

What works (and how) to impact early childhood outcomes

A targeted review for early childhood funders in the UK

January 2025



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Acknowledgements

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This work aimed to guide the group of funders in exploring mechanisms for closer coordination and collaboration to maximise the impact of their collective resources on children and families. The resulting analysis also provides valuable insights for broader stakeholders in the sector, offering an overview of the current evidence and highlighting critical gaps to address in strengthening the childhood development ecosystem.

Dr Julie Bélanger from Better Purpose led the research and writing with the invaluable support of Georgina Klein, Cate Noble, and Alice Cornish. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the many experts and stakeholders who generously shared their insights, submitted evidence, and participated in interviews, enriching the depth and breadth of this work.

Finally, we are grateful to the funders' steering group for their helpful feedback and support throughout the process.

For any questions or comments, please contact Julie at julie.belanger@betterpurpose.co.

INTRODUCTION



BACKGROUND

Improving coordination and collaboration among funders in the UK early childhood development (ECD) ecosystem

Early childhood is a critical period of a child's life, and it is when social returns on investment are greatest. Given its importance, a group of early childhood funders (listed below) began looking at how to better work together to maximise impact for children and families. The aim of this effort is to improve intentionality, transparency and coordination to maximise the use funders' collective resources, and ultimately the effectiveness of funders' efforts within the early childhood development (ECD) ecosystem.

- **Phase 1 (July 2024 – January 2025)** focused on sharing information, improving collective understanding of priorities, and highlighting opportunities for collaboration and / or areas that are relatively under-funded. Consultants (experts on funders collectives Sarah Cutler and ECD expert Dr Julie Bélanger from Better Purpose) were contracted to support with exploring possible ways of collaboration. Further details can be found on the next page.
- **Phase 2 (January 2025+ and beyond)** will focus on building the infrastructure to support more strategic collaboration, including potential for co-investment and joint projects, identifying role(s) where philanthropic funds can be especially catalytic within the sector.





ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS FROM PHASE 1



Mapping of current funding practices

- A mapping of the funder ecosystem currently working in ECD highlighting key high-level operational and strategic alignments that can facilitate future collaboration.
- A survey of 27 funders and desktop research was conducted, culminating in a shared document for internal use.



A targeted review of existing evidence

- Targeted desk research and interviews of key stakeholders to explore what is known about what works to improve childhood outcomes and how across the Common Outcomes Framework.
- A high-level summary (i.e. this document), along with a database listing review sources and data sources are the main outputs of this activity. This evidence review represents our high-level interpretation of the current evidence, but we acknowledge that other voices, including those of implementers and beneficiaries could add valuable nuances and perspectives.



A long-term collaborative structure

- Research and consultations for options and considerations for potential models for alignment, collaboration and collective impact, including a costed delivery plan.
- Preferred structure and principles for working together (see right panel) were proposed.

Principles for working together:

1. **Impact focused:** we collaborate for impact and prioritise areas where collaboration adds value
2. **Invested in relationships:** we invest time in building trust and relationships within and beyond the partnership
3. **Accessible:** we support engagement from funders with an interest in early childhood and value different levels and forms of support (both funding and capacity)
4. **Diverse, equitable, inclusive:** we work in an inclusive way to support equitable engagement of members and partners, across a range of approaches to change
5. **Child-centred & evidence-led:** our efforts are underpinned by evidence & research on the best outcomes for children & the rights of the child
6. **Structural:** we recognise and challenge the impact of structural factors including racism and inequality on early childhood outcomes
7. **Systemic:** we focus on systemic approaches to making change
8. **Power aware:** we recognise the power imbalance between funders and partners and will listen and learn from those closest to the issues
9. **Reflective & outward facing:** we reflect on successes and challenges and proactively communicate our learning and activities



OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE OF EVIDENCE REVIEW

Objectives

The aim of this high-level and targeted review of evidence is to address the following questions to inform funders' collaboration opportunities:

- Within the high-level areas of focus / common outcomes framework (see visual on right side), what do we know about **which initiatives work** to improve children's outcomes and about **how they work** in different contexts?
- **How impactful** are the initiatives in these high-level areas relative to one another and how does this map to current **funders' priorities**?
- Which areas have only **emerging evidence** and what **key gaps** remain?
- How might this evidence review be updated over time to support the **ongoing prioritisation** of resources within the sector?



METHODOLOGY

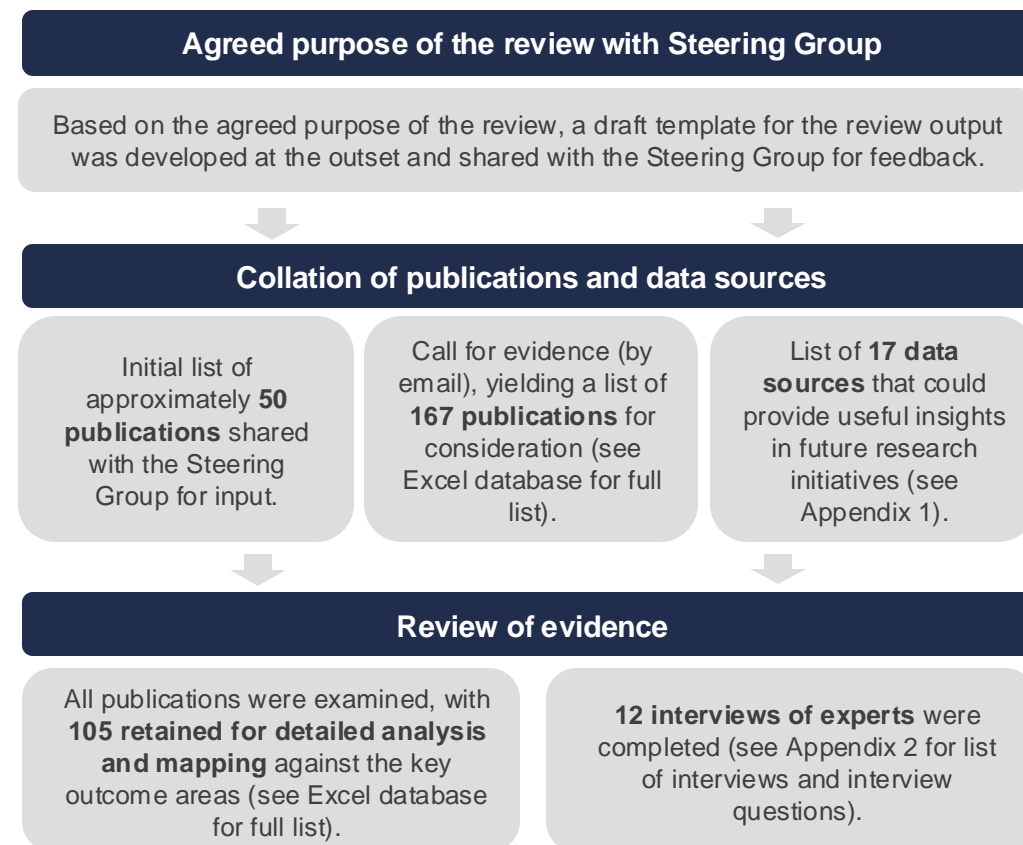


EVIDENCE REVIEW APPROACH

Methodology

To address our key questions, we took a pragmatic and targeted approach that leveraged the existing knowledge and expertise within the group of early childhood funders through a call for evidence and interviews:

- We paid particular attention to key publications that **reviewed bodies of evidence** around initiatives and interventions for improving early childhood outcomes (e.g. Early Intervention Foundation and Education Endowment Foundation systematic reviews of evidence) and that **reviewed major policies and programmes in the UK** (e.g. EPPSE, Sure Start, Save the Children's Early Learning Communities, National Lottery's A Better Start, etc.).
- The diagram on the right provides a high-level process map for this targeted review, with more information provided in the Appendices.
- The approach was **pragmatically targeted**, but this means the review was not systematic or comprehensive. The interviews were used in part to validate the emerging findings from the review of evidence.
- An accompanying Excel database contains the full list of publications and data sources reviewed.



SUMMARY



SUMMARY: WHAT WORKS TO IMPROVE CHILDREN’S OUTCOMES

The review highlighted evidence for what works, how it works, and key gaps and opportunities, which primarily map onto the Common Outcomes Framework. For maximum impact, outcomes and solutions **should not be considered in silos**. There needs to also be a focus on supporting parents and carers to provide and enhance **a good home environment to be achieved through successful implementation, and strong system enablers**.



1 Outcomes should not be considered in silos

Evidence varies across the Common Outcomes Framework, with more evidence for “healthy” and “learning”, however, approaches focused on one outcome are less likely to have long-term impact, as outcomes are interlinked. Reviews such as [DSDL for the Early Learning Communities](#) are actionable models that could be expanded.

2 The parent-child relationship and home environment have the greatest influence on child outcomes

This is often restricted by poverty, which itself has multiple facets. Holistic, place-based solutions are most likely to succeed, as they target these multiple facets. However, such approaches take time. There is much to learn from programmes such as A Better Start, Family Hubs, Early Learning Communities.



3 Implementation is key to successful outcomes

Interventions are often found to be more successful on a smaller scale, and when delivered in “real-world” contexts are less successful.

The identification and testing of core practices / principles that can be more flexibly adapted to different contexts and embedded in everyday practice (i.e. “principled adaptation vs “programme fidelity”) is a promising approach (e.g., see [Early Years Library](#), and to some extent the [Early Years Evidence Store](#)).

4 Interventions in a broken system won’t work

Early childhood needs to be prioritised at the system level, with effort in the following areas in particular:

- Strong partnerships and coalitions across the sector.
- Alignment on a vision for the sector and how to measure progress.
- Better data sharing mechanisms within layers of the system.
- See also Appendix 4 for an overview of effective systems and approaches to 3rd sector funding for system transformation



SUMMARY: WHAT WORKS TO IMPROVE CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES

The review particularly highlighted the following approaches. Note that some approaches targeted outcomes across multiple areas and are categorised here according to the most relevant.

SAFE | *Personal security*



- Prevention services through parenting interventions, home visiting and couples' work
- Approaches to reduce domestic abuse through community-based interventions, media campaigns, and home-visiting
- Approaches to reduce child maltreatment through parenting interventions (including group parenting programmes and individual and family therapy) and home visiting interventions
- Policies at the local and national levels to reduce adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

HEALTHY | *Physical wellbeing*



- Breastfeeding support through group, individual and online interventions
- Approaches for improving child nutrition through school breakfast clubs and home visiting
- Interventions supporting maternal health and mother-infant relationships through health visiting and maternity care
- Parent support through interventions promoting nurturing care and volunteer programmes
- Policies aimed at improving infant and child nutrition and oral health

HAPPY | *Social, emotional and personal wellbeing*



- Quality ECE provision through programmes that promote explicit teaching pedagogy and play (e.g. scripted programmes)
- Parental interventions and home visits supporting maternal mental health
- Structured music programmes

LEARNING | *Cognitive and metacognitive development*



- Education providers engaging with parents to support learning
- Parental interventions (e.g. home visiting, group-based programmes)
- Programmes that promote explicit teaching pedagogy and enable children to practice new learning through play (e.g. scripted programmes)
- Supporting quality of ECE provision through workforce support (staff preparation, training and support)
- Policies aimed at improving universal access to quality ECE
- Policies aimed at the integration of local services

ENGAGED | *Feel engaged in a community*



- Enhancing parent and child relationships with psychological interventions
- Supporting fathers through home visiting and parenting interventions
- Supporting underserved communities through improvement of housing and neighbourhood conditions
- Policies that support community engagement

ANALYSIS



RATINGS USED IN THE ANALYSIS

Analysis focus	Method	Evidence rating	Definition
Evidence strength	<p>The desk research targeted existing / prominent reviews of the evidence in the key outcome areas of focus, as well as key reports identified by funders and key influencers in the sector.</p>	✓✓	Several key sources reviewed indicated substantial evidence
	<p>The overall judgements made on the strength of evidence are based on the most frequent conclusions across these reviews and reports; they are not meant to be granular and precise.</p> <p>This analysis was not a systematic and comprehensive review of the evidence and did not use formal criteria to rate the strength of evidence (e.g., based on effect sizes, number of replications, etc.). It is thus meant to be interpreted in an indicative way only.</p>	✓	Only 1 or 2 key sources reviewed indicated evidence, or indicated limited, mixed or emerging evidence



All children are safe

SAFE | Personal security (1/2)

All children should: have a secure shelter; be physically safe at home, at schools and in their community; be protected from severe and immediate threats to their health, happiness and wellbeing.

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Early help and prevention services through parenting interventions, home visiting and couples' work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holistic, ongoing package of support across agencies (e.g. across children's social care and adult support services). Comprehensive strategies, involving universal, selected and targeted interventions that are part of a wider, whole-system approach. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of the delivery and effectiveness of early help. Lack of research on maltreated children in population-representative cohort studies, rather than solely relying on reports about officially registered cases, which are often a highly biased subset. Lack of understanding of the delivery of services to families and the best mix of digital and in-person services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cohort study designed to gather in-depth data on maltreated children Rigorous, longitudinal research on Family Hubs, the services that they provide, how they are organised, and how families use them.
Approaches to reduce domestic abuse through community-based interventions, media campaign, and home-visiting focusing on domestic abuse and support women who are abused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raising awareness of domestic abuse in the community and about services to address it. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of the long-term effects of home visiting interventions. Lack of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions designed for pre-school children who have been exposed to domestic abuse. 	



All children are safe

SAFE | Personal security (2/2)

All children should: have a secure shelter; be physically safe at home, at schools and in their community; be protected from severe and immediate threats to their health, happiness and wellbeing.

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Approaches to reduce child maltreatment through parenting interventions (including group parenting programmes and individual and family therapy) and home visiting interventions in early childhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored to the individual needs of families and delivered by professionals specifically trained in that intervention. Focus on increasing parental self-confidence and improving parenting skills. Interventions of 6 months duration are most effective. Intensive, 'wrap-around' family support. Combining behavioural management strategies with systemic family therapy to help families develop new strategies for engaging more positively with each other. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to prevent or reduce child maltreatment is mixed, with limited evidence of lasting effects from high quality RCT's, particularly in a UK context. Lack of understanding of what long-term ongoing support parents need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rigorous RCT examining lasting effects of interventions in the UK context
Policies at the local and national levels to reduce adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the strength of national and local systems for preventing childhood adversity and providing support to the families and children who are the most vulnerable. Providing evidence-based interventions, both universal and targeted, in response to population needs. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More research needed on the impact of policies tackling ACEs in the UK context. 	

✓✓ Key sources indicate there is substantial evidence ✓ Key sources indicate there is limited, mixed or emerging evidence



All children are healthy

HEALTHY | *Physical wellbeing (1/3)*

All children should: be protected from preventable disease; be free from chronic illness; have healthy lifestyles (nutrition, exercise); have good mental health.

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Breastfeeding support to mothers through group, individual and online interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality support requires knowledge of biological basis of breastmilk, psychological importance of breastfeeding, and common challenges that mothers face with breastfeeding. 	✓✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of studies of interventions in the workplace for new mothers. 	
Interventions for improving child nutrition through school breakfast clubs and home visiting programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holistic approaches aimed to improve diet and increase physical activity through behavioural and environmental approaches Involve family, teachers and school environment. Intensive interventions with clear messages, contextualised & material resources for families. 	✓✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attention to social and environmental factors is given insufficient attention, particularly since narrow interventions focusing on single aspects of behaviour are unlikely to achieve long-term change in efforts to tackle health outcomes. 	



All children are healthy

HEALTHY | *Physical wellbeing (2/3)*

All children should: be protected from preventable disease; be free from chronic illness; have healthy lifestyles (nutrition, exercise); have good mental health.

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Interventions supporting maternal health and to improve mother-infant relationships through health visiting and maternity care, and home visiting programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying women in need or at-risk early during and after pregnancy. Trained professionals in universal health services for assessing maternal mental health problems and arranging for support. Coordinated/integrated services are key to success of the policies. Using an early relational health framework (improving early relationships with the child) 	✓✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of what works to support minority ethnic families for improved health outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An evidence gap map to lay out what we do and don't know about improving outcomes for different UK minority ethnic groups (systematically capture research on the effectiveness of various activities, including outreach, targeted interventions or wider workforce training)
Parent support through interventions promoting nurturing care and volunteer programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of several behavioural change techniques, and support for both the mother and the father. Use of volunteers, especially for families from minority ethnic communities. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of the delivery of services to families and the best mix of digital and in-person services. 	



All children are healthy

HEALTHY | *Physical wellbeing (3/3)*

All children should: be protected from preventable disease; be free from chronic illness; have healthy lifestyles (nutrition, exercise); have good mental health.

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Policies aimed at improving infant and child nutrition and oral health (e.g., Scottish national infant feeding strategy, Sure Start, local programmes reducing cost of fruit and vegetables for families)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal and targeted policies in the UK have proven successful, especially in low-income areas, indicating benefits of targeting to families from less advantaged backgrounds. • Advocacy and coordinated/ integrated services are key to success of the policies. • Well-resourced multi-year, holistic, place-based approaches, with effective data sharing mechanisms. 	✓✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of research to follow children's outcomes over time, to examine the long-term impacts of health-related policies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research on how to improve take-up of provision by lower income families • Rigorous longitudinal research on the impact of quality ECE on sustained health outcomes • Comparisons of different early childhood services across the four nations and internationally



All children are happy

HAPPY | Social, emotional and personal wellbeing (1/2)

All children should: Have their social needs met (relationships with others); have their emotional needs met (relationship with self); have their personal needs met (mentally stimulated, able to pursue interests).

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Supporting quality of ECE provision through programmes that promote explicit (“intentional”) teaching pedagogy and enable children to practice new learning through play (e.g. scripted programmes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Intentional” pedagogical approaches designed specifically for the setting and that includes group work and child-led activities improve social-emotional well-being. • Setting staff consider a child’s interests when choosing activities. • Children’s play is valued and used to teach many aspects of the curriculum. • Using an early relational health framework (improving early relationships with the child) 	✓✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child development domains, such as well-being and critical skills, need to be examined more broadly in studies of early childhood education and care quality. • Lack of quality evidence on the role of creativity and the expressive arts within the early years’ curriculum and its contribution to wellbeing. • Lack of awareness of creative pedagogy and the skilfulness required to develop quality play-based, creative, and imaginative work with young children. • Lack of understanding the role of digital technology in children’s development and wellbeing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include social, emotional and wellbeing outcomes in evaluations of interventions in settings.
Structured music programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured music programmes foster self-regulation in the early childhood and shared music making plays a role in mother-infant bonding. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited evidence on structured music programmes in the community or in ECE settings. 	



All children are happy

HAPPY | Social, emotional and personal wellbeing (2/2)

All children should: Have their social needs met (relationships with others); have their emotional needs met (relationship with self); have their personal needs met (mentally stimulated, able to pursue interests).

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Interventions supporting maternal mental health such as parental interventions and home visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using an early relational health framework (improving early relationships with the child). The evidence suggests that to improve child outcomes it is necessary to address the mother's mental health challenges and parenting behaviour to improve interactions with the child. Multi-generational approaches that combine environmental (mitigating stressors brought on by poverty/other adversity) and individual interventions (providing training and support to adults to improve skills such as parenting capacity) 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of what works to support minority ethnic families for improved maternal health outcomes. Lack of understanding of the delivery of services to families and the best mix of digital and in-person services. 	



All children are learning

LEARNING | Cognitive and metacognitive development (1/3)

All children should: be gaining the knowledge and skills they need for later childhood and adult life (academic, practical, socio-emotional and personal); be developing their own interests and talents; be learning how to learn.

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Education providers engaging with parents to support learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-designed and personalised communication between providers and parents; giving practical guidance and encouragement about things they can do at home, such as reading together. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of what happens at home, surveys of parents are lacking, have bad response rates, and have problems of interpretation. 	
Parental interventions (e.g. home visiting, group-based programmes) to enhance parent and carer capability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parenting programmes need to be sufficiently intensive and focus on active learning for parents, with more intensive and sustained support to parents from low-income households, with sensitivity to avoid stigma. Using an early relational health framework (improving early relationships with the child). 	✓✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of fathers' changing roles (especially in single parent and blended families), and how to best engage them in their child's learning. Lack of understanding of how families are using digital technologies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of EdTech solutions to provide insights on the interactions in the home Research on use of digital technology in the home
Supporting quality of ECE provision through workforce support (staff preparation, training and support)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustained staff training with ample opportunities for practice and feedback. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of research on effective approaches to initial and on-going training and how to make these transferable for home learning environments (HLEs). Lack of understanding of how to recruit and retain quality EC staff. 	



All children are learning

LEARNING | Cognitive and metacognitive development (2/3)

All children should: be gaining the knowledge and skills they need for later childhood and adult life (academic, practical, socio-emotional and personal); be developing their own interests and talents; be learning how to learn.

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Supporting quality of ECE provision through programmes that promote explicit (“intentional”) teaching pedagogy and enable children to practice new learning through play (e.g. scripted programmes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality of provision is more important than quantity, especially for children from low-income families (ideally from age 2). Teacher-led provision is more impactful. Programmes that are adaptable to different provision contexts are more successful, or the identification of core elements of programmes (discrete practices) that can easily be integrated into staff’s daily interactions with children. 	✓✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of scaling of interventions in real-world contexts. Lack of understanding of most impactful approaches to use with children under 2 years. Lack of understanding of how to improve skills in areas other than language, early literacy and social and emotional development. Lack of understanding of the role of digital technology in children’s development and learning. Many programmes have evidence of impact at smaller scale only. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding the continuation/update and testing of the implementation and feasibility of the EIF Early Years Library. Implementation research on programmes that have shown promise.
Policies aimed at improving early learning system through the integration of local services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-resourced multi-year, holistic, place-based approaches, with effective data sharing mechanisms. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of wider awareness of the importance/benefits of early education. Lack of understanding of the policy incentives for investing in early childhood. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research on how to improve take-up of provision by lower income families Rigorous longitudinal research on the impact of quality ECE on sustained learning outcomes in the UK



All children are learning

LEARNING | Cognitive and metacognitive development (3/3)

All children should: be gaining the knowledge and skills they need for later childhood and adult life (academic, practical, socio-emotional and personal); be developing their own interests and talents; be learning how to learn.

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Policies aimed at improving early learning system through the integration of local services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-resourced multi-year, holistic, place-based approaches, with effective data sharing mechanisms. 	✓✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of rigorous follow-up of children and families over time. Lack of understanding of the effect of the digital divide on families with young children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-designed longitudinal research. Comparisons of different early childhood services across the four nations and internationally



All children feel engaged

Engaged | *Feel engaged in a community (1/2)*

All children should: be happy with their friendships, have family they get on well with and are happy with their family life; feel they belong to a group and community; have a choice of things to do and places to go in their local area.

Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Enhancing parent and infant / child relationships with psychological interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address maternal depression and parenting behaviour to improve interactions with the child. Interventions and support for both the couple and the parenting. Multi-generational approaches that combine environmental (mitigating stressors brought on by poverty/other adversity) and individual interventions (providing training and support to adults to improve skills such as parenting capacity) Using an early relational health framework (improving early relationships with the child) 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of how child development maps against what services offer (or don't offer). 	
Policies that support community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-resourced multi-year, holistic, place-based approaches, with effective data sharing mechanism. 	✓✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of long-term follow-up research of policies that enable programmes like the Family Hubs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rigorous, longitudinal research on Family Hubs, the services that they provide, how they are organised, and how families use them.



All children feel engaged

Engaged | *Feel engaged in a community (2/2)*

All children should: be happy with their friendships, have family they get on well with and are happy with their family life; feel they belong to a group and community; have a choice of things to do and places to go in their local area.

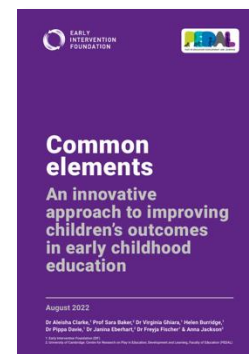
Solutions / Approaches (WHAT)	Primary enablers / success elements (HOW)	Evidence	Key gaps	Example follow-up research
Supporting fathers / male caregivers through home visiting and parenting interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fostering a productive relationship with fathers and male carers which requires to change the mind-sets of health workers and other providers into valuing the positive role that fathers can play in family life. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of fathers changing roles, especially in single parent and blended families and how that influences young children's lives and futures. Lack of understanding of the role of non-resident fathers in lone and blended families. Lack of understanding of the approaches that can support fathers' involvement in young children's lives after separation. 	
Supporting underserved communities through interventions to improve housing and neighbourhood conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support for family-friendly communities where childhood is prioritised locally. Interventions to improve housing (e.g. appropriate size, suitable warmth) may have positive effects on relationships. 	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of research to better understand the impact of living in privately rented housing on children and families. Lack of understanding of what Better Start 10-year communities learned as part of the initiative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the common outcomes framework to consult / cocreate with communities locally-relevant place-based approaches to reach the goals.

KEY REPORT HIGHLIGHTS



KEY REPORT SUMMARIES

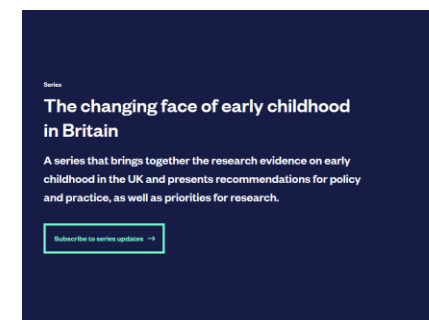
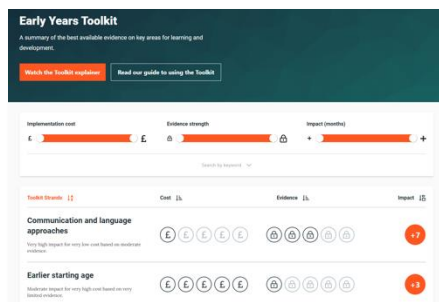
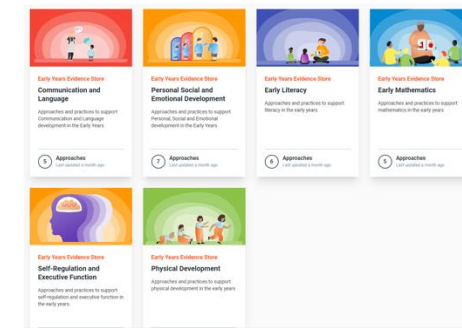
From the analysis of 105 relevant publications, the following publications particularly stood out as relevant and helpful. We have pulled out reasons why we think they stand out in the following slides and would encourage readers to access the full versions of any that seem especially useful for their work.



Download the Early Years Library

Download the full Early Years Library

Language & early literacy	Early numeracy	Social & emotional learning
Full series: intro + 4 booklets	Full series: intro + 4 booklets	Full series: intro + 6 booklets
Series introduction	Series introduction	Series introduction
Language and listening	Pattern and shape	Recognising and expressing emotions
Phonological awareness	Measurement	Regulating emotions
Print and letter knowledge	Numbers and counting	Communicating with others
Early writing	Adding and taking away	Working together
		Developing positive relationships
		Resolving conflict



Note: Reports are hyperlinked above.



The role of early language development & social mobility

Why is this report highlighted?

- This is a very accessible, yet comprehensive review of the evidence around what supports early language and communication skills.
- It provides a good overview of the importance of the home environment and early provision, and considers aspects surrounding social mobility, SEND and the relevant UK policies. The report also provides a useful overview of seminal UK studies, including EPPSE, SEED, etc.
- It reviews strategies that have been shown to be effective for parents and for early childhood staff.
- It offers insightful views on tensions within the research field and key gaps that should be addressed.

Bera (Siraj, Mathers, Gross & Buchanan). (2024). *The role of early language development & social mobility*. [Link](#).



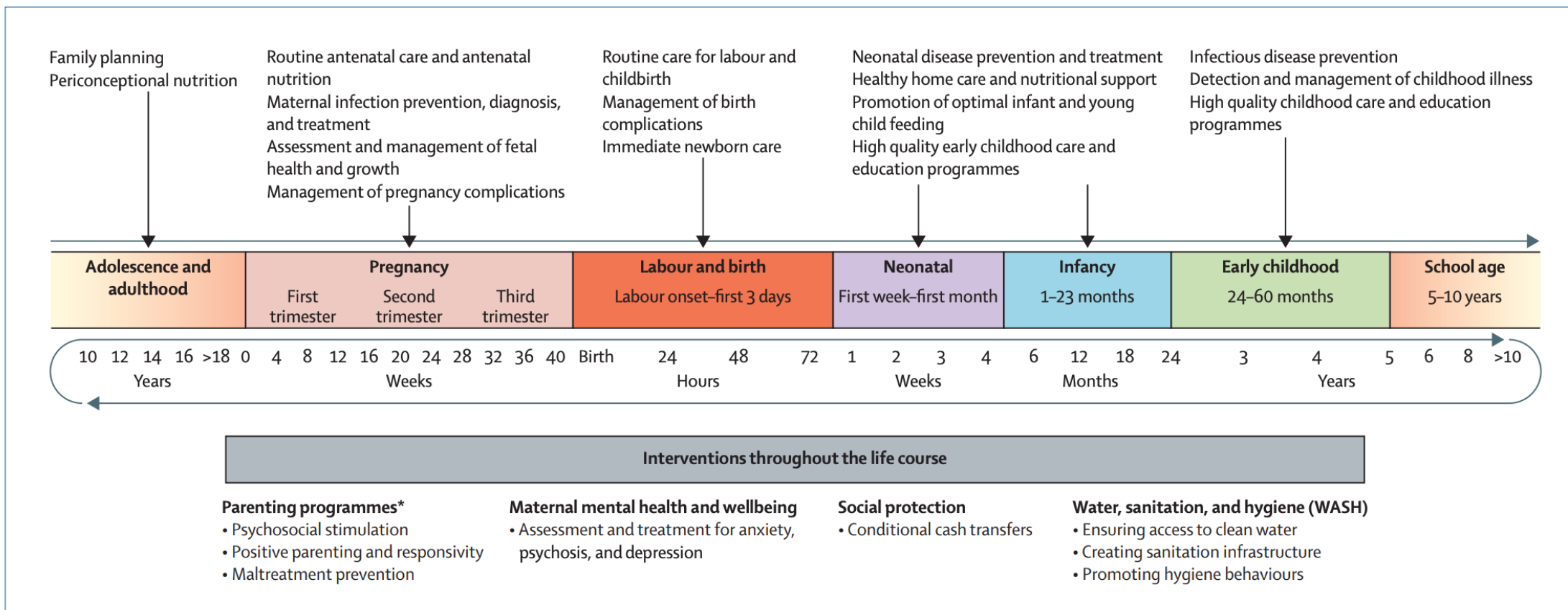
Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale

Why is this report highlighted?

- This is a seminal series of publications on children under 3. The latest version, focused on 3+, was published in at the end of November 2024.
- Although the focus is on low- and middle-income country contexts, the science and evidence is still widely applicable to the UK context.
- Provides an often-cited and used visual of evidenced-based interventions that affect aspects of nurturing care (see next page).
- Advocates that the early childhood development agenda would benefit from an expanded definition of evidence that includes and goes beyond cataloguing data from rigorous programme evaluations. We need strong science, sound implementation, sustained community engagement, rigorous evaluation, and an uncompromising commitment to breakthrough impact.

The Lancet. (2016). *Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale*. [Link](#).





Evidence-based interventions that affect aspects of nurturing care.

Source: The Lancet. (2016). Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale. An Executive Summary for The Lancet's Series. Page 4. [Link](#).



Evidence Review: Improving the Early Learning Outcomes of Children Growing up in Poverty – A Rapid Review of Evidence

Why is this report highlighted?

- This is a very comprehensive, rigorous (and long!) report that reviews the evidence of what works to improve early learning outcomes especially for children growing up in poverty. Although long, it is easy to navigate and find key information.
- The primary outcomes of focus are early language, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy, but it also covers socio-emotional development and physical health and development outcomes.
- This review and associated Toolkit (see other box to the side) were developed to inform Save the Children's Early Learning Communities.
- Focused on targeting the complex, clustering, and cumulative nature of social disadvantage in early life.
- Provides detailed information on features of effective implementation to enable effective services, as well as key considerations for system change.

Dartington Service Design Lab, Save the Children, University of Plymouth, CEI. (2018). Evidence Review: Improving the Early Learning Outcomes of Children Growing up in Poverty – A Rapid Review of Evidence. [Link](#)

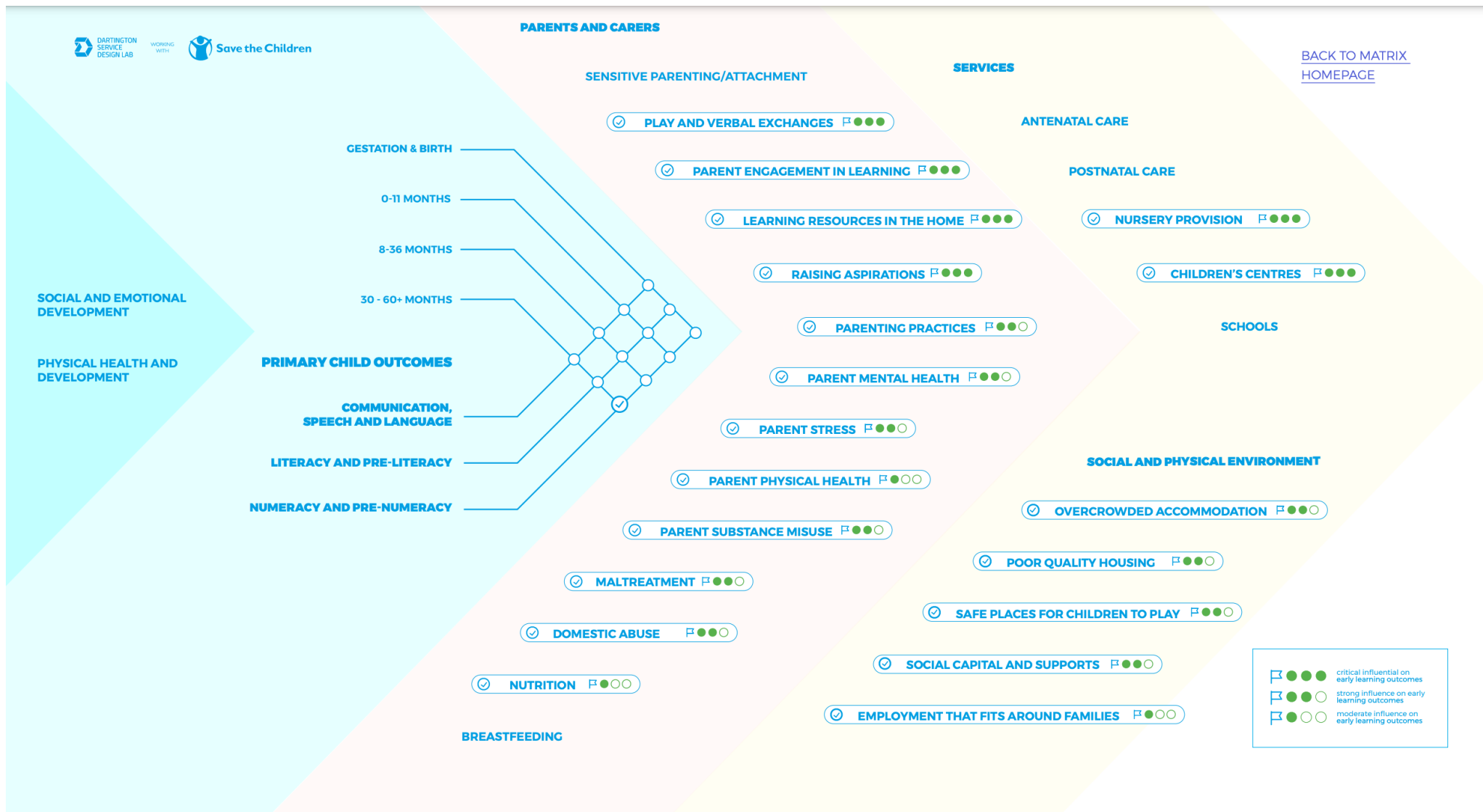


Early Learning Communities Toolkit: An Evidence-informed Guide To Improving Children's Early Learning Outcomes

Why is this report highlighted?

- This is a comprehensive toolkit to use at local level, to identify needs and plan an evidence-based strategy. It builds on the evidence review (see box on left).
- It presents the evidence on an interactive matrix that presents proximal and distal factors influencing outcomes and associated evidence-based approaches to impact. The matrix provides the strength of the evidence for what works for improving the outcome through each proximal and distal influencing factor. (See a visual representation of the matrix on the next page.)
- It provides useful guidance and structure for communities to identify evidence-based approaches to tackling local challenges.

Dartington Service Design Lab. (2019). Early Learning Communities Toolkit. [Link](#).



An example of the evidence matrix, from page 95 onwards.
 Source: Dartington Service Design Lab. (2019). Early Learning Communities Toolkit. [Link](#).



Common Elements: An Innovative Approach to Improving Children's Outcomes in Early Childhood Education

Why is this report highlighted?

- A comprehensive review of evidence-based early childhood education programmes that led to the development of the Early Years Library resource for early childhood practitioners (see box on right), in partnership with PEDAL and Nuffield Foundation.
- Examined evidenced-based programmes and extracted common elements, discrete practices, routines, strategies and behaviours that can be integrated into practitioners' daily interactions with children and created a library with tips for practitioners.
- A total of 55 discrete practice elements were identified as common across ECE programmes: 18 for language and early literacy skills, 16 for early numeracy skills, and 21 for social and emotional skills.

Early Intervention Foundation. (2022). Common elements: An innovative approach to improving children's outcomes in early childhood education. [Link](#).



Early Years Library

Why is this report highlighted?

- This organises a collection of evidence-based tips and practices that can be integrated into daily interactions with children for education practitioners to support young children's development.
- The Library is organised around language & early literacy, early numeracy and social & emotional learning. Each series contains booklets ready to use by practitioners.
- The Library is in Beta version and the resource is ready to be tested, to understand how it can be used in practice and its potential for impact. This will ensure that these resources are feasible, desirable, viable and ready for full-scale trial.

Early Intervention Foundation. (2022). Early Years Library. [Link](#).

Download the Early Years Library

Download the full Early Years Library

Language & early literacy	Early numeracy	Social & emotional learning
Full series: Intro + 4 booklets	Full series: Intro + 4 booklets	Full series: Intro + 4 booklets
➤ Series Introduction	➤ Series Introduction	➤ Series Introduction
➤ Language and listening	➤ Pattern and shape	➤ Recognising and expressing emotions
➤ Phonological awareness	➤ Measurement	➤ Regulating emotions
➤ Print and letter knowledge	➤ Numbers and counting	➤ Communicating with others
➤ Early writing	➤ Adding and taking away	➤ Working together
		➤ Developing positive relationships
		➤ Problem-solving

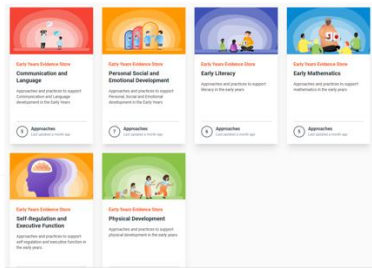


EEF Early Years Evidence Store

Why is this report highlighted?

- This website provides a compilation of evidence-based approaches that educators can apply across contexts. It is very practical and a great example of translating evidence into usable products to improve practice and outcomes.
- The Evidence Store has been designed to support Stronger Practice Hubs work with early childhood providers, but it can be used by everyone working in early childhood.
- For each area, how-to guides are provided to help develop these outcomes, focusing on setting practices:
 - Language and communication
 - Personal, social and emotional development
 - Early literacy
 - Early maths
 - Self-regulation and executive function
 - Physical development
- Methodological summaries are also provided for each section.

EEF. (Ongoing). *Early Years Evidence Store*. [Link](#).

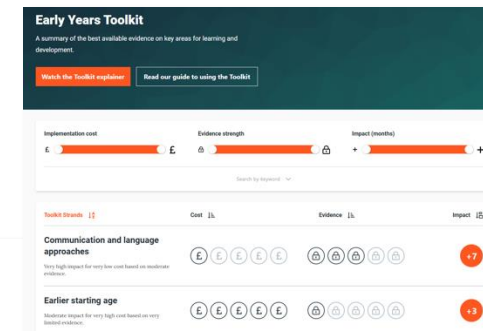


EEF Early Years Toolkit

Why is this report highlighted?

- This toolkit is built on a series of evidence reviews and highlights areas for intervention and the potential they have for impact, the strength of evidence, and their cost. This is a very useful resource as the reviews are very rigorous, and this toolkit provides a comprehensive overview of the evidence in these specific areas.
- Interventions with the most promise, i.e. the highest impact, lowest cost, and moderate/extensive evidence, focus on improving communication and language, early literacy, and parental engagement.
- Extra hours are shown to have high impact, but is very expensive and has limited evidence.
- There is much less evidence in all other areas, but the most promising include: early numeracy interventions, physical development interventions, play-based learning, self-regulation strategies, and SEL interventions.

EEF. (Ongoing). *Early Years Toolkit*. [Link](#).



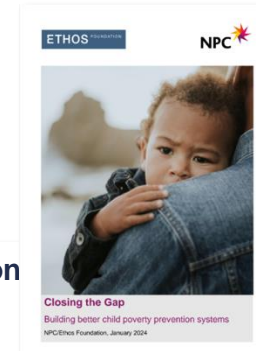


Changing Local Systems to Improve Early Learning Outcomes

Why is this report highlighted?

- This resource shares some key insights from Save the Children's Early Learning Communities programme. It is designed to be a learning resource for systems change programmes, practitioners and funders.
- The report outlines 10 interconnected and mutually reinforcing system conditions identified as key to shifting early learning systems.
- Case studies / examples are provided to exemplify the system conditions.

NPC, Collaborate, Save the Children. (2023). Changing Local Systems to Improve Early Learning Outcomes. [Link](#).

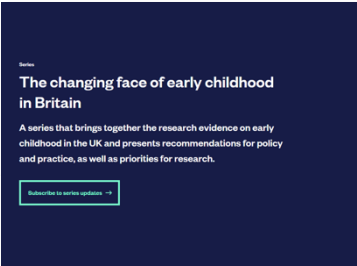


Closing the Gap: Building Better Child Poverty Prevention Systems

Why is this report highlighted?

- A system view of designing effective services to reduce child poverty, highlighting what an effective system of child poverty prevention looks like, from the services provided to the principles underpinning relationships within the system.
- It sets out the key levers for change, recommended areas for investment by funders that have the potential to create effective system of child poverty prevention in the UK.
- It provides a really interesting [interactive map](#) that explores the different components of the system, roles of different actors, etc..

NPC. (2024). Closing the Gap: Building Better Child Poverty Prevention Systems. [Link](#).



The changing face of early childhood in Britain

Why is this report highlighted?

- This series of publications by The Nuffield Foundation brings together research on early childhood in the UK, recommendations for policy and practice, and priorities for research.
- The series consists of six evidence reviews and supporting roundtables, webinars and parent engagement sessions, culminating in a final report.
- Each review explores the evidence on a different dimension of early childhood **and identifies key questions for research and policy.**

Nuffield Foundation. (2022). *The changing face of early childhood in Britain.* [Link](#).



Implementing Effective Approaches in the Early Years: The Sutton Trust and Nuffield Foundation Discussion Day

Why is this report highlighted?

- A discussion day was held in April 2024 with implementers, implementation specialists, developers and funders of programmes designed for early years settings. The insights from this day are shared in a summary key insights report, slides, and a blog, and are of great relevance to the funders' group.
- Questions addressed in the documents include:
 - What does good implementation of evidence-based programmes look like?
 - What are the barriers and enablers to successful implementation in early years, especially private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) settings?
 - What approaches could funders take to ensure that developers of new interventions pay attention to implementation issues from the start?

Sutton Trust and Nuffield Foundation. (2024). *The important role of implementation in early years: Discussion day key insights.* [Link](#).

APPENDICES



APPENDIX 1: KEY DATA SOURCES (1/2)

Who	Title	Location	Frequency	What high-level focus area/s does this data source best map to?					
				C.functn	Engaged	Learning	Happy	Healthy	Safe
Centre for Longitudinal Studies	Millennium Cohort Study	UK	Ongoing	x	x	x	x	x	x
Department for Education (2021)	Study of early education and development (SEED)	England	Fixed		x	x	x		
Department for Education (DfE)	Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers	England	Annual			x			
Department for Education (DfE)	Statistics: early years foundation stage profile	England	Annual			x			
Department for Education (DfE)	Early Years Census	England	Annual			x			
Department for Education (DfE) / Ipsos	Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents	England	Annual			x			
Department for Education (DfE) / Ofsted	Early years and childcare statistics	England	Twice a year			x			
Impera Analytics	Place Insight	UK	Ongoing	x	x	x	x	x	x
Kindred2	School Readiness Annual Survey	UK	Annual			x			
Local Insight	N/A	UK	Ongoing	x	x	x	x	x	x
MyCake	N/A	UK	Ongoing	x	x	x	x	x	x
Nesta	The future of early-years data	UK	Pending	x	x	x	x	x	x
OECD	Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey	OECD	Every 6 years			x			



APPENDIX 1: KEY DATA SOURCES (2/2)

Who	Title	Location	Frequency	What high-level focus area/s does this data source best map to?					
				C.functr	Engaged	Learning	Happy	Healthy	Safe
OECD	The International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS)	OECD	Once so far		x	x	x		
ParentKind	National Parent Survey	UK	Annual	x	x	x	x	x	x
The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood / Ipsos	Public Perceptions Survey	UK	Annual	x	x	x	x	x	x
Understanding Society	The UK Household Longitudinal Study	UK	Ongoing	x	x	x	x	x	x



APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEWEES AND QUESTIONS

Questions	Name	Organisation	Title
What are the best sources of evidence and data for what works to improve early childhood outcomes and how?	Beverley Barnett-Jones	What Works in Children's Social Care	Associate Director / Trustee
Which type of outcome do we best know how to improve? Which do we least know how to improve?	Elaine Fulton	For Baby's Sake Trust (formerly)	Consultant
What are the best solutions for improving [each category of outcomes] (and for outcomes more holistically)?	Eleanor Ireland	Nuffield Foundation	Programme Head
What's the best (and most convincing) evidence you've seen about the ROI for investing in the EY?	Joan Lombardi	Early Opportunities	Founder
What do we know about HOW solutions work across different contexts / for different target beneficiaries? What don't we know about this?	Kathy Sylva	University of Oxford	Professor of Educational Psychology
What's stopping highly evidenced approaches being scaled and what's stopping gaps in understanding from being filled?	Peter Grigg	Home Start UK	CEO
What do you know that doesn't work – and why does it fail?	Sally Hogg	Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood (formerly at PEDAL)	Assistant Director, Programme and Impact
Are there myths or misunderstandings of what works and how?	Sara Vanatta	Education Endowment Foundation	Early Years Lead
How do you value different evidence/sources and why?	Sarah Cattan	Nesta	Mission Director
Where is the biggest need in the sector that funders, either individually or collectively, could help address?	Stéphanie Jamet	OECD	Senior Analyst
	Tim Hobbs	Dartington Service Design Lab	CEO
	Tom Harbour	Learning with Parents	CEO and Founder



APPENDIX 3: FURTHER RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our review of the evidence highlighted some potential research questions to consider, which primarily map onto the following outcomes*

SAFE | *Personal security*

- **Reducing maltreatment:** What are the long-term impacts of interventions aimed at preventing or reducing child maltreatment, the reasons for effect reduction over time and the ongoing support needed by families?

HEALTHY | *Physical wellbeing*

- **Mental and respiratory health:** How do mental and emotional well-being and respiratory health relate to each other?

HAPPY | *Social, emotional and personal wellbeing*

- **Home visits:** What are the long-term effects of home visiting interventions?

LEARNING | *Cognitive and metacognitive development*

- **Quality provision:** What does quality provision look like for children under 2? What are the indicators of quality across types of settings in the UK and internationally? Can quality in ECEC be effectively and efficiently measured? Who should be doing it?
- **ECEC workforce:** How might a long-term strategy, including a review of the funding model, improve the low pay and low status of the ECEC workforce? How do we fix the EY Workforce Crisis?
- **Measuring the home environment:** Can it be effectively but efficiently measured?
- **Parental engagement:** How can ECEC settings support parents and carers to enhance home learning and development?
- **Fathers:** What is the role of fathers and how can they best be engaged in their children's learning?
- **Understanding the world:** What are effective content and pedagogic approaches for science, technology and the wider aspects of Understanding the World in early years classrooms?
- **Creativity and the arts:** What is the role of creativity and the expressive arts within an EY curriculum and its contribution to wellbeing, learning and development across all areas of learning?
- **Transition from EYFS to KS1:** How does the curriculum and pedagogic transition from the EYFS to Key Stage 1 affect learning progressions and outcomes?

ENGAGED | *Feel engaged in a community*

- ...

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL | *Structural and underlying issues*

- **Structural features and process quality:** What is the relationship between their combined or mediated effects in EY settings on children's outcomes?
- **Mixed market or standardisation:** What are the pros and cons of a mixed market of ECEC provision—is there a case for more standardisation, akin to schools?
- **Focus on disadvantage?** Should public policy and investment prioritise ECEC for disadvantaged children, over the wider population? What are the funding and structural implications?
- **ECE funding models:** What model would increase affordability for parents, and quality and sustainability of provision?
- **Funded ECE take up:** What can be done to improve take-up of funded places by children who are most likely to benefit?
- **Joining up services:** How can services for 0-4-year-olds be better coordinated? What would a more integrated experience look like for families?
- **The four nations:** How do early childhood services differ across the four UK nations?
- **Health, place, ethnicity and deprivation:** How do their associations intersect, compound and accumulate?
- **Building better understandings of poverty:** How do we build a better understanding of: 1- Deep and persistent poverty; 2- The effects of rising in-work poverty; 3- The impact of living in privately rented housing on children and families?
- **Levels of adversity:** What is the prevalence of childhood adversity (broadly defined) in the UK?
- **Birth rate:** What are the implications of the growth of one-child families?
- **Family changes:** How do changes in family form and SES factors affect social and emotional development?
- **Blended families:** What are the implications of the growth of 'blended families' for young children? What role do non-resident fathers play in lone and blended families? What measures can support these fathers' involvement in children's lives?
- **Returning to and balancing work:** What shapes the decision for mothers to return to work? How does balancing work and care affect parent-child interactions?
- **COVID-19 legacy:** Will the economic and social consequences of COVID-19 have a transient effect on children's experiences and life chances or will we see their outcomes impaired in later childhood and beyond?
- **Complex needs:** How do we work effectively with the families of children with complex needs, especially babies? What are the consequences for them?

*This list is not intended to be comprehensive.



APPENDIX 4: EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVE SYSTEMS

In “Closing the Gap”, NPC/Ethos Foundation take a system view of designing effective services to reduce child poverty. Elements of particular relevance include:

Evidence of effective systems:

1. Services with regular and early contact with parents (i.e. before birth and beyond) for prevention through early intervention
2. Quality provision for early childhood provision (i.e. professionalised)
3. Sustained support and funding to avoid short-term interventions which tend to not have long-term impact
4. Coordination of services within the system that is separately resourced (and use of MDTs and backbone infrastructure)
5. Support for parents to navigate the system and its resources (e.g. link workers building trust relationships; use of 1-stop shops/hubs)
6. Focus on transition points as they create vulnerabilities (e.g. into primary school)

The HOW of effective systems:

1. Provides the necessary time, capacity and stability (investment and long-term commitment)
2. Service models are place-based, locally driven and contextualised
3. Services & approach embed EDI
4. Support follows the subsidiary principle (central level role is to support proximal players)

Funding for 3rd sector approaches should:

1. Cover core and coordination costs
2. Be locally contextualised
3. Pool resources where necessary
4. Coordinate across the system
5. Cover pilot and innovative systemic approaches
6. Be long-term, pragmatic, flexible
7. Support and mirror ecosystem principles & practice
8. Be responsive, not directive
9. Provide resources for skills-building
10. Prioritise prevention & early intervention



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