

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY  
CHILD WELL-BEING RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
TE KĀHUI PĀ HARAKEKE

# *Supporting Children's Growth in Foundational Skills in the Early Childhood Education Context*



National  
**SCIENCE**  
Challenges

**A BETTER  
START**

..... E Tipu e Rea



# Executive Summary

Children's oral language and self-regulation development are critical factors that support children's wellbeing and successful transition to school.<sup>1</sup>

In this project, funded through Rātā Foundation, a research-informed professional learning and development approach to enhance the self-regulation and oral language skills of 3 and 4 year old children in Canterbury was developed and evaluated.

The project was undertaken in 24 Kidsfirst centres in Canterbury where comprehensive professional learning and development was provided to 84 teachers. This project complimented research within the Better Start National Science Challenge, E Tipu E Rea, where the oral language and self-regulation development of the 486 children within these

teachers' early childhood centres was monitored over time.

The professional learning and development for teachers was presented within a novel *Words Can POP!* framework. This framework, based on strong research evidence, captured critical areas of focus for developing children's oral language and self-regulation. The framework resulted in significant changes to teaching and learning for teachers and children alike.

Analysis showed that there has been significant gains for teacher knowledge and practice along with acceleration in children's learning. Further, the professional development framework and teaching resources that have been developed within the project are able to be utilised in other centres for years to come!

Stakeholder engagement at the community and government level has been a critical piece of this project and will help ensure that *Words Can POP!* will be implemented more widely in the future. The steering committee put in place by Rātā Foundation has also played a pivotal role in ensuring that the reach of this project will go well beyond the 24 centres that we have worked with.

This project marks an important step in ensuring we can create a system change in how transition to school and early learning success is enhanced in Canterbury.

<sup>1</sup> Skibbe, L. E., Montroy, J. J., Bowles, R. P., & Morrison, F. J. (2019). Self-regulation and the development of literacy and language achievement from preschool through second grade. *Early childhood research quarterly*, 46, 240-251.



## RESEARCH LEADERS

Professor Brigid McNeill and Professor Gail Gillon from the Child Well-being Research Institute at the University of Canterbury, and leaders within the Better Start National Science Challenge developed and led the implementation of the *Words Can POP!* framework. A research team ably supported them within this project. In particular, lead research assistants (speech and language therapists) Elizabeth Gibson and Nadine Prescott worked closely with Kidsfirst teachers who participated in this professional learning and development opportunity.



## Activities



1

Formed partnership with Kidsfirst Kindergartens to co-design and implement an enhanced teaching approach to support children's oral language and self-regulation.

2

Developed the *Words Can POP!* professional learning and development framework for enhancing children's oral language and self-regulation in the early childhood setting.

3

Delivered professional learning and development for 84 Kidsfirst Kindergarten teachers across 24 centres in Christchurch. This included two full-day workshops and coaching and mentoring within the context of the early childhood centre.

4

Connected with whānau by delivering face to face and online workshops, drop in sessions and sharing resources to encourage children's oral language and self-regulation skills at home.

5

Connected with key stakeholders to co-construct a sustainable, integrated approach to support children who would benefit from extra support with oral language and/or self-regulation in the early childhood setting.

6

Together with the Better Start National Science Challenge, established the social return on investment for implementing *Words Can POP!*

7

Developed teaching resources that support the implementation of the *Words Can POP!* approach within early childhood centres.

8

Together with the Better Start National Science Challenge directly monitored the impact of the approach for over 543 3 and 4 year olds.

9

Connected with key stakeholders throughout the project to facilitate the sustainability and relevance of the approach. Key stakeholders include Ministry of Education, Rātā steering group, initial teacher education, speech and language therapists, early intervention teachers, early childhood teachers and practice leaders, Māori advisors, Pasifika advisors.

*“Everywhere he goes he points out letters – like ‘that’s an ‘m’. He’s excited about letters everyday. He’s also started asking ‘what does that mean?’ when he hears a new word.”*

A FATHER





“This programme was definitely needed. It was like an emergency for us. It’s helped lift every single child here. There is a definite difference between this cohort of children and previous year’s.”

NIKKI,  
TEACHER

## Words Can POP! Oral Language and Self-Regulation Overlay

	ORAL LANGUAGE	SELF-REGULATION OVERLAY
<b>WORDS</b>	<b>Word learning:</b> Vocabulary elaboration techniques	Using vocabulary techniques to increase understanding of emotion and thinking words.
<b>CAN</b>	<b>Can you keep the conversation going?</b> Back and forth high quality conversations	Using high quality conversation as context to teach scripts to manage emotion and behaviour, and inhibition control through waiting for a conversational turn.
<b>P</b>	<b>Phonological awareness:</b> Awareness of sounds in words	Supporting working memory, inhibition control, and cognitive flexibility through phonological awareness games.
<b>O</b>	<b>Oral narrative:</b> Telling personal narratives and retelling stories	Using personal narrative and story retells as context for understanding emotion and behaviour.
<b>P</b>	<b>Print awareness:</b> Relating print to speech	Print to speech recognition activities and sorting games that support cognitive flexibility.

### KEY REFERENCES

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- Healey, D., & Healey, M. (2019). Randomized Controlled Trial comparing the effectiveness of structured-play (ENGAGE) and behavior management (TRIPLE P) in reducing problem behaviors in preschoolers. *Scientific reports, 9*(1), 1-9.
- Romeo, R. R., Leonard, J. A., Robinson, S. T., West, M. R., Mackey, A. P., Rowe, M. L., & Gabrieli, J. D. (2018). Beyond the 30-million-word gap: Children’s conversational exposure is associated with language-related brain function. *Psychological science, 29*(6), 700-710.



## Outcomes

- Teachers have an increased understanding of the importance of oral language and self-regulation along with the connection between these constructs.
- There is a more explicit focus on oral language and self-regulation teaching. Further, teachers report being more cognisant of drawing children into quality language interactions.
- Evaluation of the professional learning and development opportunities show that these have been incredibly well received by teachers. For example, evaluation of the workshop days showed that 92% of teachers rated the day as 'of the highest quality' with the remaining 8% as 'high quality'.
- Children have shown accelerated growth in their letter-sound knowledge learning and their cognitive flexibility (an aspect of self-regulation) in response to the teaching.
- Feedback from whānau has been really positive. 82% of parents rated the *Words Can POP!* workshop at a 5 = very useful; 18% at a 4 (useful). Parents reported that they found practical strategies the most useful. The most popular strategies were around quality conversations with children, talking about sounds and parts of words and drawing awareness to print when they are sharing books with children. The online resources (books, video tips) have been very popular with parents also.
- Independent analysis on the social return on investment completed by ImpactLab for the period January 2020 to December 2020 showed that for every dollar invested in *Words Can POP!* delivers \$8.38 of measurable good to New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>
- Preliminary analysis shows children in the project have stronger phoneme identity and letter-sound knowledge compared to 4-year old children from previous studies in New Zealand.



<sup>2</sup> ImpactLab GoodMeasure Report (July, 2021), Child Well-being Research Institute.

*“Implementing Words Can POP! has increased teachers’ awareness of how readily they can implement the oral language and print awareness strategies learned into their everyday practice with children.”*

LORRAINE STEWART,  
KIDSFIRST KINDERGARTEN





## Recommendations

- Based on this successful project, it is recommended that the *Words Can POP!* framework is scaled up to be utilised across a larger number of centres throughout Aotearoa.
- That the method for scaling up the approach includes both professional learning and within context coaching and mentoring support so that teachers are well-supported to utilise the resources.
- That oral language and self-regulation are taught in an integrated holistic manner in the early childhood context.
- That professional learning and development regarding the approach is included in initial teacher education programmes for early childhood teachers.
- That a combination of face to face and online techniques are used to connect with whānau regarding practical ways that self-regulation and oral language are supported at home.
- Further input from teachers and whānau about assessment resources and ways to strengthen whānau engagement.

**FOR WHĀNAU AND TEACHER RESOURCES SEE:**

<https://www.betterstartapproach.com/childrens-readers-families-ece>

FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
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