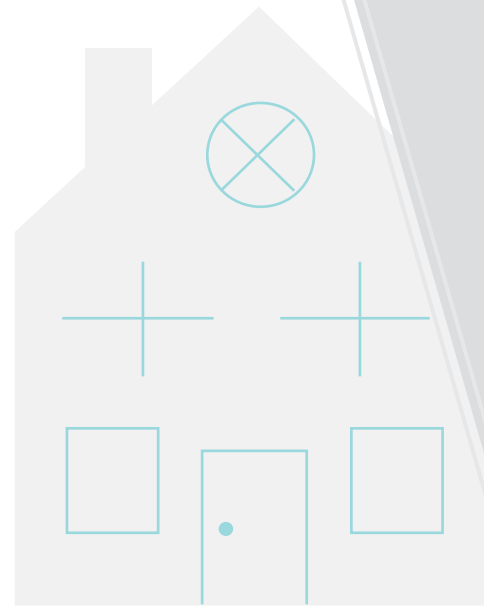


KIM
ROBERTSQ&A
with

Kim Roberts is a writer, trainer and consultant with extensive experience of developing and managing services to improve outcomes for children, families and communities. She works with the Family and Parenting Institute as a specialist in Early Home Learning and is the author of the recent publication, *Early Home Learning Matters*, a good practice guide. Here Kim talks to WayAhead about the importance of supporting home learning.

Why is the home learning environment so important to children's development?

Research clearly demonstrates that in home environments where parents provide more stimulation and positive interaction, child development on all measures is generally higher, regardless of parental education level or economic circumstance. This is vital information for everyone involved in early years services, showing that the well documented link between deprivation and underachievement is not set in stone.

How parents relate to their children from the moment of birth and the activities they do with them inside and outside the home are fundamental to children's long term development.

What is a good home learning environment?

Early home learning is not just about pre-educational activities. It encompasses a much wider range of experiences that provide the foundation from which babies and young children can grow to achieve their full potential.

The quality of the relationship between parent and child during the first three years is crucial. Soothing touch, holding, smiles and eye contact are all ways that parents provide the kind of warm, loving attention that babies and young children need.

Attention and interaction are key elements of a positive home learning environment – parents and children chatting together as part of normal daily life. Even very young babies are social beings, relishing communication based on facial expressions, sounds and actions. Some fascinating research carried out in the United States in the

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1990s by Hart and Risley found a direct and overwhelming link between the number of words babies and young children heard per hour and their cumulative vocabulary at age three.

Children also need stimulation and varied experiences in order to learn – often through the medium of play activities such as singing songs and rhymes, reading stories and looking at books, painting and drawing, playing with friends and going on visits.

Why is it important to support parents?

When parents have the knowledge, skills and confidence to provide the kind of relationships and experiences that children need in the early years, it makes a real difference to children's futures. Many parents don't realise how important their role is or how they can support their child's early development. They may not see the point in chatting to babies who can't yet talk or they may see play as something children do whilst adults get on with more important activities.

What are some practical ideas for supporting parents?

Parents consistently say that they want to be helped by 'professional friends' – confident and well-informed practitioners who are able to show an interest in them and their lives. Firstly, information, however valuable,

has to be shared within the context of a supportive relationship. Simply telling parents what to do is unlikely to bring about significant change. They need someone who can listen to the realities of their life, help them see what they are doing well and work with them to identify specific things they could do to support their child's early learning.

Parents who participated in the Early Learning and Partnerships Project (ELPP) talked about how much they valued practical support and opportunities to get involved through activities such as stay and play sessions, home visits to model play and learning at home, baby massage classes, play resources and more intensive support for parenting where needed.

Where can practitioners find out more?

For more ideas try these websites:

- www.familyandparenting.org
- www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk
- www.peal.org.uk

I also recommend the booklet *Learning and Play: Giving your child the best start* by Sophie Linington. You can download it for free at www.familyandparenting.org/publications

