

# Implementing effective approaches in the early years: Report

## Introduction

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. A link to the slides presented is [here](#).

The objectives of the day were to build on learning from the [Coaching Early Communication, Interaction and Language \(CECIL\) programme](#), led by the Sutton Trust, and funded via a philanthropic partnership (Esmeé Fairbairn Foundation, Shine Trust, Lindsell Foundation and Trustees of the Sutton Trust) and to consider:

1. What does good implementation of evidence-based programmes look like?
2. What are the barriers and enablers to successful implementation in early years, especially private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) settings?
3. What approaches could funders take to ensure that developers of new interventions pay attention to implementation issues from the start?

The day started with an introduction from Laura Barbour, Early Years Lead at the Sutton Trust, who noted that the context for the day was the progress that had been made in building the evidence base for effective practice in the early years, due to funding from organisations such as the Nuffield Foundation and the Education Endowment Fund. The current challenge was to support early years settings, in a time of significant policy change and funding pressures, to make best use of these evidence-based interventions. In particular, how to move beyond initial training which increased knowledge, and to support early years practitioners to put that knowledge into practice, thereby delivering better child outcomes. The CECIL programme had demonstrated the value of a coaching approach to support effective implementation in both private and maintained settings. It had also demonstrated the need for some sort of

“driving force” to support a sustained approach – whether from the philanthropic sector such as the Sutton Trust, or the statutory sector, such as the example of York City Council’s “Early Talk for York” programme. These were issues that she hoped would be returned to during the day.

## Implementation: Overview and application in early years contexts

Jane Lewis (Managing Director UK, Centre for Evidence & Implementation) gave an introductory presentation covering how implementation is defined, why it matters, and issues to consider. She defined implementation as “...a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions” (Greenhalgh et al, 2004)<sup>1</sup> and introduced the “[EPIS Framework](#)” covering the four stages of implementation – exploration, preparation, implementation, and sustainment.

Jane highlighted that it was important to give as much focus to exploration and preparation as to implementation and sustainment. It was also important to align the programme with both structural aspects of the setting such as resources, processes, workflows and systems, and social aspects such as values, beliefs, motivations, and goals. She argued that successful implementation mattered for the early years because interventions poorly implemented did not improve child outcomes. They might also increase inequality as more disadvantaged communities were likely to have fewer resources to support effective implementation.

In the discussion that followed, attendees debated what had resonated with them in Jane’s presentation, and the implementation challenges facing the early years sector. Key points were:

- The importance of understanding why implementation matters from an outcomes and equity point of view. This would help win hearts and minds at the start of a programme.
- The value of a focus on sustainment, given the high levels of staff turnover in the sector.

<sup>1</sup> Greenhalgh, T., Robert, G., Macfarlane, F. et al.. (2004). Diffusion of innovations in service organizations: systematic review and recommendations. *Milbank Q*, 82, 581–629. doi:10.1111/j.0887-378X.2004.00325.x

- The value of thinking about both social and structural factors – the commitment and motivation of staff are the best way to overcome the challenges of time and resources.

The challenges faced by the early years sector were considered to include:

- The variability of staff qualifications in a setting – those with lower levels of qualifications might need a more structured intervention.
- The pace of policy change – the window for applying to be part of programmes was often short and there wasn't time to do the "exploration" or "preparation" phases well.
- High staff turnover meaning that training was often given to staff who moved on from the setting.
- The lack of time/ budget for training, especially in smaller settings, when ratios had to be adhered to. Smaller settings had limited leadership capacity to spare for thinking through approaches to implementation.
- The relatively quick throughput of children meant that it was hard to track the impact of interventions.

## Examples of implementation approaches in early years contexts

The day then heard from three speakers who had taken steps to address implementation challenges in practice:

- Henrietta McLachlan, the Director of Elklan, described their accredited "Communication Friendly Settings (CFS)" programme, which is a structured approach to embedding quality, evidence-based practice within a setting. Two practitioners complete the training in Speech and Language Support and become Lead Communication Practitioners. They are then supported to deliver five one-hour sessions to all staff in the setting and to put their learning into practice. The setting is audited and accredited as a whole.
- Rob Newton, Social Mobility Project Manager at City of York Council, talked about the Early Talk for York programme. He described how settings were engaged with both values-based statements of why early language mattered for future child development, and statistics on the

impact of the programme in terms of EYFSP outcomes. Their implementation approach had been deliberately slow and steady – they had taken a year to work with settings, and talk to other areas, in order to select the core components of their programme which best fitted their context, including the Eklan CFS model. They took a co-construction approach to implementation, working with settings to identify what was working well, and adjusting what wasn't working. He said it was important to get away from the "silver bullet" theory and focus on steadily building capacity to support high quality leadership and implementation.

- Caroline Coyne, Executive Director of Communicate SLT CIC, introduced the Early Communication Support (ECS) programme for childminders, which would be delivered from September – December 2024. It comprised three twilight training sessions in the Hanen Teacher Talk™ language programme together with coaching to support the childminders to put their learning into practice. It was an example of how a programme was being adapted to the childminding context by delivering short training, coupled with bespoke coaching.

## Reflections on implementation

This section of the day concluded with reflections from Jonathan Sharples, Professorial Research Fellow in Evidence Mobilisation at the Education Endowment Foundation, and Jamila Boughelaf, Implementation Programme Manager at the Education Endowment Foundation, who had that day published an updated [Guidance Report on Implementation in Schools](#). They reflected that, although the contexts were different, many of the principles resonated with the discussion about implementation in early years settings. They noted that:

- Over the last decade, there had been a real culture shift in schools, with a much greater awareness of the importance of evidence-based approaches. However, this greater awareness did not equate to greater implementation of these ways of working.
- In the updated guidance they had emphasised the people aspects of implementation, which were felt to be key to leading change. They also encouraged leaders to spend time working across the school community to identify the programmes that had the best fit for that school, and to engage in "principled adaptation" if that was required.

- The learning from those who had used the previous guidance was that it took time to plan and implement well, and to properly invest in a programme once selected. Their perception was that schools were under pressure to adopt programmes on offer, add them to their existing work, and then repeat the cycle. This pressure came from a proper motive of urgency to affect children's outcomes, as well as short grant application windows and short deadlines from government, which would always want quick results.

In the discussion that followed, the group reflected on their learning about implementation:

- Implementation wasn't just about doing, but about planning. This had stood out in every presentation.
- The presentation from Early Talk for York had introduced the concept of an implementation mindset – building capacity steadily over time, rather than a quick fix.
- It was important to choose an intervention that fitted with the setting – the level of staff qualification, the time available etc. The application of the Teacher Talk™ programme to childminders was a good example of this. In addition, the concept of "principled adaptation" was also helpful in giving permission to tweak programmes to make them more acceptable in specific contexts.
- People were key – it was easy to focus on tools and techniques, but the route to success lay in engaging the key people, both internal and external to the setting.

## **The role of funders and programme developers in supporting implementation**

The final session of the day comprised a panel of funders and programme developers – Eleanor Ireland from the Nuffield Foundation, Dr Sarah Cattan from NESTA, and Dr Sandra Mathers from the University of Oxford. Eleanor Ireland started the discussion by reflecting on the role of funders in allowing grantees time for selection and preparation of programmes, and in supporting implementation. They thought a lot about monitoring the progress of children beyond the end of a programme, but not about whether the settings would be able to continue with the intervention after the delivery phase had completed.

Sandra Mathers offered three points in reflection:

- The focus of programme developers was on the “implementation” stage, but it was clear that the preparation and sustain phases should also be of interest to them. She gave the example of the Talking Time trial which had started before Covid, had stopped during the pandemic, and then re-started. The second trial settings had less time, and less face-to-face preparation support, and there was a much greater drop-out from the programme.
- The notion of “programme fidelity” could do with a refresh. The concept of “principled adaptation” was helpful. As developers they should be clearer on the core components and what should be tight, and what could be looser and more flexible.
- A focus on implementation would also suggest paying more attention to implementation and process evaluations, as well as child outcomes. If adaptation was to be expected, then studying why and how this happened, would be an important part of evaluation.

Sarah Cattan built on these reflections, noting that evidence generation needed to be considered as an iterative process, with understanding and learning about which interventions were effective for which children and in which contexts fed back as interventions were implemented in heterogeneous settings across the early years sector. This would have implications for evaluation design, and data collection, and implied the need for a rich and ongoing conversation between funders, developers, researchers and settings.

Her second reflection was that the discussion had implications for data collection in the sector. Understanding implementation well might imply larger samples in more heterogeneous contexts, and this would be more expensive. It was also difficult to do because there was no standard measure of progress in the early years, especially for younger children, so new monitoring frameworks were established for each project. Both of these issues suggested that there would be benefits in a consortium of funders taking forward these discussions.

In the discussion that followed, Jonathan Sharples reflected on the concept of “core components” and whether what developers perceived to be core turned out not to be so in later testing. This suggested it was important to “get under the bonnet” and understand the mechanisms that were really driving impact. Sandra Mathers noted that in the preparation of Talking Time for PVI settings they had been considering whether the “dosage” of the approach was core. In schools the programme ran in a small group in weekly sessions, but in PVI settings it wasn't the case that the same children would be in the setting each

week. They were looking to re-specify the sessions as a given number over a given time period, but without specifying weekly sessions in the same group.

The day finished with a summary of the key learnings about what enabled successful implementation of evidence-based interventions in early years settings, and thanks to all the speakers and participants.



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