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Communication Friendly Settings programme of professional development for Early Years Practitioners effective in improving the speech and language skills of 3-4-year-olds compared to business as usual

Submission date
05/10/2023

Recruitment status
No longer recruiting

Registration date
26/10/2023

Overall study status
Completed

Last Edited
04/12/2023

Condition category
Other

[_] Prospectively registered
[X] Protocol
[_] Statistical analysis plan
[_] Results
[_] Individual participant data
[_] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
As part of the Department for Education's Early Years Recovery Programme, Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs and the Education Endowment Foundation are working together to fund Early Years settings' access to evidence-informed programmes and study the programme's influence on practice and children's outcomes. The aims of this funding are to support education recovery following the pandemic, and to develop our understanding of effective professional development in the early years.

Communication-Friendly Settings is designed to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence of all staff in the Early Years setting and change practice so that the speech, language and communication development of all children is supported during every activity.

This research is designed to answer the question:
How effective is the Communication Friendly Settings (CFS) programme at improving the language skills (as measured by the LanguageScreen Assessment) of children aged 3-4 years in early years settings compared with usual practice?

Who can participate?
Settings within the designated Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs who meet the following criteria:
• Settings obtain parent consent for at least 12 children aged 3-4 (in Foundation 1) enrolled to attend for at least 15 hours a week in the academic year 2023/2024 (Cohort 1; C1) or academic year 2024/2025 (Cohort 2; C2) to participate in the study.
• Settings complete the pre-evaluation staff survey before randomisation (October 2nd 2023; C1) and agree to facilitate child assessments by October 20th 2023 (C1). Cohort 2 dates TBD.
• Settings agree to participate fully in the evaluation, including completing the programme if

selected to be in the intervention group.
• Settings may only receive one programme funded as part of the Department for Education's Early Years Recovery Programme between 2022 – 2025.

Children will be eligible to be recruited for the impact study (i.e. to have their data collected for the evaluation) if:
• They are aged 3-4 (i.e. in Foundation 1 and due to start Reception classes in the academic year 2024/2025 for C1, or 2025/2026 in C2)
• They are registered to attend the setting for a minimum of 15 hours per week
• They have signed parental consent.

What does the study involve?
Settings will help recruit children and facilitate data collectors visiting their setting to administer the assessments. They will also complete surveys at baseline and endline and a small sample will facilitate visits from the research team to observe the programme in practice and be interviewed about their experiences (intervention-only).
Intervention settings will receive the training and support from Elklan to achieve Communication friendly Settings status.

Children aged 3-4 with parental consent will undertake two short assessments at baseline (September/October) and endline (June/July). The assessments are the LanguageScreen and the Renfrew Action Picture Test, both designed to be administered with children this age.

What are the benefits and risks of participating?
The Communication Friendly Settings programme is designed to benefit all children in the setting. The programme is designed to be embedded into everyday practice. Parent consent is only for their child to be part of the evaluation of the programme. All children in settings allocated to intervention should receive the strategies and practices the programme trains practitioners to use. This study is a waitlist design so control group settings will receive the programme in the following academic year.

There are no risks associated with participating.

Where is the study run from?
The study is run from the University of Leeds and is a collaboration between The University of York, The University of Sheffield and The University of Leeds (UK)

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
The study started in October 2022 and is expected to report in July 2026

Who is funding the study?
The study is funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (UK)

Who is the main contact?
Prof Louise Tracey: l.c.tracey@leeds.ac.uk

Contact information

Type(s)
Public, Scientific, Principal investigator

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Additional identifiers

Study information

Scientific Title
Efficacy Trial of the Communication Friendly Settings (CFS) programme

Study objectives
How effective is the Communication Friendly Settings (CFS) programme at improving the language skills (as measured by the LanguageScreen Assessment) of children aged 3-4 years in early years settings compared with usual practice?

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 06/03/2023, Department of Education Ethics Committee (University of York, York, YO10 5DD, United Kingdom; +44 (0)1904 324476; education-research-administrator@york.ac.uk), ref: 23/8

Primary study design
Interventional

Study design
Two-armed cluster randomized efficacy trial

Study type(s)
Efficacy

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Speech, language and communication

Interventions
This efficacy trial will compare outcomes for 3-4-year-old children in the intervention settings compared to control (business as usual). Randomisation will be undertaken at the setting level.

The intervention involves six months of training for Lead Communication Practitioners (LCPs) in intervention settings who will concurrently cascade the training within settings. Settings will then embed the practices from the intervention.

CFS is a whole-setting programme that aims to promote the speech, language and communication skills of all children. It aims to do so by improving the quality and quantity of interactions between staff and children, so children are exposed to more vocabulary that is also appropriate to their developmental stage and next steps (i.e. children are provided with differentiated support).

There are two elements to the programme:
1. Speech and Language Support for 3-5-year-olds (SLS 3-5s); and
2. Communication Friendly Settings status.

This is followed by the setting seeking to achieve Communication Friendly Setting status (CFS status).

For part one, Elklan Training Ltd provides online training (SLS 3-5s) and coaching to two staff (Lead Communication Practitioners or LCPs) from each setting (in cohorts of 10-16 staff across settings). The training consists of 10 e-learning modules, 10 interactive webinars and completion of 10 online learning logs, all supported by an Elklan tutor. Completing SLS 3-5s and the learning logs leads to the LCP gaining a level 3 accreditation through an Ofqual-approved and regulated national awarding organisation (OCN, London).

Alongside this training, LCPs also receive training and support to share their learning and make and embed changes to the settings practice. This includes the LCPs delivering a lighter-touch course, Communication Counts (CCs). CC is delivered asynchronously by the LCPs, to all setting staff (not only Early Years practitioners). After each session, all setting staff are expected to complete 1-2 'challenges' (7 per staff member in total) which demonstrates the use of strategies taught by the training. Completion is evidenced through the submission of a short 'challenge questionnaire' via the online portal. LCPs provide mentoring to the whole staff team in their nursery in implementing and embedding practice changes for the setting to gain CFS status. They also collate the evidence that individual staff members provide as part of their challenges into their learning log, in which LCPs also reflect on the impact of embedding these strategies on pupils and staff. As with the previous learning log, LCPs submit this learning log via the online portal and receive feedback from Elklan tutors. LCPs receive a level 4 qualification for cascading the course to colleagues and satisfactorily completing their learning logs through an Ofqual-approved and regulated national awarding organisation (OCN, London).

Paired visits between LCPs from different nurseries at the end of the programme promote opportunities to share experiences, provide examples of best practices and lead to the completion of a peer review audit to discuss whether the setting can gain Communication Friendly Status. After a successful external peer review and if the above steps have all been met (i.e. LCPs have completed all level 3 learning logs and the level 4 learning log and 80% of available staff have individually completed the 7 challenge questionnaires the setting is awarded CFS-status. If concerns are expressed during the review, feedback is provided, and a further visit is scheduled to audit whether the setting can now achieve CFS status. CFS status is valid for three years, after which time they can apply for reaccreditation. This involves a further peer-review visit to confirm if the setting continues to meet the requirements of CFS status.

Overall training will take place between October 2023 and March 2024 with CFS-status expected to be completed by April 2024 for Cohort 1 (C1), and on similar timelines in 2024/2025 for Cohort 2 (C2).

Settings will be randomly allocated 1:1 to either receive the CFS training or to the control condition. Control settings will continue with business as usual although they will receive the training in the subsequent year as this is a waitlist design. Minimisation (via MinimPy) will be used with the type of setting (SBS or PVI), and whether all baseline assessments have been completed (yes or no) as factors. Due to timeline constraints, it may not be possible to have completed all baseline assessments by the proposed randomisation date (2nd October 2023 for C1), so this variable will be included in the randomisation. All remaining settings will have to have their baseline assessments scheduled to be eligible for randomisation. An independent trial statistician at the York Trials Unit will be responsible for randomisation, with another statistician second checking. If appropriate, the same minimisation scheme will be used to randomise Cohort 2 – otherwise, another minimisation scheme will be used for the second Cohort, using the same variables (type of setting and whether or not all baseline assessments have been done). Randomisation for Cohort 2 is anticipated to be undertaken in October 2024. Baseline assessments will take place in September/October (2023, C1; 2024, C2) and endline assessments in June/July (2024, C1; 2025, C2).

Intervention Type
Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)
Children's language skills as measured by the Oxford LanguageScreen assessment. To be measured

Key secondary outcome(s)
Expressive vocabulary as measured by the Renfrew Action Picture Test (RAPT) at baseline (Sept /October) and endline (June/July) for each of the cohorts

Completion date
31/07/2026

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
Settings to be recruited from pre-specified Early Years Sronger Practice Hubs. Cohort 1 from North East, North West, Yorks & Humber, East Midlands. Cohort 2 TBD.
Setting level:
1. Settings obtain parent consent for at least 12 children aged 3-4 (in Foundation 1) enrolled to attend for at least 15 hours a week in the academic year 2023/2024 (Cohort 1; C1) or academic year 2024/2025 (Cohort 2; C2) to participate in the study.
2. Settings complete the pre-evaluation staff survey before randomisation (October 2nd 2023; C1) and agree to facilitate child assessments by October 20th 2023 (C1). Cohort 2 dates TBD.
3. Settings agree to participate fully in the evaluation, including completing the programme if selected to be in the intervention group.
4. Settings may only receive one programme funded as part of the Department for Education’s Early Years Recovery Programme between 2022 – 2025.

Children will be eligible to be recruited for the impact study (i.e. to have their data collected for the evaluation) if:
1. They are aged 3-4 (i.e. in Foundation 1 and due to start Reception classes in the academic year 2024/2025 for C1, or 2025/2026 in C2)
2. They are registered to attend the setting for a minimum of 15 hours per week
3. They have signed parental consent.

Participant type(s)
Learner/student

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Child

Lower age limit
3 Years

Upper age limit
4 Years

Sex
All

Key exclusion criteria
Settings will not be eligible for if any of the following apply:
1. Setting participated in EYPDP1 (the Early Years Professional Development Programme)
2. Setting is participating in EYPDP3 in the 2023/24 academic year
3. Setting has previously gained Communication Friendly status (Early Years) through Elklan.
4. Setting is taking part on another SPH funded programme.

Children will not be eligible for recruitment if they have a severe auditory or visual impairment, or severe social communication/autism-related needs. This is because these needs would prevent them from accessing the assessments.

Date of first enrolment
01/03/2023

Date of final enrolment
30/06/2023

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre
East Midlands Early Years Stronger Practice Hub
United Kingdom
NN17 1AG

Study participating centre
Northern Lights Early Years Stronger Practice Hub
United Kingdom
SR3 2RE

Study participating centre
Bright Futures Early Years Stronger Practice Hub
United Kingdom
M41 6NA

Study participating centre
St Edmund's Early Years Stronger Practice Hub
United Kingdom
BD8 9QW

Sponsor information

Organisation
Education Endowment Foundation

ROR
https://ror.org/03bhd6288

Funder(s)

Funder type
Charity

Funder Name
Education Endowment Foundation

Alternative Name(s)

EducEndowFoundn, The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Education Endowment Foundation | London, EEF

Funding Body Type
Private sector organisation

Funding Body Subtype
Trusts, charities, foundations (both public and private)

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
The dataset arising from the impact evaluation will be deposited in the Education Endowment Foundations (EEF) data archive. Impact data collected as part of the evaluation will be archived in the EEF data archive within three months of report publication (including baseline and endline assessments). This archive is held in the Secure Research Service (https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/statistics/requestingstatistics/approvedresearcherscheme) provided by the ONS. The archive does not contain any information that can be used to directly identify an individual pupil. For example, the archive does not include names, addresses or dates of birth. The archive does contain the Pupil Matching Reference (PMR), gender, month and year of birth. This is to perform longitudinal and sub-group analyses without directly identifying any individual pupils. The PMR is an identifier used by the DfE that enables linking archive data to data held in the National Pupil Database.

EEF evaluation data is processed by the archive manager on the basis of legitimate interests, according to the GDPR, Article 6, Paragraph 1(f), taking responsibility for protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subjects, and ensuring their interests are protected at all times. Occasionally, the EEF archive, also processes special categories of personal data from evaluations according to the GDPR, Article 9, Paragraph 2(j), which specifies that processing is necessary for ‘archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes’. This processing is carried out with appropriate safeguards for protecting the rights and freedoms of the data subjects, according to the GDPR, Article 89. Permission to archive data was included in the consent forms for the study.

The EEF data archive is managed by FFT Education (https://fft.org.uk/about-fft/; FFT). FFT provides data extracts to EEF's designated archive evaluator (currently based at Durham University) for the purpose of conducting secondary and longitudinal data analyses in order to track impact over time (using additional matching to NPD data obtained from the DfE), check data archive integrity and produce methodological outputs for the EEF Evaluation Advisory Board. EEF evaluation data may also be shared with other research teams and matched to other datasets for secondary research purposes.

IPD sharing plan summary
Stored in publicly available repository

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Participant information sheet			05/10/2023	No	Yes
Protocol file	version 1.0	20/09/2023	05/10/2023	No	No
Study website	Study website	11/11/2025	11/11/2025	No	Yes