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## Executive Summary

Evaluation of the Eager and Able to Learn  
Programme for Two-Three Year Old Children

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*The*  
**ATLANTIC**  
*Philanthropies*

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STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
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## The Programme

Eager and Able to Learn (EAL) is a new pilot programme designed by *Early Years - the organisation for young children* in Northern Ireland, and targeted at 2-3 year old children in early years settings. It aims to improve young children's eagerness and ability to learn through enhancing their physical, social, emotional, and linguistic development.

The programme places a particular emphasis on physical movement, on the physical design of early childhood programme settings, and on relationships - the practitioner/child relationship, the parent/child relationship and the partnership between the parent and the practitioner to support young children's development. The theory of change underpinning the programme is that movement provides a natural context for children of this age to develop. The programme has a group-based element, which involves a series of developmental movement and play activities, and a home-based element including home visits, which encourages parents to explore play activities with their children in the home environment.

A Senior Early Years Specialist (SEYS) was assigned to each setting to provide: (1) initial training in programme implementation for practitioners; (2) a series of support visits and cluster sessions for practitioners throughout the year; and (3) workshops for parents of children who participated in the programme. In addition, practitioners were given a service design manual to guide them through the delivery of all aspects of the programme. A home learning package for parents was provided.

## The Research

An interdisciplinary research team comprising the Centre for Effective Education at Queen's University Belfast, the National Children's Bureau (NCB) Northern Ireland and Stranmillis University College, was commissioned by Early Years to undertake a series of studies including:

**1)** a baseline survey of the developmental status of 2-3 year old children entering group-based settings and a baseline survey of the quality of the settings; and **2)** a rigorous and independent evaluation of the Eager and Able to Learn programme. The evaluation took the form of a cluster trial using a partial-cross-over design, led by the Centre for Effective Education with the School of Psychology at Queen's, and a fidelity implementation study, led by NCB.

The findings from the baseline surveys and both elements of the evaluation are presented in three detailed reports that are freely available to download.

The evaluation studies were preceded by a pilot evaluation in a small number of settings and in-depth qualitative case studies (led by NCB NI and Stranmillis University College) that informed the subsequent design of the programme and the design of the final evaluation and fidelity implementation studies.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Molyneaux, F., Walsh, G., McConnell, B. and McGuinness, C. (2012) *The Eager and Able to Learn Pilot Year: Lessons learned – implementation and evaluation of the pilot programme.*

## Research Instruments

For both the baseline survey and the EAL evaluation study, the children's outcomes were assessed using the Bayley Scales for Infant and Toddler Development, 3rd Edition (2006), commonly known as Bayley III. Five domains of children's development were assessed by trained fieldworkers observing the children as they completed play-based tasks in cognitive development, receptive and expressive communication, and fine and gross motor movement. Two other domains were assessed by the practitioners who rated the children's social-emotional development and adaptive behavior including communication, functional academics (emergent literacy), self-direction, play and leisure, and social interaction. All scales have high reliability and validity.

For both the baseline survey and the EAL evaluation studies, the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ECERS-R, Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005) was the observation instrument used to assess the quality in the group-based settings. ECERS-R has seven sub-scales, each dedicated to a different aspect of early childhood practice. The scale is recommended for use with children aged between 2 ½ to 5 years and it was supplemented with subscale indicators from its sister scale, ITERS-R (The Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale, Revised Edition, Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2003) designed for younger children aged between 1 month and 30 months.

Survey questionnaires were specially designed for early years practitioners and parents to elicit information about their knowledge, attitude and behaviors related

to the developmental needs of 2-3 year olds.

For the Fidelity Implementation Study, a quantitative measure of fidelity was designed and questionnaires were completed by early years practitioners, setting managers, parents, and Senior Early Years Specialists.

## The Baseline Survey

The purpose of the baseline survey was: (1) to gain a snapshot of the developmental status of a large sample of 2-3 year old Northern Ireland children at a single point in time (towards the end of 2008), as they entered a variety of early years settings; (2) to explore the knowledge and attitudes of their parents, related to the developmental needs of two-year-olds; and (3) to explore the knowledge, attitudes and self-reported behaviours of the practitioners in the early years settings. In addition, a baseline observation survey of the quality of early years provision in a sample of 40 settings was assessed in March 2009.

655 children, from 90 different settings, participated in the survey; 341 boys (52%) and 314 girls (48%). All the children were individually assessed using Bayley III. The mean age of the sample at the time of testing was 2 years and 7 months, and ranged from 2 years 0 month to 3 years and 1 month. This represents approximately 2.8% of the 2-3 year cohort of children for that year in Northern Ireland (the Census identified 23,272 live births in 2006.) The sample was not fully representative of the Northern Ireland population of 2-3 year old children, as it was confined to children who attended group-based early years settings and did not include children who were looked after

by relatives and child-minders, or by their parents during the day. The parents of the children in the sample had higher levels of educational qualifications than the general population of same-aged adults in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the children in the sample came from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, from urban and rural settings and were geographically distributed across Northern Ireland.

501 parents/guardians completed questionnaires and 95% of the respondents were women. 230 practitioners completed questionnaires and 229 were women. Almost 50% of the practitioners were between 18-25 years, 80% had pre-degree vocational qualifications, and fewer than 10% had a degree. The questions in the survey concentrated on the role of play in early years, movement and learning, adult-child interactions, and their current

experiences and satisfaction with the level of communications and working partnerships between parents and practitioners in early years settings.

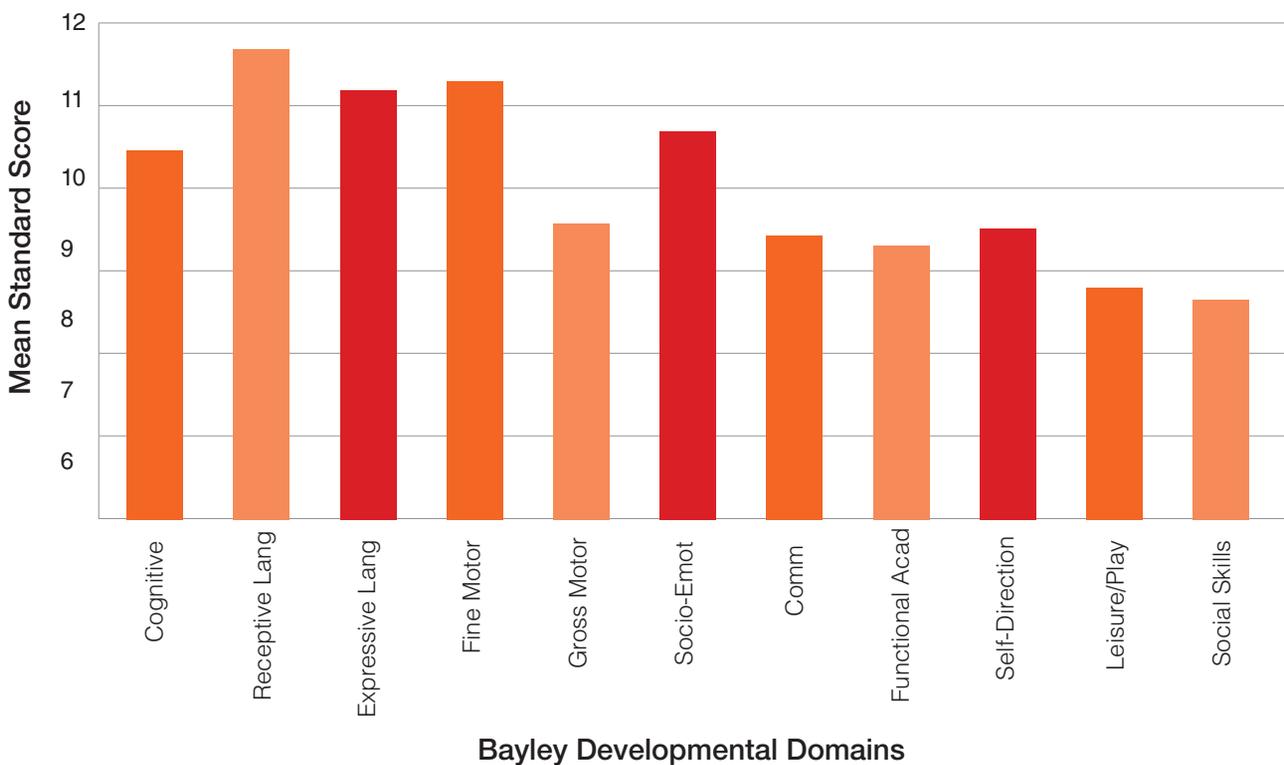
40 early years settings participated in the baseline survey using ECERS-R in March 2009.

## Findings from the Baseline Survey

### Child Outcomes

Age norms based on US samples of children are available for Bayley III. The standardized average score for each domain is 10, with a standard deviation of 3. Supplemental norms are available for a small UK and Ireland sample to calibrate the US norms. Figure 1 shows the standardized scores for eleven Bayley developmental domains. When interpreting the findings, it should be remembered that the social-economic

**Figure 1. Mean Standard Scores for each Bayley Developmental Domain**



backgrounds of the children in the baseline sample were more affluent than a representative sample of Northern Ireland children and this is likely to positively affect the developmental outcomes for children.

The findings show that the baseline children were more developmentally advanced than the US norms in cognitive, language, social emotional and fine motor development, and were less advanced in gross motor development. The pattern of findings for motor development was more in line with UK norms, where children's gross motor movement appears to be less advanced than for same-aged US children, and their fine motor movement appears to be more advanced. The baseline children were also less advanced than US norms in some areas of adaptive behaviour, particularly in their ability for playful and social interactions. As well as noting the mean scores, the findings draw attention to the variability between children of the same age, with some children being substantially more developmentally advanced than the average and some substantially less advanced. For example, on the majority of the scales, scores ranged from 5 to 19 standardized points.

In terms of the findings for sub-groups of children, girls were significantly more advanced than boys in all areas with the exception of gross motor development, where no differences were observed. Social-economic disadvantage had negative effects on developmental outcomes, particularly for children with the highest levels of disadvantage (i.e., those with Multiple Deprivation Scores in the top quartile of the sample).

## Setting Outcomes

Using ECERS-R, settings were rated on a seven-point scale with explicit quality bands for scores of 1<3 (inadequate), 3-4 (adequate), 5 plus (good to excellent). 57.5% (25/40) of the settings were rated as adequate, 42.5% of the settings (15/40) were located in the inadequate band and no setting was rated as good/excellent. The average numerical ECERS-R rating was 3.29, just above the minimal threshold on the scale.

ECERS-R has 7 sub-scales which assess different aspects of the setting and the interaction between the adults and children - Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language Reasoning, Learning Activities, Interaction, Program Structure, Parents and Staff. Figure 2 shows how the ratings are distributed across the different scales.

The highest quality ratings were for Interactions, confirming that the early years settings in the sample were most successful in having warm and respectful relationships with the children, helping the children get along with their peers, and providing appropriate levels of discipline. Interactions between parents and between staff members were also rated relatively highly. The settings were less successful in providing a breadth of stimulating materials and experiences for the children; the rating for Learning Activities was the lowest rating. The profile of higher ratings for Interactions, lower ratings for Learning Activities and threshold ratings for Personal Care and Safety routines has been found in other studies, using the same or similar instruments. International comparisons also report wide variation in the quality of early years settings for both infants/

toddlers and for pre-school children, with generally poorer quality provision reported for younger children.

**Practitioner and Parent Outcomes**

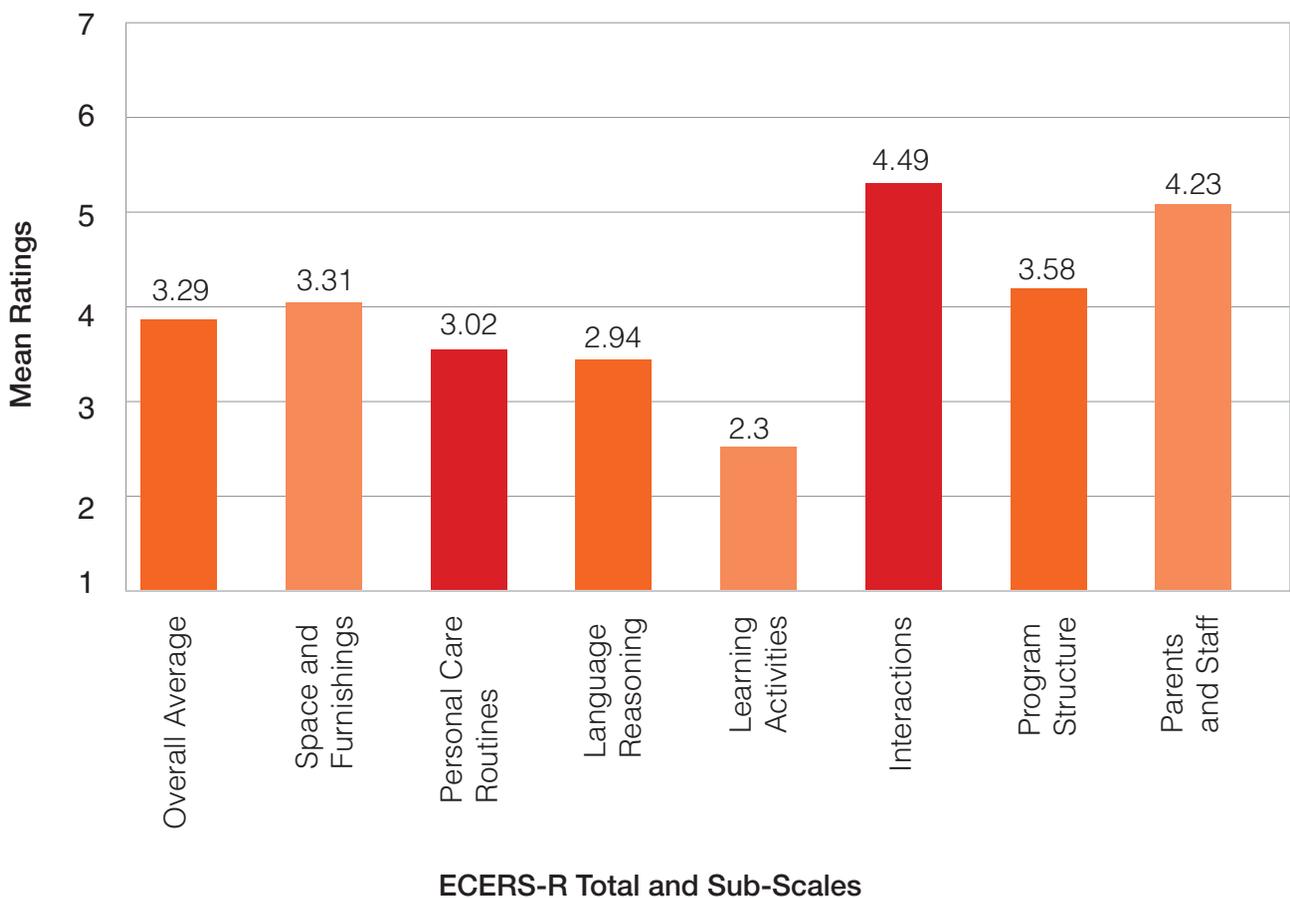
The vast majority of parents and practitioners presented very positive and developmentally sensitive portraits of their interactions with the 2-3 year old children. Play activities such as story-telling and books were reported most frequently for both parents and practitioners, and there was a tendency for more active activities (movement games and dance, rough and tumble play, playing with outdoor equipment) to be reported less frequently. Nevertheless, there was no evidence that play was ‘in peril’ for this sample of children and parents. In terms of their feelings of parental self-efficacy,

parents expressed the highest levels of satisfaction about playing with their children.

There was some evidence of contrasting images of what constituted ‘good’ play held by both practitioners and parents – from allowing children to play alone and follow their own interests to adult scaffolding and extending children’s play.

Finally, there was strong alignment between the parents’ and practitioners’ views about communication and the working relationship between them. Both groups agreed that they had positive and open communications with the other group, although practitioners’ views about open communication tended to be slightly more positive than the parents.

**Figure 2. ECERS-R Mean Quality Ratings: 40 Settings**



More diverse views were expressed about whether the settings encouraged feelings of shared responsibilities, joint activities and extending the work of the early setting into the home. Some settings clearly did this and others did not. Again, parents and practitioners agreed on this point.

## Evaluation of the Eager and Able to Learn Pilot Programme

### Cluster Trial using a Partial Cross-Over Design

The EAL evaluation consisted of a cluster trial using a partial cross-over design involving 28 early years settings (from the original 90 settings in the baseline survey) and 454 children aged 2-3 years. 18 Day Care and 10 Sure Start settings participated. In addition, 180 practitioners and 390 parents completed survey questionnaires similar to those used in the baseline survey.

The trial took place over two years from September 2008 to June 2010. In Year One, from September 2008 to June 2009, the settings continued with their usual programme of activities and the cohort of 2-3 year olds attending the settings during that year acted as a control group. In Year Two, from September 2009 to June 2010, the same settings introduced the EAL pilot programme and the next cohort of 2-3 year olds who attended these settings acted as the intervention group. The study therefore used a partial cross-over design, with each setting acting as its own control.

Pre-testing took place in October/

November and post-tests were conducted in May/June in each year. At each time point, children were assessed individually using the Bayley III while practitioners and parents completed questionnaires. In addition, the quality of the 28 settings in the trial was assessed twice using ECERS-R, once in March 2009 during the control year and again in March 2010 while the settings were implementing the EAL pilot programme.

### Fidelity Implementation Study

The effectiveness of a programme or intervention needs to be measured, not only in terms of its outcomes but also in the context of *how* it was implemented. The aim of the study was to measure fidelity of implementation and to explore stakeholder experiences and the processes of implementation.

A series of eight key indicators of fidelity was identified. These included: the practitioner attendance levels at training (both initial and cluster training sessions); ratio of EAL trained practitioners to children in the 2-3 year old room receiving EAL; the number of developmental movement experiences completed; the duration of implementation of the movement experiences; the frequency of implementation of the developmental movement experiences; the number of home visits conducted by practitioners; proportion of parents attending the workshop; the number of Senior Early Years Specialist support visits conducted. A quantitative measure of programme fidelity was derived from these indicators.

Survey questionnaires were completed by 84 practitioners across all settings at three points in the year (100% response rate from the practitioners in

post in the settings in the intervention year), and they were followed up by 19 in-depth interviews. 26 setting managers completed questionnaires from a management point of view. 186 parents responded to questions about their experiences. Senior Early Years Specialists attached to each of the 28 EAL settings also completed questionnaires.

## Findings from the Cluster Cross-Over Design Trial

The outcomes tested and the effects found in relation to these are listed in Tables 1 and 2, and Figure 3. For the purposes of this evaluation, **an outcome is defined as a real and discernible change in the children’s development, the quality of the settings, and**

**Table 1. Effects of the Eager and Able to Learn Pilot Programme on Children**

Child Outcomes	Main Effects
<b>Language and Communication Skills, Vocabulary</b>	
Receptive Language: Improved ability to understand spoken words, to follow more complex directions, to identify actions in pictures	-.07
Expressive Language: Improved ability to use words, to ask and answer more complex questions, combine words and gestures, use multiple-word utterances	+.06
Communication Skills: Improved ability to follow instructions, ask questions, describe activities and have more sustained conversations	+.17
<b>Social/Emotional Development and Adaptive Behaviours, Independence and Self-Help Skills</b>	
Social Emotional Milestones: Improved ability to take actions to get their needs met, to use their imagination in play, to explain what they need and why, to describe how they feel and to use emotions in a purposeful manner	<b>+.30*</b>
Social Skills: Improved ability to interact positively with other children and with adults, to share toys willingly, to show some degree of empathy with other children when they are sad or upset, to seek friendship with peers and show helping behaviour	+.17
Play Behaviours/Leisure: Improved ability to choose toys/games for play, to sustain play for a period, to join in and play with peers without adult supervision, invite others to join in games and to follow rules, to wait their turn	+.07
Self-Direction: Improved ability to try out most routine things without adult help, increased ability to persist with hard tasks, to ask for help only when necessary, to follow routines without being reminded, not to hit out at other children when upset, to control their temper in the face of disagreements	+.13
<b>Thinking and Problem-Solving</b>	
Cognitive: Increased ability to solve problems and complete simple puzzles, to match patterns, to assemble jigsaws, to group objects according to different dimensions, to engage in representational and imaginary play, to understand one-to-one correspondences	<b>-.29*</b>
Functional Pre-Academics: Increased ability to demonstrate emergent literacy skills, point to pictures in a book, hold a marker with the point down, imitate simple drawings, recognise and name shapes, name colours, recite rhymes, count objects using fingers	<b>-.29**</b>
<b>Movement Development, Gross, Fine and Sensory Motor</b>	
Fine Motor: Increased ability to manipulate objects through finely co-ordinated movements, to control hand eye co-ordination, to build block sequences, to grasp, to imitate precise strokes, to control speed of movement	-.13
Gross Motor: Increased ability to show full body control in space, to plan and control movements, to climb stairs unaided, to maintain balance, to walk sideways or backwards, to jump, to kick a ball, to stop from a full run	+.01

\*p<0.10; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

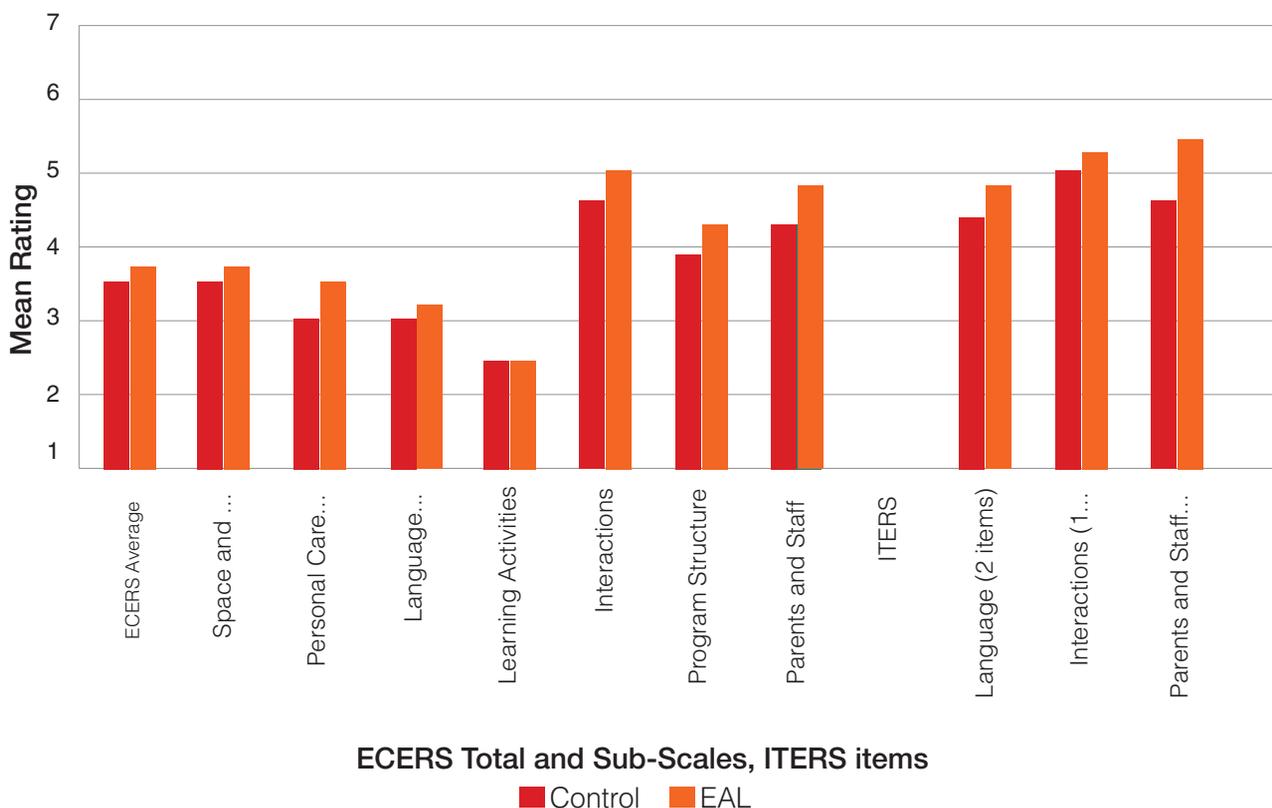
**practitioners' and parents' knowledge, attitudes or self-reported behaviours as a direct result of taking part in the EAL pilot programme.**

### Child Outcomes

As Table 1 shows, the EAL pilot programme had statistically significant main effects on 3/11 developmental domains as assessed by Bayley III. The children's social and emotional development was positively affected by the programme, while their cognitive development was negatively affected. The strongest negative effect was on emergent literacy activities, called functional pre-academics. There were also some smaller positive effect sizes on other developmental domains that were consistent with the positive social emotional effect but which did not reach statistical significance - communication, social skills and self-direction.

The effects were consistent across the whole sample of children and no differences were found between: boys and girls; settings with different management types; or settings located in rural/urban areas. However, exploratory analysis revealed that the pattern of the findings was statistically related to the children's pre-test scores; the observed effects, both positive and negative, were seen more strongly in children with high pre-test scores than those with lower pre-test scores. Overall, the programme was delivered with high fidelity (see details below) and whatever variation existed had no discernible effects on the majority of the outcomes, with the exception of receptive and expressive language where it had a significant positive effect. The number of hours the children spent in a setting had a significant negative effect on their self-direction scores.

**Figure 3. ECERS-R Mean Quality Ratings for 28 settings: Control vs EAL**



## Setting Outcomes

Participating in the EAL pilot programme had a positive effect on the quality of the settings. The average ECERS-R rating for the 28 settings changed from 3.44 to 3.74 ( $p < .10$ ), shifting the average quality of the settings to the higher end of the 'adequate' quality band. Additionally, 4 settings moved from the inadequate band ( $<3$ ) to the adequate band ( $3 < 5$ ) and two settings moved from adequate to the good band ( $5+$ ). Figure 3 shows that there were improvements on almost

all ECERS-R subscales and on the ITERS-R items. The differences were statistically significant on Interactions ( $p < .05$ ) which included indicators relating to the quality of staff-children interactions (warmth, respect, appropriate discipline, supervision) as well as promoting positive child-child interactions (taking part, taking turns, managing conflicts, including others). Provision for Parents and Staff (ECERS-R and ITERS-R) also improved significantly in EAL settings (ECERS-R,  $p < .05$ ; ITERS-R,  $p < .05$ ).

**Table 2. Effects of the Eager and Able to Learn Pilot Programme on Practitioners and Parents (see Note below)**

Outcomes	Main Effects	Main Effects
Practitioner and Parent Outcomes	Practitioners	Parents
Increased recognition of the importance and the different purposes of play in the development of two-year-old children;	<b>+.35*</b>	<b>+.19*</b> <b>+.26**</b>
and increased frequency in providing different types of play opportunities, both indoors and outdoors.	<b>+.38**</b> <b>+.68***</b> <b>-.48**</b>	<b>+.27**</b> <b>+.19***</b>
Increased responsiveness in practitioners'/ parents' interactions and engagement with two-year-old children in order to support their communication, social, emotional, physical and cognitive development needs.	<b>+.57*</b> <b>+.29*</b> <b>-.47**</b> <b>+.35**</b> <b>+.44**</b> <b>-.45*</b>	<b>-.22*</b>
Increased recognition of the importance of movement for two-year-old development and how it can be related to wider developmental goals (e.g. language, cognitive, social-emotional, as well as motor development).	<b>+.56**</b> <b>+.51**</b> <b>+.35*</b> <b>+.34**</b> <b>+.34*</b>	<b>+.40**</b> <b>+.33**</b> <b>+.40***</b> <b>+.42***</b> <b>+.40***</b> <b>+.37***</b>
Increased recognition of the importance of working in partnership with practitioners/ parents around the developmental needs of two-year-old children, increased opportunities to communicate with parents, and increased satisfaction with the communication.	<b>+.32*</b> <b>+.43**</b>	<b>+.31**</b> <b>+.27**</b> <b>+.22**</b> <b>+.51***</b> <b>+.26*</b>

\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

Note: The effect sizes in the Table refer to differences on specific survey questionnaire items related to the outcome.

## **Practitioner and Parent Outcomes**

As Table 2 shows, participating in the EAL pilot programme had significantly positive effects on practitioners' and parents' beliefs, attitudes and self-reported behaviours. Although significant effects emerged for only a limited number of survey questionnaire items, the effect sizes were often large, ranging from +.68 to +.19, and entirely in the direction expected by the aims and goals of the programme. For example, with regard to providing new and different opportunities and materials for play, EAL practitioners reported that they were using more 'everyday' materials' (e.g. pots, pans, crumpled papers) and props to help with movement games (e.g. scarves, balls, hoops). They also reported less frequent use of 'books and story-telling' and 'number games'. With regard to their interaction with children, the EAL practitioners were much less likely to adopt 'harsh and controlling' interaction styles and more likely to explain the reasons for things in order to encourage the children to think for themselves. Consistent with the new partnership arrangements with parents during the EAL year, practitioners were more positive about how their setting worked with parents, and less doubtful than they were during the control year about the contribution that parents can make to support their children's learning in the setting.

EAL parents also reported playing with their children in different types of ways – with song and dance, and using different materials. EAL parents showed a sharper recognition than Control parents about the relevance of play to different forms of learning both in the present and in the future. EAL parents were

also substantially more satisfied than Control parents with communicating and sharing views with staff in the early years settings and also reported more help with materials and training for promoting their child's development.

## **Findings from the Fidelity Implementation Study**

The EAL programme was implemented with high levels of fidelity across all 28 settings, with 6 settings achieving almost perfect adherence, and only 2 settings with noticeably lower adherence scores than the other settings. The mean score was 34.6 points out of a possible 40 points. Adherence to the programme design was particularly strong in relation to the practitioner training (initial and cluster sessions), the developmental movement experiences and the SEYS support components of the programme. On the other hand, fidelity levels were adversely affected by poor ratios of EAL trained practitioners working with children in settings, low numbers of home visits and low levels of attendance at the parent workshops.

The best combination was high adherence in terms of content and high quality in terms of format and style of delivery. Specific enabling factors were the effective delivery style of the initial and cluster training, and the content/accessibility of the service design manual which was used as a constant source of reference. With regard to the developmental movement experiences, these were delivered best when (1) practitioners were not overly risk adverse and let children explore the challenges presented by the experiences; (2) practitioners were confident and adequately skilled to fully develop the

experiences and maintain children's interest in them; and (3) there was adequate space to accommodate the resources and therefore fully implement the experiences. SEYS support emerged as one of the most important and valuable aspects of the programme in terms of enabling and motivating practitioners to deliver the programme well. Specific success factors were the bespoke and solution-oriented support provided and the trusting relationships developed between practitioners and their SEYS.

The parent workshop, home learning manual and resource pack were all well received by parents and contributed to high levels of enjoyable and mutually beneficial play activities and interactions between parents and their children. The only component of the programme which proved more challenging than others was the home visiting which was adversely affected by low levels of practitioner confidence in engaging with parents, a lack of support from setting management and timing/logistical issues associated with undertaking the visits.

Looking across the programme, there were two common and important factors which acted as barriers to achieving high fidelity and successful implementation. The first factor relates to management support and buy-in to the programme, which, when not present, led to a number of difficulties including poor practitioner attendance at training sessions, poor implementation of home visits (as referred to above) and a lack of autonomy afforded to practitioners to fully develop the movement experiences. Where management support was in place, implementation was more successful. Many of the more supportive managers had attended the initial training

sessions and therefore fully understood the rationale and requirements of the programme.

The second factor which affected some settings was the lack of knowledge of the programme by regulation and inspection staff who were unaware of the EAL programme's aims and rationale and consequently questioned some of the practice taking place and the layout of rooms where the programme was being delivered.

## **Conclusions from the Evaluation Study**

The impact of the programme on the children's development produced a surprising and unexpected pattern of results, with positive effects on the social emotional development and negative effects on cognitive and emergent literacy outcomes. This 'polarising' effect was more noticeable in those subgroups of children who were more developmentally advanced when they joined the programme. The absence of an effect on gross motor development was also surprising given the emphasis on the movement activities and the high fidelity implementation in this component of the programme.

The positive social emotional impact is consistent with the observed positive boost on the rated quality of the EAL settings compared to the Control settings, especially on interactions between staff/child and child/child, and on the practitioners' reports post-EAL that they were interacting with children in a more positive way. Parents also appeared to learn more about the role of play in children's development and to experiment with different types of play. They were also more positive about their own

interactions with the early years settings.

However, in the light of the findings on child outcomes, the content of the programme needs to be re-evaluated to ensure that the positive impact can be maintained and the negative impact minimised.

The findings from the Fidelity Study show that the large majority of settings implemented the programme with high fidelity and that the programme was warmly welcomed by the vast majority of practitioners, setting managers and parents. The high levels of fidelity meant that it had no discernible differential effect on children's outcomes except on receptive and expressive language.

The study also succeeded in identifying the factors that contributed to a higher level of implementation and those areas that will need additional effort in any future implementation, particularly:

- Engaging more parents in the process, facilitating the logistics of home visits and better preparation of practitioners for the visits.
- Strong and clear commitment to the programme and leadership from setting management to ensure the programme is delivered with fidelity.
- Better communication between settings and regulatory authorities is necessary when settings are implementing innovative programmes.

## Recommendations

From the baseline findings, with regard to being developmentally responsive to the needs of two-three year olds:

- Given the likely differences between the developmental profiles of children entering early years settings, settings need to develop a method for observing and recording children's developmental stages in different domains so that they

can respond appropriately.

- Given the variability of same-aged children, settings need to ensure that their provision is truly developmentally appropriate and not just matched to the 'typical' two year old or the 'typical' three year olds.
- Given the evidence that two-three year old children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are already developmentally delayed at the point of entry into early years settings, they will need intensive intervention if a positive impact is to be realised, perhaps more intensive than is currently available in two-year-old Sure Start programmes.
- In order that early years practitioners are sufficiently prepared for these professional demands, initial qualifications for practitioners in early years settings as well as CPD needs to be informed by the most up-to-date knowledge about research in child development and how it relates to early years practice. The particular needs of the 0-3 age group need greater attention in both initial training and ongoing CPD.

From the baseline findings, with regard to the quality of the settings:

- Given the international comparisons that 2-3 year old settings tend to be poorer than those for 3-4 year olds, and the reported average quality of settings in this report, regulatory frameworks should adopt more rigorous indicators for different bands of quality in settings that provide for 2-3 year olds.
- Settings should also immediately adopt more rigorous quality audit tools, such as ECERS-R or similar tools, to audit their own provision and as the basis for professional development. Early Years - the organisation for young children should support this development for 2-3 year old programmes.

- In order that early years practitioners are sufficiently prepared for these professional demands, initial qualifications for practitioners in early years settings as well as CPD needs to be informed by the most up-to-date knowledge about research into dimensions of quality and quality frameworks and how this relates to early years practice.

From the EAL evaluation, with regard to the development of the programme:

- Given the unusual pattern of findings for children's outcomes, Early Years should re-evaluate the content of the EAL programme to ensure that the positive impacts on children, quality of settings, practitioners and parents are maintained and the negative impacts are minimised or turned around.
- Specifically, the dominance of the movement activities in terms of time allotted should be re-assessed to create a more balanced programme that focuses directly on socio-emotional development, language, movement and conceptual development.
- The focus on high quality interactions between adults and children should be maintained and enhanced in any future programmes.
- The focus on partnerships between settings and parents should be maintained and enhanced, following the advice from the Fidelity Implementation Study on involving parents and on managing home visits.
- Fidelity monitoring should be part of any future roll-out of the programme.

## Policy and Research

**1.** A focus on provision for 2-year-olds has emerged only recently as a national priority, with the launching of the 2-year-old Sure Start programmes in England,

Wales and Northern Ireland. Previously, both policy and research had focused on 3-4 year olds in the pre-school year (e.g. the EPPE and EPPNI longitudinal research studies and the expansion of free pre-school places). The research base on what we know about the impact of provision for two-year-olds in the UK is at a very early stage. For example, the National Evaluation of Neighbourhood Nurseries (2007) in England and the evaluation of the Early Education Pilot for Two Year Old Children (2009) in England, both focused on disadvantaged children. The current studies contribute substantially to the research base in Northern Ireland. From a research/policy perspective, it is important that, as well as evaluating the impact of specific programmes, participating in early years provision (of whatever kind) is included as part of current and any future longitudinal cohort tracking (e.g. the Northern Ireland Millennium Cohort and any future cohort studies in Northern Ireland.)

**2.** A consistent finding across many pre-school studies is the importance of the quality of the settings for children's outcomes. This point has been confirmed again in the pilot evaluation for two-year-olds in England, where positive outcomes for children were reported only for those who attended the very highest quality settings.

**3.** The EAL trial is one evaluation of an innovative pilot programme that focused on developmental movement experiences as a potential approach for accelerating more general development. Although the findings from the EAL evaluation on child outcomes are surprising, it is important that research continues on the relationship between different kinds of movement development as an approach for early years intervention.

4. It is important to appreciate the scale and scope of these early years studies for Northern Ireland and to understand the logistical demands of running research studies on this scale with 2-3 year old children.

5. Some of the earlier recommendations pose serious research and policy

challenges, for example, in regards to developing methods of observing and recording children's developmental status, and adopting more rigorous policy frameworks. They need careful consideration so that policy decisions are research-informed and are appropriately benchmarked with international developments.

## Further Information

The full findings from the Baseline study, from the EAL Cross-over Design Evaluation and the Fidelity Implementation Study are contained in three reports that are freely available to download at:

- McGuinness, C., Connolly, P., Eakin, A. and Miller, S. (2012) *The Developmental Status of 2-3 Year Old Children entering Group-Based Settings in Northern Ireland: Survey Findings*, Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast. Available at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cee/>
- McGuinness, C., Eakin, A. and Connolly, P. (2012) *An Evaluation of the Effects of the Eager and Able to Learn Programme on Outcomes for 2-3 Year Olds*, Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast. Available at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cee/>
- Geraghty, T., Molyneaux, F. and Dunne, C. (2012) *A Fidelity and Implementation Study of the Eager and Able to Learn Programme*, Belfast: National Children's Bureau. Available to download at: <http://www.ncb.org.uk/resources>

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