<b>Rhyming</b>	Making rhymes

## What are the early years?

ERO looked at oral language development of children aged 0 to 7 years old in ECE and new entrant classes.

## What did ERO look at?

ERO drew together a wide range of established international and Aotearoa New Zealand evidence. We also surveyed and spoke to parents and whānau, ECE and new entrant teachers, ECE service leaders, and a range of sector experts to understand how well children across Aotearoa New Zealand are developing oral language skills and how well supported they are. ERO visited a selection of ECE services and new entrant classrooms across Aotearoa New Zealand to better understand children's progress and the teaching practices that support them.



## Key findings

### Oral language is critical for achieving the Government's literacy ambitions.

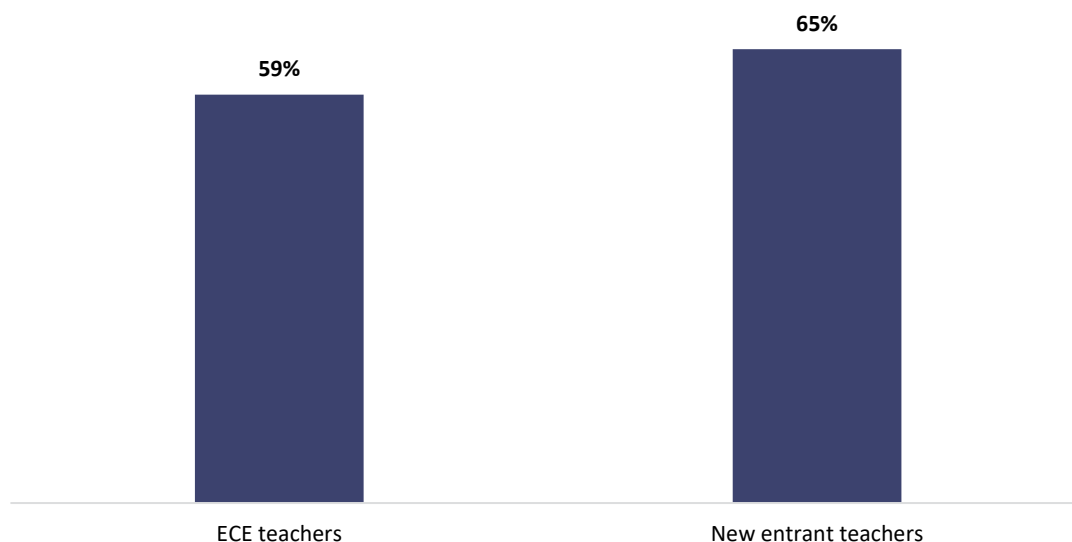
**Finding 1:** Oral language is critical for later literacy and education outcomes. It also plays a key role in developing key social-emotional skills that support behaviour. Children's vocabulary at age 2 is strongly linked to their literacy and numeracy achievement at age 12, and delays in oral language in the early years are reflected in poor reading comprehension at school.

### Most children's oral language is developing well, but there is a significant group of children who are behind and Covid-19 has made this worse.

**Finding 2:** A large Aotearoa New Zealand study found 80 percent of children at age 5 are doing well, but 20 percent are struggling with oral language.<sup>a</sup> ECE and new entrant teachers also report that a group of children are struggling and more than half of parents and whānau report their child has some difficulty with oral language in the early years.

**Finding 3:** Covid-19 has had a significant impact. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (59 percent of ECE teachers and 65 percent of new entrant teachers) report that Covid-19 has impacted children's language development. Teachers told us that social communication was particularly impacted by Covid-19, particularly language skills for social communication. International studies confirm the significant impact of Covid-19 on language development.

**Figure 1:** *Percentage of teachers reporting Covid-19 had an impact on children's oral language development*



<sup>a</sup> Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ) is Aotearoa New Zealand's largest longitudinal study of child health and wellbeing, following the lives of more than 6000 children and their families.

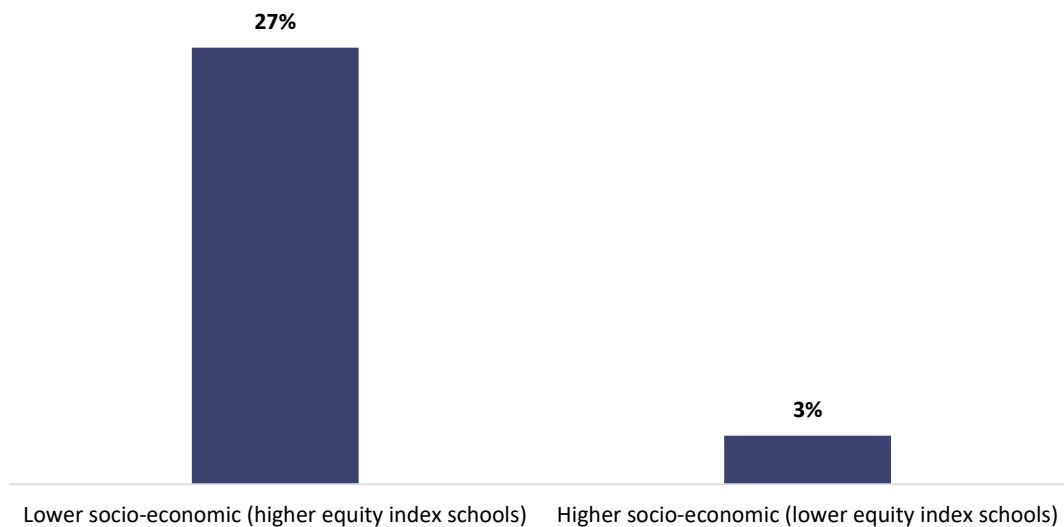
“A lot of children are not able to communicate their needs. They are difficult to understand when they speak. They are not used to having conversations.”

TEACHER

## Children from low socio-economic communities and boys are struggling the most.

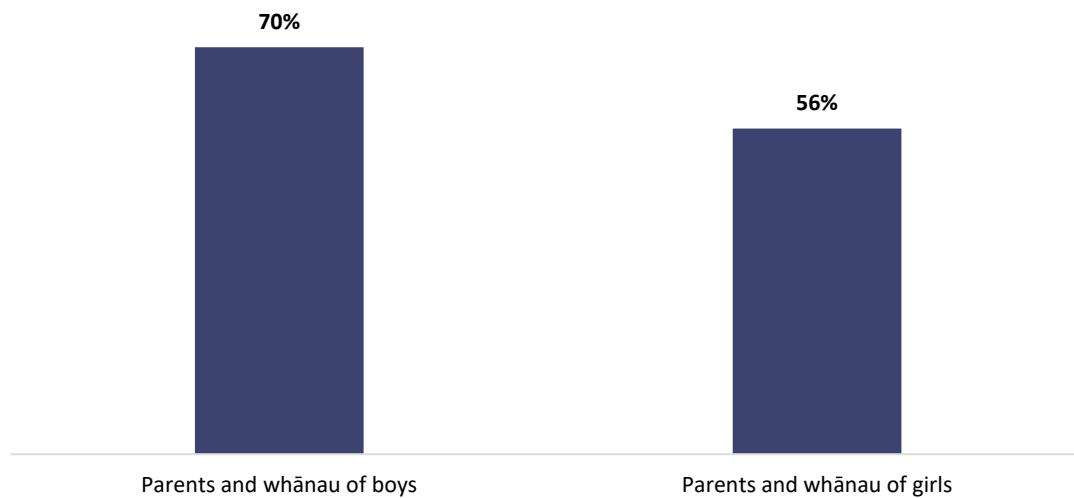
**Finding 4:** Evidence both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally is clear that children from lower socio-economic communities are more likely to struggle with oral language skills. We found that new entrant teachers we surveyed in schools in low socio-economic communities were nine times more likely to report children being below expected levels of oral language. Parents and whānau with lower qualifications were also more likely to report that their child has difficulty with oral language.

**Figure 2:** *New entrant teachers report that most children they work with are below the expected level of oral language, by equity index*



**Finding 5:** Both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, boys have more difficulty developing oral language than girls. Parents and whānau we surveyed reported 70 percent of boys are not at the expected development level, compared with 56 percent of girls.

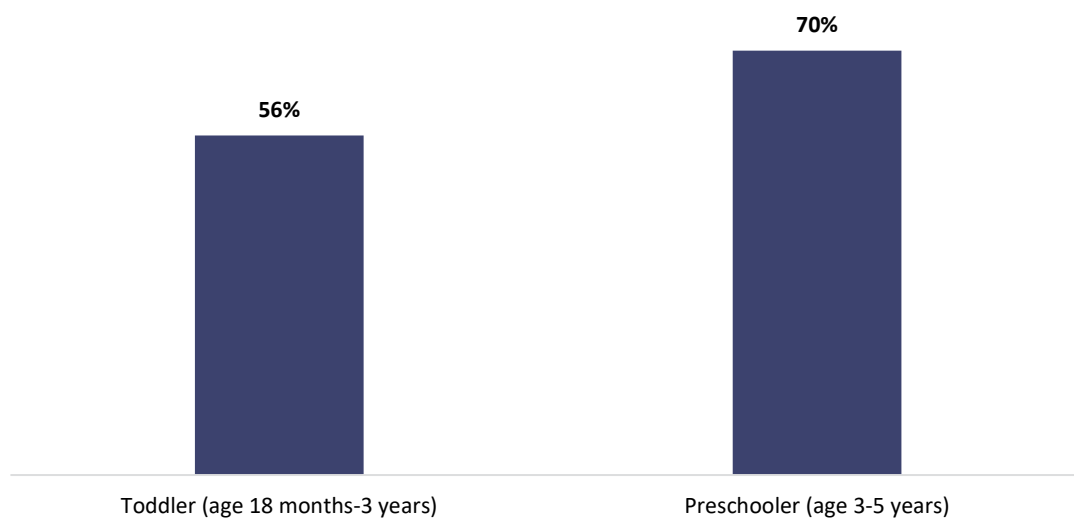
**Figure 3:** *Proportion of parents and whānau that report their child has some difficulty in oral language*



### Difficulties with oral language emerge as children develop and oral language becomes more complex.

**Finding 6:** Teachers and parents and whānau report more concerns about children being behind as they become older and start school. For example, 56 percent of parents and whānau report their child has difficulty as a toddler (aged 18 months to 3 years old), compared to over two-thirds of parents and whānau (70 percent) reporting that their child has difficulty as a preschooler (aged 3 to 5).

**Figure 4:** *Proportion of parents and whānau who report their toddler or preschooler has difficulty with oral language*



**Finding 7:** Teachers and parents and whānau reported to us that children who are behind most often struggle with constructing sentences, telling stories, and using social communication to talk about their thoughts and feelings. For example, 43 percent of parents and whānau report their child has some difficulty with oral grammar, but only 13 percent report difficulty with gestures.

### Quality ECE makes a difference, particularly to children in low socio-economic communities, but they attend ECE less often.

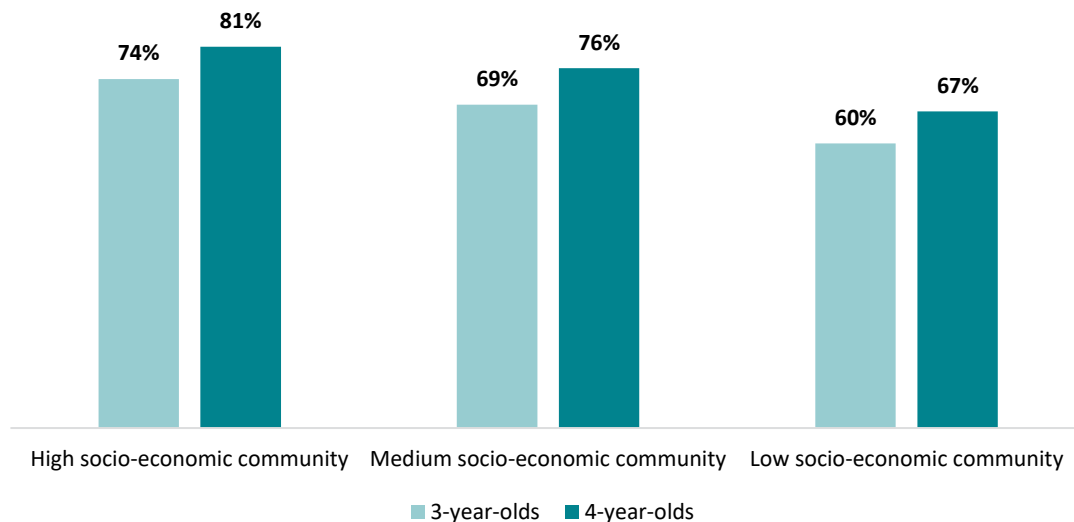
**Finding 8:** International studies find that quality ECE supports language development and can accelerate literacy by up to a year (particularly for children in low socio-economic communities), and that quality ECE leads to better academic achievement at age 16 for children from low socio-economic communities.<sup>b</sup>

“My daughter has issues specifically with certain sounds, so it’s been great getting some support from her daycare on how to manage and support her with that.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU

**Finding 9:** Children from low socio-economic communities attend ECE for fewer hours than children from high socio-economic areas, which can be due to a range of factors.<sup>c</sup>

**Figure 5:** Intensity<sup>d</sup> of ECE participation of 3- and 4-year-olds in 2023, by socio-economic community<sup>e</sup>



<sup>b</sup> Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education Project (EPPSE) is a longitudinal study from the UK that examines how pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time.

<sup>c</sup> Early learning participation intensity: [Early learning participation | Education Counts](#)

<sup>d</sup> Intensity is the proportion of children in New Zealand who attended ECE for more than 10 hours per week in 2023.

<sup>e</sup> To determine socio-economic level, children's primary home address for their most recent enrolment in the Ministry of Education Enrolment Information system (ELI) has been used. A measure of socio-economic deprivation produced by the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago, based on information from the 2018 Census. NZ Deprivation scores have been grouped into three categories: high socioeconomic (NZ Deprivation Index scores 1 to 3), medium (scores 4 to 7), and low (scores 8 to 10). Early learning participation intensity: [Early learning participation | Education Counts](#)

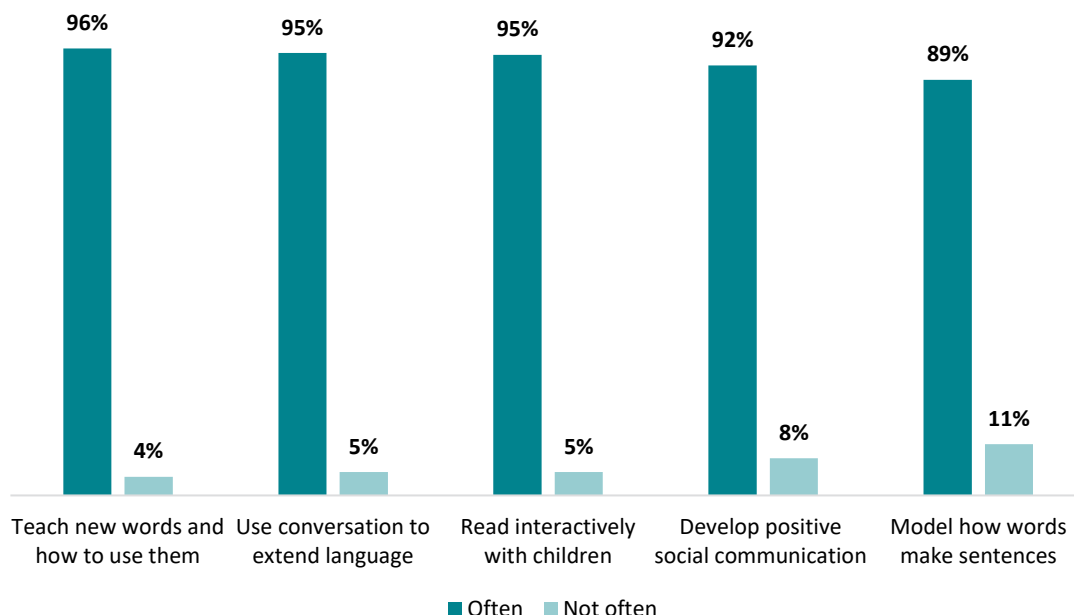
## The evidence is clear about the practices that matter for language development, and most teachers report using them frequently.

**Finding 10:** International and Aotearoa New Zealand evidence is clear that the practices that best support the development of oral language skills are:

Practice area 1	Teaching new words and how to use them
Practice area 2	Modelling how words make sentences
Practice area 3	Reading interactively with children
Practice area 4	Using conversation to extend language
Practice area 5	Developing positive social communication

**Finding 11:** ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed reported they use these evidence-based practices often. ECE teachers reported that they most often teach new words and how to use them (96 percent), use conversation to extend language (95 percent), and read interactively with children (95 percent). New entrant teachers we surveyed reported they most frequently read interactively with children (99 percent), teach new words and how to use them (96 percent), and model how words make sentences (95 percent).

**Figure 6:** *ECE teachers' reported frequency of using teaching practices*



## Teachers' practices to develop social communication are weaker.

**Finding 12:** ECE and new entrant teachers we surveyed both reported to us they develop social communication skills least frequently.

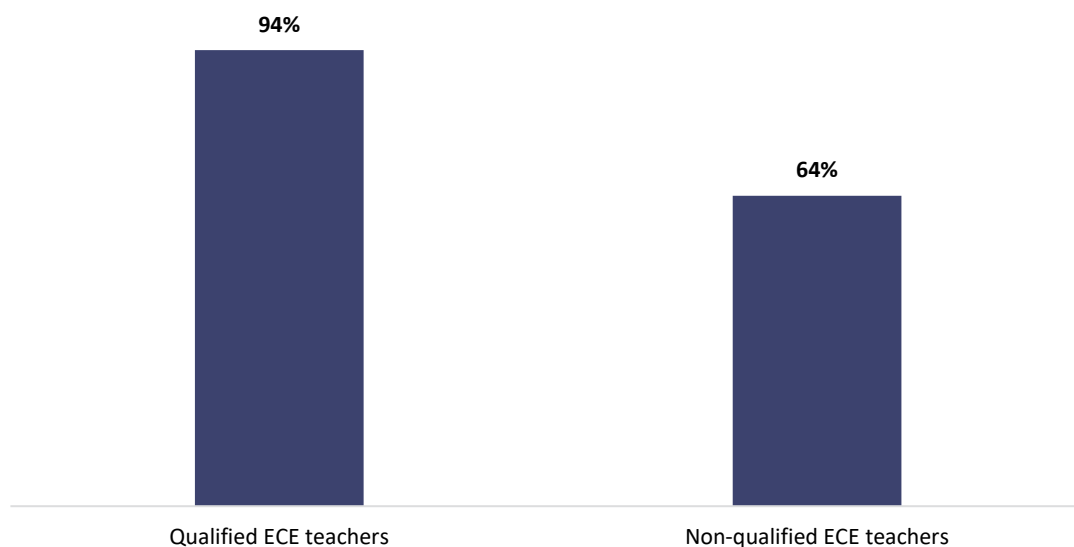
## Professional knowledge is the strongest driver of teachers using evidence-based good practices. Qualified ECE teachers reported being almost twice as confident in their knowledge about oral language.

**Finding 13:** Qualified ECE teachers we surveyed reported being almost twice as confident in their knowledge about how oral language develops than non-qualified teachers. Most qualified ECE teachers (94 percent) reported being confident, but only two-thirds (64 percent) of non-qualified teachers reported being confident.

**Finding 14:** Qualified teachers reported more frequently using key practices, for example, using conversation to extend language (96 percent compared with 92 percent of non-qualified teachers).

**Finding 15:** ECE teachers who reported being extremely confident in their professional knowledge of how children's language develops were up to seven times more likely to report using effective teaching practices regularly.

**Figure 7:** *ECE teachers' reported confidence in their professional knowledge of how oral language develops, qualified compared with non-qualified teachers*



“We got the [provider] to come in and talk to us about the science, and the brain, and the neuroscience behind basically play-based learning.”

TEACHER



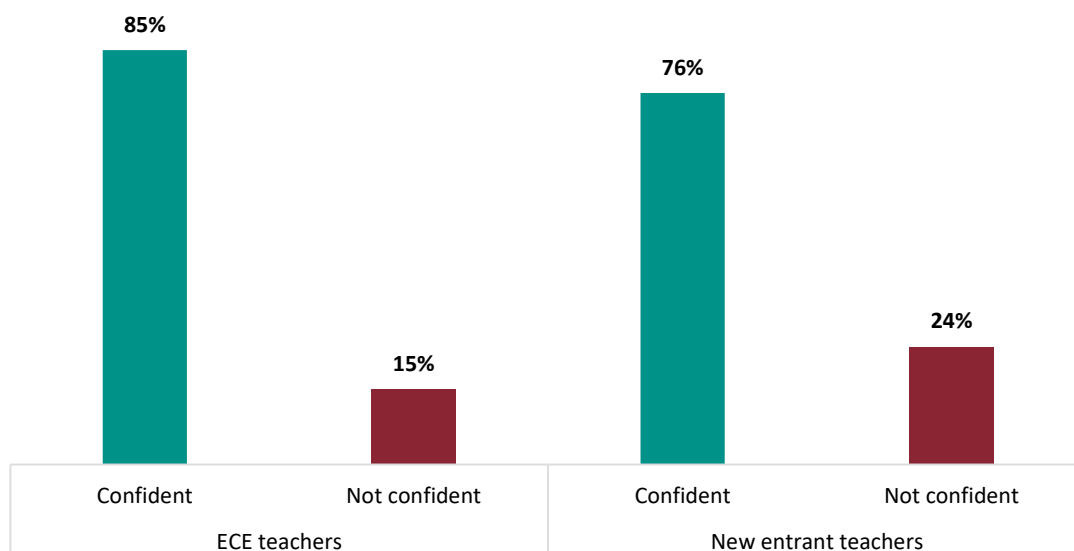


## Teachers and parents often do not know how well their children are developing and this matters as timely support can prevent problems later.

**Finding 16:** Not all ECE and new entrant teachers are confident to assess oral language progress. Of the new entrant teachers we surveyed, a quarter reported not being confident to assess and report on progress. The lack of clear development expectations and indicators of progress, and lack of alignment between *Te Whāriki* and the *New Zealand Curriculum*, makes this difficult. Half of parents (53 percent) do not get information from their service about their child's oral language progress.

**Finding 17:** Being able to assess children's oral language progress and identify potential difficulties is an important part of teaching young children. However, not all ECE and new entrant teachers are confident to identify difficulties in oral language (15 percent of ECE teachers and 24 percent of new entrant teachers surveyed report not being confident).

**Figure 8:** *ECE teachers' and new entrant teachers' reported confidence to identify difficulties in children's oral language development*



**Finding 18:** For children who are struggling, support from specialists, such as speech-language therapists, who can help with oral language development is key. But not all teachers are confident to work with these specialists, with 12 percent of ECE teachers and 17 percent of new entrant teachers surveyed reporting not being confident.

“Many are attending ECE, but not being referred early enough once the delay in oral language is noticed. Then when trying to get intervention, the wait times are too long and the support is inconsistent.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER



## Areas for action

ERO has identified five areas for action to support children's oral language development.

### Area 1: Increase participation in quality ECE for children from low socio-economic communities

- 1) Increase participation in quality ECE for children from low socio-economic communities through removing barriers.
- 2) Raise the quality of ECE for children in low socio-economic communities – including through ERO reviews and Ministry of Education interventions.

### Area 2: Put in place clear and consistent expectations and track children's progress

- 3) Review how the *New Zealand Curriculum* at the start of school and *Te Whāriki* work together to provide clear and consistent progress indicators for oral language.
- 4) Make sure there are good tools that are used by ECE teachers to track progress and identify difficulties in children's language development.
- 5) Assess children's oral language at the start of school to help teachers to identify any tailored support or approaches they may need.

### Area 3: Increase teachers' use of effective practices

- 6) In initial teacher education for ECE and new entrant teachers, have a clear focus on the evidence-based practices that support oral language development.
- 7) Increase professional knowledge of oral language development, in particular for non-qualified ECE teachers, through effective professional learning and development.

### Area 4: Support parents and whānau to develop language at home

- 8) Support ECE services to provide regular updates on children's oral language development to parents and whānau.
- 9) Support ECE services in low socio-economic communities to provide resources to parents and whānau to use with their children.

### Area 5: Increase targeted support

- 10) Invest in targeted programmes and approaches that prevent and address delays in language development (e.g., *Oral Language and Literacy Initiative* and *Better Start Literacy Approach*).



## Conclusion

Oral language is a critical building block for all children and essential to setting them up to succeed at school and beyond. Most children's oral language is developing well, but there is a significant group of children who are behind (including children in lower socio-economic communities), and Covid-19 has made this worse. Quality ECE can make a difference.

We have identified five key areas of action to support children's oral language development. Together, these areas of action can help address the oral language challenges children face. We have developed a suite of oral language evaluation, practice, and support resources for key individuals in the education sector and parents and whānau to use to support children with their oral language development.

### ERO's suite of oral language evaluation, practice, and support resources

Title	What's it about?	Who is it for?
Let's keep talking: Oral language development in the early years (Evaluation report)	The <b>evaluation report</b> shares what ERO found out about what is happening with oral language in ECE and new entrant classrooms.	Teachers, leaders, parents and whānau, learning support staff, specialists, and the wider education sector.
Good practice: Oral language development in the early years	The <b>good practice report</b> sets out how services can support oral language development and implement good practices.	Teachers, leaders, parents and whānau, learning support staff, specialists, and the wider education sector
Poster for teachers: Oral language development in the early years	This poster sets out the five key practice areas for <b>ECE teachers</b> .	Early childhood teachers
Guide for ECE teachers: Oral language development in the early years	This guide for <b>ECE teachers</b> explains how they can support oral language development.	Early childhood teachers
Guide for ECE leaders: Oral language development in the early years	This guide for <b>ECE leaders</b> explains how they can support oral language development.	Early childhood leaders
Insights for new entrant teachers: Oral language development in the early years	This brief guide for <b>new entrant teachers</b> explains how they can support oral language development.	New entrant teachers
Insights for parents and whānau: Oral language development in the early years	This brief guide for <b>parents and whānau</b> explains how they can support oral language development.	Parents and whānau

## What ERO did

### Data collected for this report included:

- National and international studies, including Education Endowment Fund research
- Ministry of Education statistics on ECE attendance
- Our surveys of ECE teachers, new entrant teachers, and parents and whānau

### Site visits of:

- ECE services across Aotearoa New Zealand
- New entrant classrooms across Aotearoa New Zealand

### In-depth interviews with:

- Parents and whānau
- ECE teachers
- New entrant teachers
- Speech-language therapists and other experts

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this evaluation, particularly the parents and whānau, ECE and new entrant teachers, speech-language therapists, and key informants who took part in our surveys and interviews. Their experiences and insights are at the heart of what we have learnt. You can find the full report and good practice guide on oral language on ERO's evidence and insights website [www.evidence.ero.govt.nz](http://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz)



**EDUCATION REVIEW OFFICE**  
Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga  
[www.ero.govt.nz](http://www.ero.govt.nz)



**Te Kāwanatanga  
o Aotearoa**  
New Zealand Government

