

Talking Matters is the brainchild of Alison Sutton, COMET's champion of literacy in all its forms from 2008 to 2020.

Adult literacy had been Alison's passion and profession since the 1984 but it was in 2014 that Alison experienced the aha moment that gave birth to Talking Matters.

"I had spent 30 years in adult literacy but the number of adults who leave school alienated and without the skills needed to thrive was not reducing. Then in 2014, I followed up comments from a couple of principals about children having less oral language at school start than they used to.

Children were not able to ask for help, express their feelings or manage their own behaviour. It was news to me, I didn't know about the power of talk and babies, even though I had spent all those years in literacy."



A Winston Churchill Fellowship to England in 2015 enabled Alison to pursue her newfound mission. "I visited 11 organisations in nine cities in England. Everywhere I went, they were talking about early language and parents' roles as brain builders and coaches. It made me realise I had been working at the wrong end. Adult literacy was too late." Alison came back "incredibly excited". The result - Talking Matters - was a campaign to get everyone talking more to babies and small children. Its vision was, and remains, an Aotearoa where all children thrive as thinkers, talkers, and readers.

Initially, Alison faced a lot of scepticism about the campaign. "Everyone talks to babies, they'd say. We've got problems about poverty; we've got problems about behaviour; those things are more important. People didn't understand how early language is a key driver for children's development and for self-regulation."

**Kōrerotia
mai!**

**Talk
to me!**

Starting a new venture requires asking naive questions, finding allies (and drinking a lot of coffee). In the first year Alison met with more than 100 people to talk about talk. Two were particularly influential - Nola Harvey and Jannie van Hees. They were the start of a small working group, where people shared their deep knowledge about how children learn to communicate and also their concern about early language being overlooked as a key factor in children's development. An expanding network played a key role in building a common agenda and language by bringing together different disciplines - health, education, family services, speech and language, libraries, research, teacher education and policy.

Winning sustained and flexible funding from the NEXT Foundation in 2016 was a game changer. The rigour of NEXT's due diligence process sharpened COMET'S investment proposal and the flexibility of NEXT's support enabled the campaign to evolve in response to emerging insights and opportunities.

Another milestone was the 'Power of Talk' Summit in 2017; it was the first national event on early language and put Talking Matters on the map.

The conclusion of Talking Matters 'deep learning' phase came in mid 2020 as the world grappled with Covid-19. Locked down at home with her family, Alison decided it was time to retire from full-time work and devote more time to the other passions in her life. Talking Matters was in the process of refining a strategy that would expand the campaign's reach and build on its learnings about the power of data to both drive and measure positive and sustained behaviour change. This work represented a subtle shift in direction, revealing the right moment for Alison to hand over the reins of her creation. "I am leaving confident that the team has the skills and vision to move Talking Matters to the next level," she said. ●

