Day in the life of a Flying Start Speech and Language Therapist

Sarah Golunski and Rebecca Jones are Flying Start Speech and Language Therapists, working with babies and children up to the age of three, and their families, in Bettws, North Cornelly and Caerau.

Flying Start is a community based programme which helps parents access health support for their children, and identify problems early to ensure help is provided to continue the child’s development.

They assess and support those who need help with their speech and language skills. They also work with families to put communication skills in place early, to try and stop problems from developing as the child grows older.

Sarah said: “It is such a rewarding job, being able to help a family in this way. Often children can become frustrated if they have speech and language problems, but making a few changes can help them make a lot of progress.”

Rebecca added: “I absolutely love my job. It can have a really positive effect on children and help give them a head start. Problems with speech and language can have an impact on a child’s learning and also their social life, for example making friends. Language skills need to be in place from an early age.”

Sarah and Rebecca run training courses to help others support children with speech and language needs. One teaches parents how children develop their speech and language skills, and how they can help them to improve at home. The other course trains childcare staff in the understanding and supporting of speech and language.

Picture: Sarah and Rebecca with some of the mums and babies from the North Cornelly Baby Club.

In order to help put language skills in place from the very beginning, Sarah and Rebecca hold Baby Clubs in health centres across their Flying Start areas. They introduce themselves to new mums at baby clinics with the health visitor and invite them to join their seven week course. It aims to
encourage parents to talk to their baby, as a lot of parents don’t realise how important it is, or that their baby can communicate in many different ways.

Each week has a different theme such as eye contact, water play or texture play. During the sessions mums and dads play different games and do a variety of activities around the theme with their children. The club encourages parents to continue talking to their children at home, and to carry on the activities.

Sarah and Rebecca visit nurseries in their areas to assess the children to ensure that there aren’t any problems with their speech and language. They carry out assessments to test a child’s understanding and expression of words and sentences, and refer those who need extra help to the core Speech and Language Therapy Service.

If there are a group of children they are worried about, Rebecca and Sarah hold group sessions at the nursery over a few weeks to help the children develop their speech, language and communication skills.

Not all parents or family members are comfortable attending appointments in clinic settings, which can lead to children not being taken to their appointments. As part of their role, Sarah and Rebecca set up the Support to Attendance programme to help solve the problem. When a new referral is made to the paediatric Speech and Language Therapy department from their Flying Start area, Sarah and Rebecca arrange a home visit before the patient is to be seen in clinic.

They send letters and texts to remind the family that they are coming, and the visit helps to make the family feel more comfortable about attending the appointment. Parents can have any questions answered, and put a face to some of the people in the team. In the past 12 months since putting the programme in place, attendance at clinic appointments has risen from 33% to 86% in one Flying Start area.

Another part of Rebecca and Sarah’s role is to follow up referrals from Health Visitors concerned that a child is too old to still be using a dummy. Sarah and Rebecca make home visits to the children, where they discuss with the parents the impact a dummy can have on a child’s speech, teeth and health.

They introduce the child to a character called the Dummafant, which they created, to help persuade children to give up their dummies. Sarah and Rebecca wrote a book that tells the story of an elephant called the Dummafant who eats dummies. They leave an envelope with the child and return at a later date with a special post box for the child to post their dummy to Dummafant. If they do, they are given a soft toy elephant as a
present. Nearly 100% of the children referred have given up using a dummy completely.