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# Understanding the impact of the Talk with Tales for Children (TWiTCH) programme on preschool children's language skills and on nursery practitioners' story reading behaviours

**Submission date**
23/09/2026

**Recruitment status**
No longer recruiting

**Registration date**
02/10/2026

**Overall study status**
Ongoing

**Last Edited**
02/10/2026

**Condition category**
Other

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

## Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
Early language and communication skills are important for children's learning and later life outcomes. Children with weaker communication skills in the early years often achieve less well at school. This gap can continue into secondary school and adulthood. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to start school with language delays, and this gap often grows over time.
The Talk with Tales for Children (TWiTCH) programme aims to improve language and communication skills for children aged 3–4 years in nursery. The programme helps early years practitioners use story time more effectively to support children's language development. TWiTCH trains practitioners to use "dialogic reading", which means encouraging children to talk about stories. Practitioners read traditional stories each day and use structured activities to prompt discussion.
Practitioners deliver nine story cycles with each cycle based on a different story, each lasting three weeks. Sessions take place daily for 10–15 minutes in small groups of up to 10 children. Each cycle includes:
• Week 1: Helping children understand the story and discuss characters and events.
• Week 2: Encouraging deeper discussion through activities based on choices and moral dilemmas in the story.
• Week 3: Supporting children to use their story knowledge in play, with extra help for those who need it.
The programme includes initial training and ongoing coaching to support practitioners.
A small earlier study showed that nurseries found TWiTCH acceptable and easy to deliver. Practitioners reported greater confidence and improved practice in supporting children's language. They also used more discussion during story time. Practitioners felt that children's language and confidence improved.
This study will now test how well TWiTCH works using a more robust approach (a randomised

controlled trial) in a larger number of nurseries. It will measure children's language and communication skills, including their ability to tell stories. It will also examine how the programme changes practitioners' story-reading behaviours.

Who can participate?
The study will involve nurseries in the North West, Midlands and Yorkshire in England. These nurseries must:
• offer funded places for 3–4-year-olds
• have at least 15 children aged 3–4 years attending for at least 15 hours per week
• not be taking part in other Education Endowment Foundation research projects targeted at Early Years
• have the staffing and space to deliver the programme in groups of up to 10 children
The study will include:
• children aged 3–4 years who attend these nurseries for at least 15 hours per week in the year before school
• nursery practitioners who work with these children

What does the study involve?
This study uses a randomised controlled trial. This means we will compare:
• nurseries delivering the TWiTCH programme
• nurseries continuing their usual practice
We will randomly assign nurseries to one of these groups.
Before the programme starts, researchers will assess children's language using the LanguageScreen assessment.
Nurseries in the TWiTCH group will then:
• receive training and support from a coach
• receive a set of nine storybooks and related activities
• deliver the programme over 27 weeks (nine three-week cycles)
At the end of the programme, researchers will assess all children again using:
• LanguageScreen (language skills)
• the Bus Story assessment (narrative skills)
Researchers will carry out these assessments one-to-one with each child in the nursery.
We will also follow children into school. At the end of Reception, we will use their Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores, provided by teachers and accessed through the National Pupil Database. This will show whether the programme has longer-term benefits and supports school readiness.
The study will also examine how practitioners read stories. In a sample of 50 nurseries, two practitioners will record a story session with a group of 8–10 children. Researchers will analyse these recordings to look at:
• how often practitioners prompt children to talk
• how much practitioners talk compared to children
We will also study how nurseries use and experience the programme. This will include:
• observing training and coaching sessions
• interviewing practitioners
• case studies of practice
Nurseries in the TWiTCH group will receive £575 as a thank you payment. Nurseries in the usual practice group will receive £1000.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
The programme may improve children's language skills and school readiness. It may also help

practitioners develop their knowledge and practice in supporting language development. There is a small risk that children may feel uncomfortable when completing assessments. Researchers present these as games, and most children enjoy taking part.

Where is the study run from?
Durham University (UK) – Evaluation Team
Sheffield Hallam University (UK) – Delivery Team
Navigator Insight (UK) - Deliver child assessments

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
March 2026 to December 2028

Who is funding the study?
Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)

Who is the main contact?
Victoria Menzies, victoria.menzies@durham.ac.uk

# Contact information

### Type(s)
Principal investigator, Scientific, Public

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Mrs Victoria Menzies

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# Additional identifiers

# Study information

### Scientific Title
Independent evaluation of Talk with Tales for Children (TWiTCH): A two-armed cluster randomised controlled efficacy trial investigating the impact of TWiTCH compared to business as usual nursery practice, on children's language outcomes and nursery practitioner's shared story book reading practice

### Acronym
TWiTCH evaluation

## Study objectives

Primary Research Question
1. What is the impact of the TWiTCH programme on children's holistic language development measured by the LanguageScreen results of 3–4-year-olds in nurseries receiving the TWiTCH programme in comparison to children in control nurseries receiving business-as-usual?

Secondary Research Questions
2. What is the impact of the TWiTCH programme on children's narrative skills as measured by the Bus Story Assessment of 3–4-year-olds in nurseries receiving the TWiTCH programme in comparison to children in control nurseries receiving business-as-usual?
3. What is the impact of the TWiTCH programme on 1) the subgroup of children eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium, and for 2) the subgroup of children with the lowest language skills at baseline, on their holistic language development and narrative skills comparing children in nurseries receiving the TWiTCH programme to children in control nurseries receiving business-as-usual ?
4. To what extent is the TWiTCH programme more, or less, beneficial depending on children's level of language development at baseline?
5. What is the impact of the TWiTCH programme on nursery practitioners observed story-time practice as measured by coded audio recordings of their story-time behaviour, for nursery practitioners in nurseries receiving the TWiTCH programme in comparison to those in nurseries receiving business-as-usual?
6. What is the impact of the TWiTCH programme on children's Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) assessment at the end of Reception for all children, and those eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium, comparing children in nurseries receiving the TWITCH programme to children in control nurseries receiving business as usual:
6.1. For all EYFSP early learning goals?
6.2. For Communication and Language early learning goals?
6.3. For Literacy early learning goals?

## Ethics approval required

Ethics approval required

## Ethics approval(s)

Approved 11/03/2026, Durham University School of Education Ethics Committee (School of Education Durham University Confluence Building Stockton Road, Durham, DH1 3LE, United Kingdom; -; ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk), ref: EDU-2026-9504-13539

## Primary study design

Interventional

## Allocation

Randomized controlled trial

## Masking

Open (masking not used)

## Control

Uncontrolled

## Assignment

Parallel

## Purpose
Tests universal educational intervention in nursery settings to improve language skills

## Study type(s)

## Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Improving language skills of preschool nursery children (aged 3-4) with a focus on those living in disadvantaged areas

## Interventions
This research uses a two-armed cluster randomised controlled efficacy trial design delivered under ideal conditions with allocation at nursery setting level but with children nested within nurseries. Nurseries will be allocated into one of two groups on a 1:1 ratio to:
Intervention – nursery will receive the Talk with Tales for Children (TWiTCH) programme resources and training and will be expected to deliver the TWiTCH programme over 27 weeks within the nursery setting (and £575 thank you payment)
Control – nursery allocated to 'business as usual' nursery practice (and £1000 thank you payment).
Randomisation will be done so that there are equal numbers (where possible) of settings assigned to intervention and control group. Minimisation will be used to ensure a balance of nursery type (PVI/ Maintained), spread of settings across geographical area/local coach zone, and pupil cohort sizes across trial arms. Randomisation will be done by a trial statistician blinded to nursery name and location, on a weekly rolling basis (from October to November 2026) after child recruitment and baseline data collection is complete for the minimum number of children.
For intervention group nursery settings, initial TWITCH training and provision of all required resources will be in November 2026. Training for all nursery staff working with 3-4 year-old children in the preschool year, will consist of a pre-recorded video on the programme background to watch (20 minutes), two three-hour face-to-face training sessions in the nursery delivered by a TWiTCH coach. For a member of nursery staff nominated to be the 'TWiTCH Champion' - who serves as the lead contact for the project and leads the delivery of TWiTCH in the setting - there will be an additional online two-hour training session.
Intervention group nurseries will then deliver the programme over 27 weeks with 9 cycles of three weeks of activities per book. Each week in the three-week cycle focuses on specific activities. In week 1 practitioners focus on introducing the story book, reading it each day to the children with a focus on discussion of different topics each day (e.g. characters, sequence, concepts). Practitioners are provided with prompts of what to ask children in each session. Each session takes 10-15 minutes. In week 2 there is a focus on language reasoning games based on the story which are intended to develop children's language and enable them to express complex ideas. The games encourage children to make a choice, give reasons and reflect on their reasons. Practitioners model the reasoning language using a puppet during these sessions. Three 10-15 sessions are delivered during week 2. In week 3 the story is used as the basis for activities offered across familiar daily activities incorporating at least three activities during the week. Practitioners are also encouraged to identify and intentionally focus support and engagement on children with greater needs in language during week 3.
Throughout the programme delivery period, the coach will make three visits to the nursery to observe practice and provide feedback and support to the practitioners. TWiTCH Champions will also be invited to attend two 30-minute online networking meetings to share experiences and good practice with practitioners in other nurseries.
Control group settings will not receive any additional training and will be asked to continue with their usual practice in the setting.

### Intervention Type
Behavioural

### Primary outcome(s)
1. Children's holistic language skills measured using LanguageScreen latent variable score at Baseline September - November 2026 and Endline - immediately following intervention - June - July 2027

### Key secondary outcome(s)
1. Children's oral narrative language measured using Renfrew Bus Story Test: Information and Sentence length raw scores at Endline - immediately following intervention - June -July 2027

2. School readiness measured using Early Years Foundation Stage Profile at end of Reception obtained through NPD (1- number of Early Learning Goals (ELGs) for which child has met expected standard; 2- whether child has met expected level for all Communication and Language ELGs; 3- whether child has met expected level for all literacy ELGs) at 1 year follow up - June 2028

3. Practitioner shared book reading behaviours measured using Coded audio recordings of story time practice: 1- frequency per minute of use of all prompt types, 2 - teacher talk percentage during story reading at Endline - immediately following intervention - June -July 2027

### Completion date
31/12/2028

## Eligibility

### Key inclusion criteria
Nursery settings must:
1. Offer funded places for 3- and 4-year-olds
2. Be located within one of the following local authorities: Barnsley, Blackpool, Bolton, Bradford, Bury, Calderdale, Cumbria, Derbyshire, Doncaster, Kirklees, Knowsley, Lancashire, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Oldham, Rochdale, Rotherham, Salford, Sheffield, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wakefield, Wigan, York
3. Have sufficient space and staffing to run story time with groups of around ten children
4. Have at least 15 children aged 3-4 attending for a minimum of 15 hours per week
5. Have a minimum of two staff working with preschool cohorts
6. Not be involved in other nursery- or reception- based Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) projects or EEF Evidence into Action Partnerships during the 2026–27 academic year
7. Not previously have taken part in TWiTCH intervention training
8. Be able to support the evaluation activity requirements.

Children need to:
1. be between 3 and 4 years old and due to start school in September 2027,
2. attend a participating nursery setting
3. attend nursery for at least 15 hours per week
4. have parent/carer consent to take part in the evaluation.

Nursery practitioners need to:
1. Work with the 3-4 year-old children in a participating nursery setting

### Healthy volunteers allowed
Yes

### Age group
Child

### Lower age limit
3 Years

### Upper age limit
4 Years

### Sex
All

### Total final enrolment
0

### Key exclusion criteria
Nurseries must not:
1. Be involved in other nursery- or reception- based Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) projects or EEF Evidence into Action Partnerships during the 2026–27 academic year
2. Have previously undertaken TWiTCH intervention training.

Children should not:
1. Attend nursery for less than 15 hours per week

### Date of first enrolment
16/03/2026

### Date of final enrolment
31/10/2026

## Locations

### Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

### Study participating centre
**Durham University**
School of Education
Confluence Building
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Stockton Road
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**Study participating centre**
**Sheffield Hallam University**
Sheffield Institute of Education
Charles Street
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**Study participating centre**
**Navigator Insight**
Merchant House
11a Piccadilly
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# Sponsor information

**Organisation**
Durham University

**ROR**
https://ror.org/01v29qb04

# Funder(s)

**Funder type**

**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 datasets generated during the current study will be stored in a non-publicly available repository (EEF Data Archive - https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/evaluation/evaluation-guidance-and-resources/evaluation-data-archive).
At the end of the project (May 2029), Durham University will share individual participating children's data and practitioner's data with the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) Data Archive. The EEF Archive is hosted in the Secure Research Service (SRS) at the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and is managed by the Fischer Family Trust (FFT), the EEF Archive data manager. While the archive does not contain any information that can be used to directly identify an individual pupil, Durham University will submit the National Pupil Database (NPD) Pupil Matching Reference (PMR) which is an identifier used by the DfE to enable the linking of archive data to the NPD longer term. This will have been collected when matching data to the NPD and can be used by EEF to match to further data held in the NPD.
Data to be shared are:
* participant characteristics (month/year of birth, gender, Early Years Pupil Premium status, nursery setting ID)
*nursery setting characteristics (setting type, IDACI decile, setting local authority code, setting size)
*treatment allocation (intervention/control)
*primary and secondary outcome data
*intervention compliance data
Participants will be made aware of the data sharing (through information sheets and privacy notices) and will agreed to this.

Researchers who wish to access data extracts from the EEF archive will need to have applications processed and approved by the EEF and other relevant stakeholders, such as FFT, the ONS and the Department for Education (DfE). Currently, extracts of EEF archive data are only available through funded projects commissioned by the EEF. This may be updated in the future.

### IPD sharing plan summary
Stored in non-publicly available repository

### Study outputs

| Output type | Details | Date created | Date added | Peer reviewed? | Patient-facing? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant information sheet | version 3 | 08/07/2026 | 02/10/2026 | No | Yes |
| Protocol file | | 23/03/2026 | 23/09/2026 | No | No |