

Press Release

Thursday 14 September 2023

Retrieved from: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/news-events/press-releases/national-roll-out-of-covid-recovery-programme-boosted-young-childrens-language-skills-by-four-months/>

This press release was first published by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) on Thursday 14 September.

New independent evaluation of Programme for four- and five- year olds

The national roll-out of a programme to support young children’s language skills in response to the COVID-19 pandemic had a positive impact on their development, according to an independent evaluation published by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) today.

The Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI), created by the founders of OxEd and Assessment, was offered to all state-funded schools in England with Reception classes across three academic years (2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23), funded by the Department for Education. Over 6,500 schools registered to take part in the first year, while a further 4,000 signed up across the second and third years of delivery.

The independent evaluation, conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), found that children who took part in the programme made on average four months’ additional progress in their language skills, compared to children in participating schools who didn’t receive the intervention. The study looked at data from 10,800 children in 350 schools who registered for the second year of the national roll-out (2021-22).

Developed by researchers at the Universities of Oxford, Sheffield and York, the programme trains school staff, usually teaching assistants or early years educators, to deliver individual and small-group sessions to four- and five-year-olds to improve their vocabulary, active listening and narrative skills. For example, in one session, the adult tells the children “The Gingerbread Man” story, before working with them – and Ted the puppet – to put pictures of the story in order. In another, the children paint handprints and then wash their hands to practise the target vocabulary “clean”, “wash” and “dry”.

Further analysis in today’s report found that children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) made on average seven months’ additional progress as a result of receiving the programme, suggesting that NELI could help to close the language development gap between socio-economically disadvantaged children and their peers.

The findings also showed that the impact was greater for children who received more of the programme sessions compared with children who received fewer sessions. Due to ongoing disruption caused by the pandemic, many schools included in the evaluation – which examined the impact of NELI in the academic year 2021-22 – were unable to deliver all the sessions as intended. But even for children who

received fewer sessions, there was an average positive impact on their language outcomes.

Since 2012, the EEF has funded three evaluations of NELI to test its impact at increasing scale, all of which have shown consistently positive effects on young children's language development. The Department for Education funded the national roll-out in response to emerging evidence suggesting young children's language development had been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. They recently confirmed funding for a fourth year of delivery, to further support young children to recover from the impact of the pandemic.

The EEF is currently recruiting early years settings to take part in other projects, including a broad range of early years programmes designed to support young children's emerging language or maths skills. These include the Early Years Conversation Project which provides educators with professional development to promote high-quality adult-child interactions during play.

Early years providers can search for opportunities to get involved in on the [EEF website](#).

Professor Becky Francis CBE, Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, said:

“Time and time again, the Nuffield Early Language Intervention has proven its effectiveness in boosting young children’s language development.

“It’s hard to overestimate how exciting it is to see a programme have a significant positive impact on a national scale. This gives early years educators a programme that they can trust to help children needing additional support with their communication and language skills, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

“Today’s report is also a great example of how evidence can be successfully scaled and mobilised to address a real and pressing need. The success of the roll-out is testament to the power of collaboration, and the hard work of schools who delivered the programme in such challenging circumstances.”

David Johnston, Children and Families minister, said:

“High-quality childcare and language development are so crucial to make sure children are ready for school and to improve their life chances. That is why programmes like Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) are so important.

“It’s fantastic to see that the children involved in the programme are now four months ahead of where they would have been without the programme, with disadvantaged children having benefitted the most. The big impact this programme is having is clear, and I am pleased that we will now be funding it for another year.”

Dr Ben Styles, Head of Classroom Practice at NFER said:

“Our evaluation of the NELI programme shows a positive impact on young children’s language skills and represents useful recovery in this aspect of their development following disruption by the pandemic. It is a rare example of robust evaluation of a scaled-up programme that demonstrates real impact and should be celebrated.”

Josh Hillman, Director of Education at the Nuffield Foundation, said:

“It is rare to see an intervention operating at scale with such solid evidence for narrowing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. The extraordinary results of the EEF evaluation of NELI show the power of grounding programme design in high-quality research and developing and adapting it for roll-out through rigorous trials.”

Professor Charles Hulme, co-author of the NELI Programme, said:

“We are delighted that this roll-out of NELI in schools has been so successful. NELI is the best evidenced language intervention in the world and helps to provide a solid foundation for the whole of children’s education.”

[View further information on the report here.](#)

Notes to Editors:

1. The evaluation report will be published [here](#) at 0001 on Thursday 14th
2. Further information about previous trials of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention can be found [here](#).
3. The second year of the national roll-out was overseen by a team at the Nuffield Foundation, in partnership with OxEd and Assessment.
4. The [Education Endowment Foundation](#) (EEF) is an independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. It does this by supporting schools, colleges and nurseries to improve teaching and learning through better use of evidence.
5. For more information contact Charlotte Bedford, EEF Communications and Media Manager, at bedford@eefoundation.org.uk.
6. The [Nuffield Foundation](#) is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare, and justice. The Nuffield Foundation commissioned the original development of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention.
7. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) is the leading independent provider of educational research, and holds the status of Independent Research Organisation (IRO) from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Its unique position and approach delivers evidence-based insights to

enable education policy makers and practitioners to take action to improve outcomes for children and young people.

8. [OxEd and Assessment](#) (OxEd) is a University of Oxford spinout company launched to take the research of Professor Charles Hulme and his team, creators of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI), through to practical application in schools. OxEd develops educational apps and interventions which have been shown to improve educational outcomes for children.