



Education
Endowment
Foundation



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EUROPE



UNIVERSITY
of York

Concept Cat

Invitation to participate

We are seeking Early Years settings to participate in a randomised controlled trial of the Concept Cat programme.

Half the settings recruited will be selected at random to receive Concept Cat in the academic year 2023-2024, the other half will receive the programme in the academic year 2024-2025.

All evaluation activities will take place during 2023-2024.

What is Concept Cat?

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) supported by the Department for Education (DfE) is funding a study to evaluate a programme designed to improve early years language development.

Concept Cat is a whole class teaching methodology for early verbal concepts (part of the widely used book 'Word Aware 2') and delivered by Stephen Parsons and Anna Branagan, working with a partner organisation (Better Communication CIC).

The Concept Cat approach teaches children concepts such as 'first', 'wide' and 'empty'. This is designed to be taught in a structured and engaging manner with explicit teaching of vocabulary followed by implicit teaching in play-based learning. The teaching process includes staff acting out a scripted story with a toy cat (that we will send to each participating setting). Small changes are made to the environment so that children have chances to experience the new word an increased number of times. For instance, if the target word for the week was 'empty', then sand and water trays would be out that week. Families are engaged with simple home activities which will be available in a number of community languages.

This sequence is designed to be accessible to a wide range of children; including those with limited language. One word is taught per week; allowing opportunity for deep understanding to develop. Rather than general vocabulary, Concept Cat specifically teaches early verbal concepts (such as 'before', 'early' and 'through') core to the curriculum of maths and science, with the ultimate aim of improving maths and science attainment at Key Stage 1.

The evaluation

RAND Europe and the University of York have been selected as the independent evaluators for this intervention, and we will assess the impact of the programme on three- to four-year-olds. Settings that are recruited to the trial will be randomly assigned to be trained in and deliver Concept Cat in the academic year 2023/2024 (the intervention group) or to be trained in and deliver Concept Cat in the academic year 2024/2025 (the control group). There will be an equal chance of being allocated to each group, with half the settings in the intervention group and half in the control group. The success of the programme will be measured by comparing children's language skills using the CELF-2 Preschool Basic Concepts and Concepts & Following Directions subtests and the Early Numeracy Assessment from the Early Years Toolbox. In total, we expect test administration to take approximately 20-25 minutes for each child. These assessments will be administered one-to-one with the participating children by trained researchers from Elklan on behalf of the evaluation team.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Your participation in the study will make it possible for the evaluation to assess the impact of Concept Cat on key child outcomes and explore how these vary depending on the participant and setting characteristics. This will enable us to contribute our learning to a growing evidence base around what works for children in the early years. In addition, pseudo-anonymised data will be archived in the EEF's data archive so that it may be used in future to understand longitudinal outcomes for this group of children. Participation will also provide an opportunity for staff in early years settings to be trained in and receive ongoing support in Concept Cat, which is expected to encourage them to continue to reflect on and develop their professional practice (see below for further details about what participation in the study will involve).

What will taking part in the study involve?

As part of participation in the programme, each setting will receive:

- Key resources to run the programme
- a free initial three-hour training session for a lead practitioner and one hour training for all staff (delivered remotely) by Stephen Parsons and Anna Branagan.
- funding to cover staff attendance at the training
- visits from specially trained 'Concept Cat Coaches' to provide modelling and in-school support sessions. This will be delivered half termly with an additional session in the first half term. The sessions will provide support for staff to apply the learning in their setting, modelling teaching, quality checking, problem solving issues and sharing best practice.
- half termly one hour on-line peer support sessions for the lead practitioners. This is facilitated by Concept Cat Coaches, supporting practitioners to share experiences of

delivery in different settings and collectively reflect on ways of overcoming common challenges in everyday practice.

- Settings will receive £400 in the evaluation year (2023/2024) to assist in parental recruitment and completion of evaluation measures (surveys, setting visits, child language assessments). This will be divided into £200 for baseline (i.e. Sept/October 2023) and £200 on completion of endline data collection (June/July 2024).

The training and support will be delivered in either the academic year 2023/24 or 2024/25.

More information on Concept Cat is available on the Concept Cat Project webpage at <https://tinyurl.com/ConceptCatEEF>.

Please note: The first training session, should you be allocated to receive the intervention in the academic year 2023/2024 will take place in September 2023.

As part of the evaluation, settings will need to:

- Enter into a Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) to enable data to be shared
- Share parent information sheets and privacy notices with parents of children aged 3 – 4, collecting any withdrawal forms and sharing these with RAND Europe
- Liaise with RAND and Elklan to provide pupil level data (e.g. names, dates of birth, EYPP status)
- Liaise with Elklan to book a time for assessors to visit schools, once in September/October 2023 and once in June/July 2024
- Agree for the setting manager and a nominated Concept Cat lead to complete two short surveys at the beginning and end of the academic year about their experiences in their settings
- If selected, participate in setting visits by researchers from the University of York which will involve an observation of the programme in practice and staff interviews to help us understand more about how the programme works ‘in practice’
- Distribute a link to an on-line survey to parents of children attending the setting

Who can take part in the study?

All Early Years settings with children aged 3-4 are eligible to take part in the trial, provided they meet the criteria set out below. This includes Private, Independent and Voluntary (PVI) and School-based settings. This project is one of several in the Stronger Practice Hub initiative, an aspect of the Department for Education (DfE) Early Years Educational Recovery Programme.¹ Following a matching process carried out by DfE in Autumn 2022, it has been determined that each setting participating in the present project will be allocated to a Stronger Practice Hub located either in the West Midlands or the North West. As such, initial geographical restrictions may apply when settings are being selected.

Settings are eligible to apply if they:

- have a minimum of 15 children aged three to four (i.e., in Foundation 1) enrolled to attend for at least 15 hours a week in the academic year 2023/2024;
- coordinate schedules so that Elklan may administer all baseline assessments prior to randomisation (which will take place in September 2023);
- agree to participate fully in the evaluation, including completing the programme (as outlined above) if selected to be in the intervention group, and completing all evaluation requirements (both intervention and control group) in the academic year 2023/2024;
- do not have any staff who have attended the Word Aware Early Years training in the last three years; and
- have not implemented Concept Cat in the last two years.²

Children will be eligible to be included in the evaluation (i.e. to have their data collected for the study) if: ²

- They are in Foundation 1 and will be aged 4 – 5 years at the time they begin Reception for academic year 2024/2025 and
- They are registered to attend the setting for a minimum of 15 hours per week.

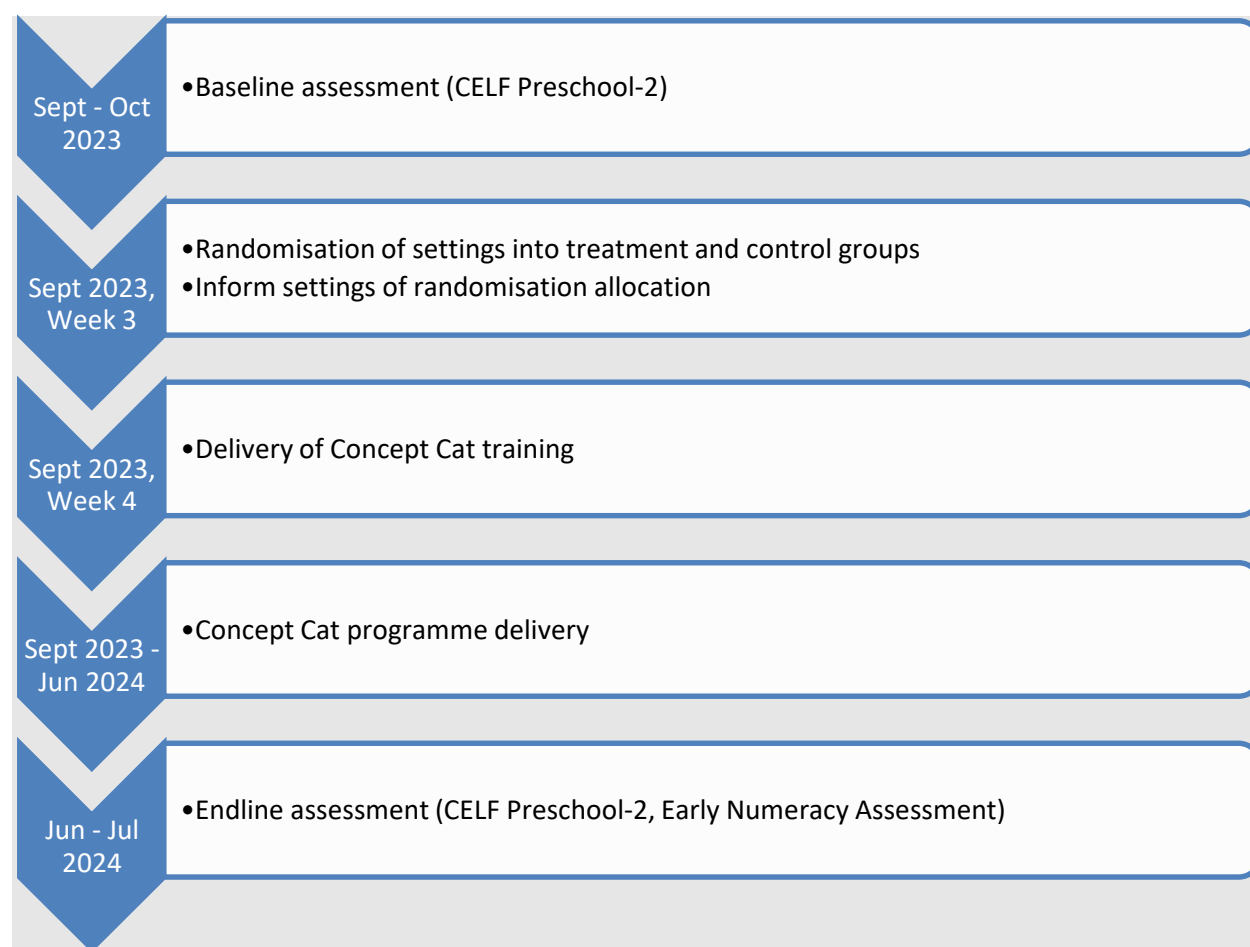
¹ The new network of Stronger Practice Hubs, launched in Autumn 2022, is part of the Department for Education's (DfE) [Early Years Education COVID-19 Recovery Package](#). They aim to address the impact of the pandemic on young children by supporting early years settings to build local networks and share evidence-informed practices to ultimately improve the quality of education and care. As Evidence Partner, the EEF will support the launch of the network.

² If a setting has the Word Aware 2 Early Years book but are not actively using it, they are still eligible. Similarly, settings are eligible if individual children have been participating in speech and language programmes containing Concept Cat. In this case, however, the Delivery team should be alerted.

Children will not be eligible for participation in the study³ (i.e., have their data collected⁴) if:

- Their parent has indicated that they wish to withdraw their child's data from the evaluation.
- At time of initial baseline the child is judged by the setting staff to be unable to sit and follow a short adult-selected task. This is because these needs would prevent them from accessing the assessments. If you are unsure about these requirements, please contact a member of the evaluation team (details below).

Key Dates



³ The programme should, however, be used as a whole setting approach, not just with those children participating in the evaluation.

⁴ This means that children whose parents have indicated that they wish to withdraw their child's data from the evaluation may still participate in the programme.

How will data be protected?

All personal data used for the evaluation will be treated with the strictest confidence and used and stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (2018) and the Data Protection Act (2018). Full details of data protection is available in the accompanying privacy notice. We will provide you with parent information sheets to distribute to the parents of 3-4-year-old children in your setting and will provide the option for parents to withdraw their child's data from the evaluation. A Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) with full details of the data to be collected, how it will be transferred and stored will be put in place with settings before any data is provided to the evaluation team.

To ensure that all processing is fair and lawful, the evaluation team have also completed a Data Protection Impact Assessment, and have sought and obtained ethical approval from an internal review board.

Next Steps

IF YOU HAVE FURTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT THE EVALUATION, PLEASE CONTACT THE EVALUATION TEAM AT conceptcatevaluation@randeurope.org.