

Thank you for taking part in the **Early Home Learning Study (EHLS)** and the **EHLS at School** study. You have helped us to better understand how parents can support children's early learning and development, so that they have the skills they need to be ready for school.

We found that families who received the **smalltalk** program showed greater improvements in parent-child interaction and their home learning environment, than families who attended a standard playgroup.

Benefits from **smalltalk** lasted into the early school years.

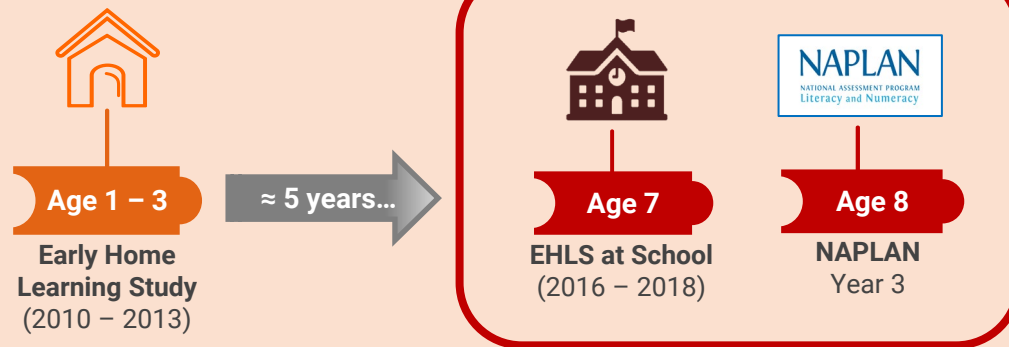
Children whose parents participated in **smalltalk** had **better word reading and spelling skills 5 years later**, compared to children whose parents participated in a standard playgroup. The best outcomes were for children whose parents participated in **smalltalk plus** (a playgroup, plus home coaching).

Word reading and spelling are the building blocks for reading, and help children to become competent readers at school.

These findings show that **smalltalk** for parents of toddlers can help children develop the skills they need to learn at school.

Professor Jan Nicholson
Chief Investigator, EHLS at School

A quick recap...



Who participated?

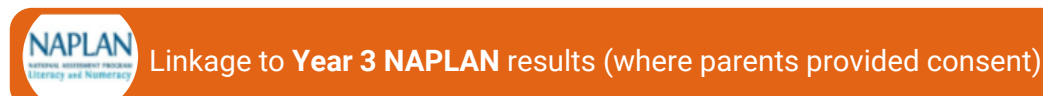
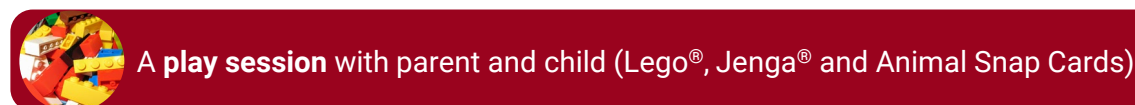
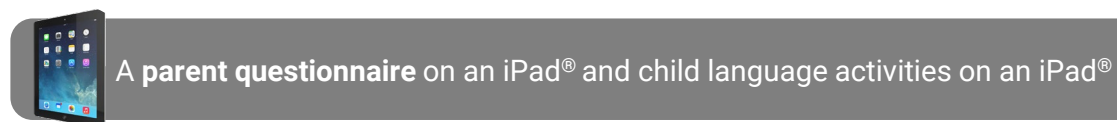
During **EHLS**, parents and children took part in 1 of 3 groups:

- standard playgroup
- **smalltalk** playgroup
- **smalltalk plus** (**smalltalk** playgroup plus home coaching)

After 5 years, we were thrilled to have **669 families (67%)** join us again for **EHLS at School**. Of these, 610 families did a 1-hour home visit. The remaining 59, many of whom were living interstate or overseas, completed a parent questionnaire online.

What did parents and children do?

The home visit at child age 7.5 years included:



How does *smalltalk* support families?

Child age
12 - 36 months

Parents who participated in *smalltalk*:

- ✓ Did more **activities at home** with their children
- ✓ Used more **descriptive language** with their child

Child age
7.5 - 9 years

About 5 years later, **children** whose parents participated in *smalltalk*:

- ✓ Recognised **more words**
- ✓ Could **sound out** more unfamiliar words
- ✓ Had better **spelling** skills



Why is this important for children?

Positive interactions with parents encourage children to **enjoy learning** and **engage in new learning activities**.

When children have **more opportunities** to hear and use new words in the context of everyday activities, this expands children's knowledge and language skills. These skills form the **foundations for learning to read**, especially when parents also engage with their children in shared reading activities.

Why is this important for children?

Spelling and word learning form the **building blocks** for children's reading.

Learning to spell requires children to bring together what they know about **written words, speech and letter sounds, and the meaning of words**. These skills support memory for whole words and sight reading, helping children to become **competent readers** across at school. Competent readers are more likely to have broader knowledge, stronger communication skills, more confidence, and better school achievement.

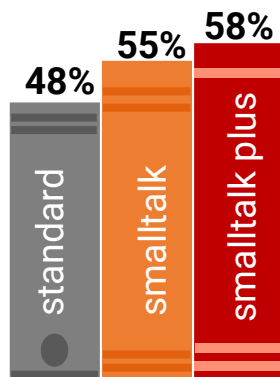
What did we find for EHLS at School?

Recognising and sounding-out words are the **building blocks for reading**.

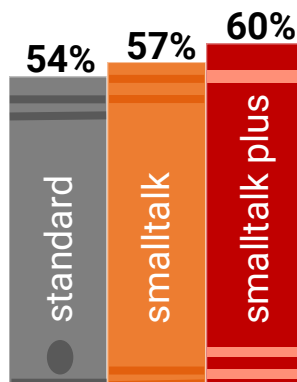
We asked children to read aloud up to 120 words shown on an iPad® screen. This included **regular words** that sound like they look (e.g. “bed”), **irregular words** that sound different to how they look (e.g., “yacht”) and **non-words** that aren’t real words (e.g. “norf”).

The pictures below show the percentages (%) of children who scored at or above the average for children their age. Scores are based on how many words children could recognise or sound-out correctly.

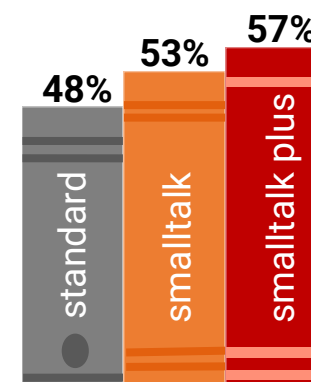
Regular Words



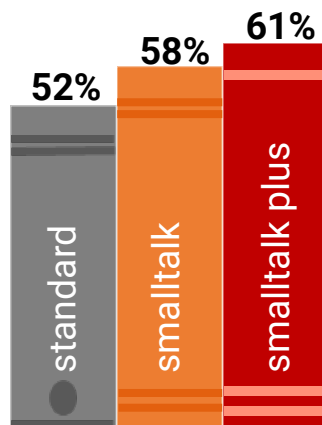
Irregular Words



Non-Words



NAPLAN Spelling



Spelling skills help children to become **more competent readers**.

NAPLAN is the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy. It assesses five skill domains: Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar & Punctuation, and Numeracy. For the Spelling domain, children are asked to identify and fix spelling errors in frequently used words. Spelling skills help children to become more competent readers and writers.

The picture on the left shows that children whose parents took part in **smalltalk** or **smalltalk plus** had stronger spelling skills on Year 3 NAPLAN than children in the standard playgroup.

There were no statistically significant differences between the groups on other measures of language or other NAPLAN domains.

OFFICIAL



How is this research making a difference?

Today, parents in **all 79 Local Government Areas** in Victoria have access to the ***smalltalk*** program, to help give their child the best start for their learning and development. It's included as a normal part of every Government-funded playgroup. Families can also receive home coaching. This means that each year, around **6,000 Victorian parents and children** are getting the benefits of ***smalltalk***.

Playgroups are being delivered by **83 agencies**, and there are **230 trained staff** running the playgroups and home coaching. Playgroups and home coaching have been adapted for remote delivery, to allow families to continue accessing this support during COVID-19. Resources have also been co-designed and updated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents by the Parenting Research Centre, in collaboration with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and Youthworx.

We have shared our findings with other researchers, policy makers, and professionals who work with children, parents and families. This has included scientific publications, as well as presentations at national and international conferences.

If you'd like to learn more about ***smalltalk***, you can check out the website: www.smalltalk.net.au

What's next?

As shown above, ***smalltalk*** for parents of toddlers can help to strengthen children's spelling skills at Year 3. Unfortunately, **NAPLAN was cancelled in 2020** due to COVID-19, when most of our study children were due to complete their Year 5 NAPLAN.

Instead, we are now **seeking parents' consent to obtain children's Year 7 NAPLAN data**. This will help us to see if the findings presented above might last to secondary school entry.

For more information

P: (03) 9479 8753

E: EHLSatSchool@latrobe.edu.au

W: <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/jlc/research/tcpp/projects/ehls>

EHLS at School was funded by the **National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)** in partnership with the **Victorian Government Department of Health and Human Services**. Research at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute is supported by the Victorian Government's Operational Infrastructure Support Program. *EHLS at School* was conducted by La Trobe University, together with partners at the following institutions:



Health
and Human
Services



OFFICIAL

