# Implementing effective approaches in the early years

The Sutton Trust and Nuffield Foundation discussion day

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## Key learnings

1. Implementation matters to achieving outcomes for children.

2. Implementation takes time.

3. In selecting a programme and the implementation approach, settings need to consider both structural factors and social factors.

4. Funders and developers might need to think about what is core to the programme and what is adaptable.

5. A focus on implementation has implications for evaluation and data collection.

6. There are specific characteristics of the early years sector that make implementation more challenging - but there are also success stories to share.

7. There is a good consensus around what enables effective implementation of evidence-based interventions in the early years sector.

# Key learnings from the early years implementation discussion day

The Nuffield Foundation and the Sutton Trust hosted a discussion day in April 2024, focused on "Implementing Effective Approaches in the Early Years". Forty in-person and ten online participants came together to hear presentations from implementation specialists, developers and funders of programmes designed for early years settings, and those implementing evidence-based practices on the ground, to discuss why implementation matters, what it is, and how to do it well in this sector. You can find a short description of the day and a link to the slides here.

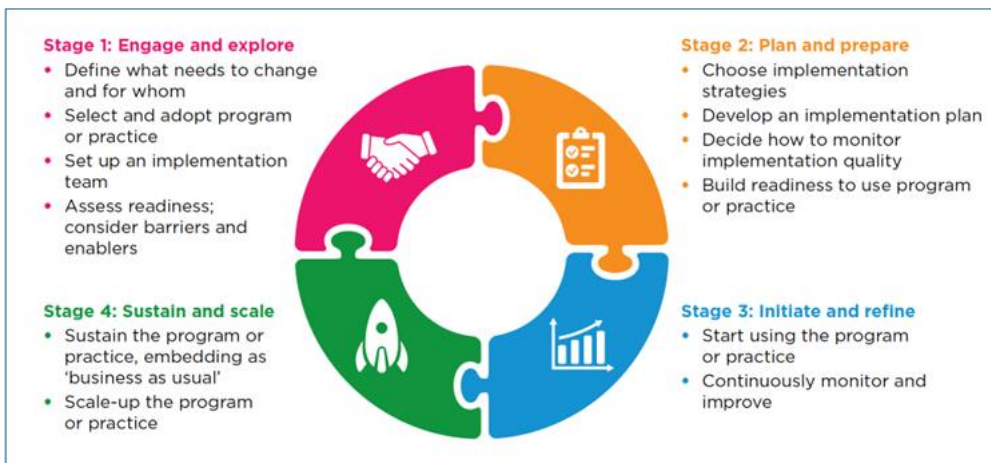There were seven key learning points from the day:

## Learning Point 1: Implementation matters

The motivation for all interventions is to improve outcomes for children. There is strong evidence that good implementation is critical to achieving all the desired outcomes of interventions with a robust evidence base. There is even some evidence that good implementation of a less-effective intervention can lead to better outcomes than poor implementation of a more-effective intervention.

## Learning Point 2: Implementation takes time

From a setting's perspective, good implementation takes time. The four-stage EPIS model, (Figure 1) was found to be helpful in thinking about the features of a good approach to implementation, with implementers needing to give as much focus to Stages 1 and 2 as to Stages 3 and 4. This was reinforced by the example of the Nuffield-funded trial of the "**Talking Time**" programme. Due to Covid disruption, the trial had to be re-started. In one trial, the 'plan and prepare' stage (e.g. orientation visits for schools), was substantially disrupted by Covid. The delivery team noted that, compared with the trial where orientation was conducted as planned, settings were less engaged (e.g. less likely to attend training, more likely to postpone mentoring sessions at short notice) and had poorer understanding of key programme principles. Although hard to disentangle from the ongoing challenges of delivery during the pandemic, the team felt this illustrated the importance of building firm foundations during the early stages of implementation. Encouragingly, the example of "**Early Talk For York**" demonstrated the impact of the Local Authority team spending a good period of time on the "engage and explore" stage to ensure that the chosen programme fitted with the local context.

**Figure 1: Implementation Stages - The EPIS Framework**



**Stage 1: Engage and explore**
- Define what needs to change and for whom
- Select and adopt program or practice
- Set up an implementation team
- Assess readiness; consider barriers and enablers

**Stage 2: Plan and prepare**
- Choose implementation strategies
- Develop an implementation plan
- Decide how to monitor implementation quality
- Build readiness to use program or practice

**Stage 4: Sustain and scale**
- Sustain the program or practice, embedding as 'business as usual'
- Scale-up the program or practice

**Stage 3: Initiate and refine**
- Start using the program or practice
- Continuously monitor and improve

Source: Drawn from Aarons et al, 2011[1]

## Learning Point 3

In selecting a programme and the implementation approach, settings need to consider both structural factors and social factors. There is a wide range of issues to consider when approaching implementation of a new programme, and it helps to work through both the structural issues (resources, processes, workflow, systems) and the social issues (people's motivations, values, and goals). The day heard several examples of how "keeping why at the heart" had overcome concerns about change in hard-pressed settings. The recent updated School's Guide to Implementation, published by the Education Endowment Foundation, reinforced this, stressing the importance of focusing on people issues through the implementation journey. Another way to think about this set of issues was the metaphor offered by Chip and Dan Heath in their book "Switch: How to change things when change is hard".[2] They talk about supporting implementation as being akin to an elephant and a rider walking along a path – where the rider is the rational side that needs to be directed, the elephant is the emotional side that needs to be motivated, and the path is the environment that needs to facilitate the elephant and rider passing through.

[1] Aarons, G.A., Hurlburt, M. & Horwitz, S.M. Advancing a Conceptual Model of Evidence-Based Practice Implementation in Public Service Sectors. *Adm Policy Ment Health* **38**, 4–23 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-010-0327-7

[2] Heath C. and Heath D. (2010). Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard. New York, NY: Random House.

## Learning Point 4: Funders and developers might need to think more about "principled adaptation" rather than "programme fidelity"

It was important that settings chose programmes that fitted to their context, but it was also important that developers were clear about which aspects of their programmes were "core components" and which were more flexible. In other words, what could be tight, and what could be loose. This was of particular importance in a heterogeneous sector such as the early years. Talking Time was discussed as an example of an intervention explicitly aiming to achieve 'principled adaptation', providing support for educators to adapt and embed programme activities and language supporting interactions into everyday practice in a way which suits their context and children.

## Learning Point 5: A focus on implementation has implications for evaluation and data collection

There was a recognition that, at present, funders and developers largely measure the success of an intervention by child outcomes. Evaluations might track the progress of a cohort of children but would be unlikely to track whether a setting had sustained the programme after the trial period. A focus on implementation would suggest that implementation and process evaluations, and rigorously assessing practice pre and post intervention should be both important indicators of success, and sources of learning if outcomes were not as hoped for. This would, of course, be likely to make evaluations more expensive. A challenge to evaluations in the early years sector was that, especially for younger children, there was no consistent universal data collection, so every programme was specifying a bespoke monitoring framework. Both these issues could potentially be mitigated if funders and programme developers were able to work together to share risks and costs.

## Learning Point 6: There are specific characteristics of the early years sector that make implementation more challenging - but there are also success stories to share

The challenges raised most often during the day were:

- The diversity of the sector, from childminders through PVIs to nursery classes in primary schools, the variety of qualification levels within each early years setting, and the variable patterns of child attendance. All these issues reinforced the importance of settings selecting programmes that fitted the setting context (both structural and social factors) and resisting the temptation to take up programmes just

because they were on offer free of charge, or in vogue. It also reinforced the importance of developers taking time to test and evaluate their programmes in a variety of settings and being clear about core and flexible components.

- The high turnover of staff. This was felt to intensify the focus on taking time to embed an intervention into the routines of the setting, as it was only by a programme becoming part of the way of working or culture in the setting, that it would outlast a succession of staffing changes.

- The shortage of time and funding, particularly in PVI settings. Providing initial training was more difficult because they had longer hours (no "twilight" sessions) and were not able to close for inset days. Moreover, there might be a budget for training, but there was less likely to be a budget for implementation or time set aside for trained staff to share learning with others in the setting. Elklan's "Communication Friendly Settings" approach was an excellent example of how this issue could be overcome, with trained staff given support to cascade their learning to other staff in the setting, and a regular whole-setting audit cycle.

- The lack of universal routine and standardised data collection on children's progress (unlike in schools) meaning that every evaluation was identifying its own monitoring framework. This could be an issue for early years funders to work on together.

## Learning Point 7: There is a good consensus around what enables effective implementation of evidence-based interventions in the early years sector

For many, the main takeaway from the day was the importance of focusing on the people in the implementation process, or the "social", rather than structural factors.

Key social enablers referred to included:

- Keeping the "why" at the heart – repeatedly stressing that the purpose was to improve outcomes for children. In other words, thinking about the "emotional elephant" as well as the "rational rider".

- Using the engagement and preparation stages to connect with all the setting's stakeholders, including leaders, staff, and parents, and to build

an implementation team from a "diagonal slice" across the organisation which brought in people from all levels and roles.

- Encouraging people by building communities of practice, using early adopters to model approaches and sharing success stories to inspire others.

- Building in time for feedback from across the setting to inform reflection and a learning culture. Reinforcing that everyone finds changing the way they work hardand being prepared to adjust the approach in light of the learning.

Among the structural factors that were considered important enablers, the following were mentioned:

- The importance of slowing down and avoiding the temptation to adopt new programmes just because they are on offer this year. This was accepted to require bravery in the face of the constantly changing policy and funding landscape.

- Building on activities and routines that already existed in the setting, such as staff induction, training sessions, supervision structures and staffing rotas, to support implementation. Consciously thinking about how to repurpose existing activities rather than add new ones helped staff feel that the changes were manageable.

- Building in data collection, internal monitoring and evaluation from the start and throughout, including identifying the practice change you would want to see happening, how you would know when you saw it, and ensuring that the evaluation had mechanisms such as video observations to assess it effectively.

- Planning for evaluation of child outcomes and also change in practitioner knowledge/practice and setting outcomes over time, in terms of whether the intervention is embedded and still being used. Bravery to slow down applies to programme developers and evaluators as well as to settings.

The Sutton Trust and Nuffield Foundation. Implementing effective approaches in the early years: Key learnings