PREPARING FOR LITERACY
Improving communication, language and literacy in the early years

Guidance Report

Education
Endowment
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This guidance report is one of several resources that the EEF has produced on the theme of literacy. For more on literacy from the EEF please visit:

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/school-themes/literacy/

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The importance of developing good literacy skills is that rare thing in education: something that everyone–from parents and teachers, to unions and policymakers–agrees on. Not only do they underpin academic success in every subject, but they are fundamental for building fulfilling careers and rewarding lives.

For most us who leave school being able to read and write well, we can't possibly imagine how debilitating it is not to. Almost all careers and further training and study are out of reach; day-to-day responsibilities like paying bills become mammoth tasks; and activities like reading with your children are difficult.

In my view, the most important thing a school can do for its pupils–and for society–is to teach them to read and write well. But to achieve this, we have to get in early and make sure that all young children get a good grounding in literacy before school starts.

"...we have to get in early and make sure all young children get a good grounding in literacy before school starts."

This is why we've produced this guidance report. It offers early years professionals seven practical evidence-based recommendations to provide every child–but particularly those from disadvantaged homes–with a highquality and well-rounded grounding in early literacy, language and communication.

One recommendation focuses on the importance of high quality interactions between adults and children to develop their communication and language skills. Another suggests using a range of different activities– like singing, storytelling and nursery rhymes–to develop children's early reading and ability to hear and manipulate sounds.

To arrive at the recommendations we reviewed the best available international research and consulted experts to arrive at key principles for preparing for literacy. This report is part of a series providing guidance on literacy teaching. It builds on the recommendations presented in our Improving Literacy in Key Stage One and Two reports, but is specific to the needs of three to five year old children.

As with all our guidance reports, the publication is just the start. We will now be working with the sector, including through our colleagues in the Research Schools Network, to build on the recommendations with further training, resources and guidance. And, as ever, we will be looking to support and test the most promising programmes that put the lessons from the research into practice.

Our hope is that this guidance will help to support a consistently excellent, evidence-informed early years system in England that creates great opportunities for all children, regardless of their family background

Sir Kevan Collins

Chief Executive
Education Endowment Foundation

What does this guidance cover?

This is part of a series of reports that the EEF is producing on the theme of literacy. It focuses on the teaching of communication, language and literacy to children between the ages of three and five. However, it may also be applicable to older pupils who have fallen behind their peers, or younger pupils who are making rapid progress. Two earlier reports cover the typical requirements of teaching literacy in Key Stage 1 (ages 5–7) and Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11).

This report is not intended to provide a comprehensive guide to communication, language and literacy provision in the early years. The recommendations represent 'lever points' where there is useful evidence about communication, language and literacy teaching that schools can use to make a significant difference to children's learning. The report focuses on pedagogy and approaches that are supported by good evidence; it does not cover all of the potential components of successful literacy provision. Some will be missing because they are related to organisational or leadership issues; other areas are not covered because there is insufficient evidence to create an actionable recommendation in which we have confidence. Other important issues to consider include— but are not limited to—leadership, staff deployment and development, and resources.

This guidance draws predominately on studies that feed into the Early Years Teaching and Learning Toolkit produced by the EEF in collaboration with the Sutton Trust and Durham University. As such, it is not a new study in itself, but rather is intended as an accessible overview of existing research with clear, actionable guidance. More information about how this guidance was created is available at the end of the report.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is aimed primarily at literacy co-ordinators, headteachers, and other staff with leadership responsibility in early years settings. Senior leaders have responsibility for managing change across a setting so attempts to implement these recommendations are more likely to be successful if they are involved. Early years practitioners will also find this guidance useful as a resource to aid their day-to-day teaching.

It may also be used by:

- governors and parents to support and challenge staff;

- programme developers to create more effective interventions and teacher training; and

- educational researchers to conduct further testing of the recommendations in this guidance, and fill in any gaps in the evidence.

What support is available for using this guidance?

We recognise that the effective implementation of these recommendations—such that they make a real impact on children—is both critical and challenging. Therefore, the EEF is collaborating with a range of organisations across England to support schools to use the guidance.

- **North East Primary Literacy Campaign.**
  In November 2015, the EEF and Northern Rock Foundation launched a £10 million campaign to improve primary literacy outcomes for disadvantaged children in the North East. This five-year campaign aims to work with all 880 primary schools in the region, building on the excellent practice that already exists. The series of literacy guidance reports forms the foundation for this campaign. The EEF is collaborating with a range of organisations in the North East that will contribute their expertise and build on their trusted local relationships to 'bring the evidence to life' in the classroom. More information about the campaign, and how to get involved, can be found at https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/scaling-up-evidence/campaigns/north-east-literacy-campaign/

- **Research Schools.** In October 2016, the EEF and the Institute of Effective Education welcomed the first five members of a growing national network of Research Schools. Research Schools will become a focal point for evidence-based practice in their region, building affiliations with large numbers of schools, and supporting the use of evidence at scale. More information about the Research Schools Network, and how it can provide support on the use of EEF guidance reports, can be found at https://researchschool.org.uk

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Sections are colour coded for ease of reference

1

Prioritise the development of communication and language

Language provides the foundation of thinking and learning and should be prioritised.

High quality adult-child interactions are important and sometimes described as talking *with* children rather than just talking *to* children.

Adults have a vital role to play in modelling effective language and communication.

Use a wide range of approaches including shared reading, storytelling, and explicitly extending children's vocabulary.

2

Develop children's early reading using a balanced approach

Early reading requires the development of a broad range of capabilities.

Using a number of different approaches will be more effective than focusing on any single aspect of early reading.

Promising approaches to develop early reading include storytelling, activities to develop letter and sound knowledge, and singing and rhyming activities to develop phonological awareness.

Prior to the introduction of systematic phonics teaching, activities to develop children's phonological awareness and interest in sounds are likely to be beneficial.

3

Develop children's capability and motivation to write

Writing is physically and intellectually demanding.

Expressive language underpins writing and should be prioritised.

Provide a wide range of opportunities to communicate through writing and develop children's motivation to write.

Support children to develop the foundations of a fast, accurate, and efficient handwriting style.

Monitor the product and process of children's handwriting and provide additional support as necessary.

Find this info on:

Page 8

Page 10

Page 14

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4
Embed opportunities to develop self-regulation

'Self-regulation' refers to children's ability to manage their own behaviour and aspects of their learning.

A number of approaches to developing self-regulation exist, including the 'Plan-Do-Review' cycle.

Embed opportunities to develop self-regulation within day-to-day activities.

Monitor the development of children's self-regulation and ensure activities remain suitably challenging.

Page 16

5
Support parents to understand how to help their children learn

Effective parental engagement is challenging but has the potential to improve children's communication, language, and literacy.

Promising strategies include:

- encouraging parents to read *to* children before they can read, then to begin reading *with* children as soon as they can; and

- running workshops showing parents *how* to read and talk about books with their children effectively.

Less promising strategies include occasional home visits or homework tasks.

Page 18

6
Use high quality assessment to ensure all children make good progress

Ensure clarity of purpose about the different assessments used in your setting.

Collect a small amount of high quality information to ensure that:

- children who are struggling receive the right type of support; and

- time is used efficiently by avoiding rehearsing skills or content that children already know well.

Use assessments to inform, not replace, professional judgement.

Monitor children's sensory needs to ensure they do not impede learning.

Avoid using assessments to label children and split them into fixed groups.

Page 20

7
Use high quality targeted support to help struggling children

High quality targeted support can ensure that children falling behind catch up as quickly as possible.

Small-group support is more likely to be effective when:

- children with the greatest needs are supported by the most capable adults;

- adults have been trained to deliver the activity being used; and

- the approach is evidence-based and has been evaluated elsewhere.

In addition to using evidence-based programmes, some specialist services are likely to be best delivered by other professionals, such as speech and language therapists.

Page 22

Approaches that emphasise spoken language and verbal interaction can support the development of communication and language.[1,2] In turn, communication and language provide the foundations for learning and thinking and underpin the development of later literacy skills.[3] The evidence suggests that the quality of these approaches is more important than the quantity.[3] Furthermore, all children are likely to benefit from a focus on communication and language,[4] but some studies show even larger effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[1]

Focusing on language and communication is especially important for young children and will support the development of a range of early literacy skills as well as their wider knowledge and understanding.[1] In addition, developing communication and language is linked to other important outcomes including children's self-regulation,[5] socio-emotional development,[6] and reasoning.[7] A wide range of activities can be used to develop communication and language including shared reading (Recommendation 2), storytelling, and explicitly extending children's vocabulary.[1] These activities should be embedded within a curriculum of rich and varied experiences.
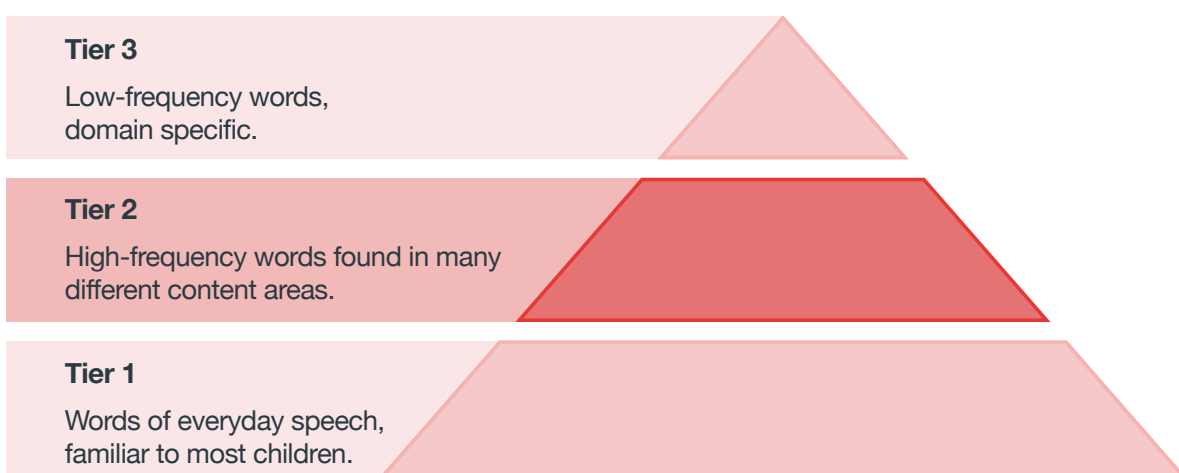
Improving young children's vocabulary is often a high priority, particularly when teaching students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to have a less extensive vocabulary.[3] Developing vocabulary is important for later literacy development, but it should not be seen as a silver bullet;[4,8] it should form part of a broad approach to improving communication, language, and literacy (see

Recommendation 2). There is relatively limited evidence about how best to improve vocabulary, but the existing evidence suggests that the following should be considered:

- providing children with a rich language environment (implicit approaches) as well as directly extending children's vocabulary (explicit approaches);

- carefully selecting high-frequency words for explicit teaching (see Figure 1);

- developing the number of words children know (breadth) and their understanding of relationships between words and the contexts in which words can be used (depth); and

- providing multiple opportunities to hear and use new vocabulary.[8–10]

Prioritising high quality interactions with children will help to develop their communication and language. A distinction is sometimes drawn between talking *with* children and simply talking *to* children; talking to children tends to be more passive, while talking with children is based on their immediate experiences and activities and is likely to be more effective.[1] When done well, high quality interactions often look effortless but they are not easy to do well and professional development is likely to be beneficial.[1,2] A number of different frameworks exist to support such interactions including sustained shared thinking and guided interaction (see Box 1). These approaches can be used while children engage in a variety of everyday activities.[11–13]

Figure 1: Prioritise tier 2 vocabulary for explicit instruction

Tier 3
Low-frequency words, domain specific.

Tier 2
High-frequency words found in many different content areas.

Tier 1
Words of everyday speech, familiar to most children.

Box 1: High quality interactions—it's harder than it looks

Multiple frameworks exist to help structure high quality interactions.

Guided interaction occurs when an adult and child collaborate on a task and the adult's strategies are highly tuned to the child's capabilities and motivations.[13] The adult is responsive to the child's intentions, focuses on spontaneous learning, and provides opportunities for the child's feedback. Discussion is a key feature of this approach and the use of a variety of questions helps to develop and extend children's thinking.

Sustained shared thinking involves two or more people working together to solve a problem, clarify an issue, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative.[12] Key features include all parties contributing to the interaction—one aimed at extending and developing children's thinking.[12,14] Techniques that adults might use include:[15]

- **tuning in**—listening carefully to what is being said and observing what the child is doing;

- **showing genuine interest**—giving whole attention, eye contact, and smiling and nodding;

- **asking children to elaborate**—'I really want to know more about this';

- **recapping**—'So you think that…';

- **giving their own experience**—'I like to listen to music when cooking at home';

- **clarifying ideas**—'So you think we should wear coats in case it rains?';

- **using encouragement to extend thinking**—'You have thought really hard about your tower, but what can you do next?';

- **suggesting**—'You might want to try doing it like this';

- **reminding**—'Don't forget that you said we should wear coats in case it rains'; and

- **asking open questions**—'How did you?', 'Why does this…?', 'What happens next?'

Box 2: Types of questions to develop reasoning

Question type	Example
Evidence	How do you know Winnie-the-Pooh got stuck in the rabbit hole?
Reasons/theory	Why did Winnie-the-Pooh get stuck in the rabbit hole?
Counterfactual suggestion	What would have happened if Winnie-the-Pooh had not eaten the honey?
False belief	What does Winnie-the-Pooh think has happened to stop him getting out?
Future hypothetical suggestion	What could Winnie-the-Pooh do next?

Adapted from Taggart et al., 'Thinking skills in the early years'.[7]

2 Develop children's early reading using a balanced approach

Early reading should be developed using a balanced approach that focuses on both language comprehension and decoding.[4,17] This approach, often underpinned by a framework known as the Simple View of Reading (Figure 2), is well-supported by evidence and provides a helpful overview of the reading process.[18]

To support language comprehension, children appear to benefit from a range of complementary activities, including those focused on vocabulary development, language structures and the development of background knowledge.

Storytelling and shared reading activities have consistently been shown to improve children's language comprehension skills.[4,10,19–22] A range of frameworks can be used to support shared reading, often emphasising different aspects of comprehension. For example, the PEER framework, described in Box 3, can be used to develop vocabulary and background knowledge. Parents can also be encouraged to use a version of shared reading with their children at home; a framework to support this is provided in Recommendation 5.

To support the development of decoding, children are likely to benefit from activities focusing on alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness.

GOOD word recognition

POOR comprehension

GOOD word recognition

GOOD comprehension

POOR word recognition

POOR comprehension

POOR word recognition

GOOD comprehension
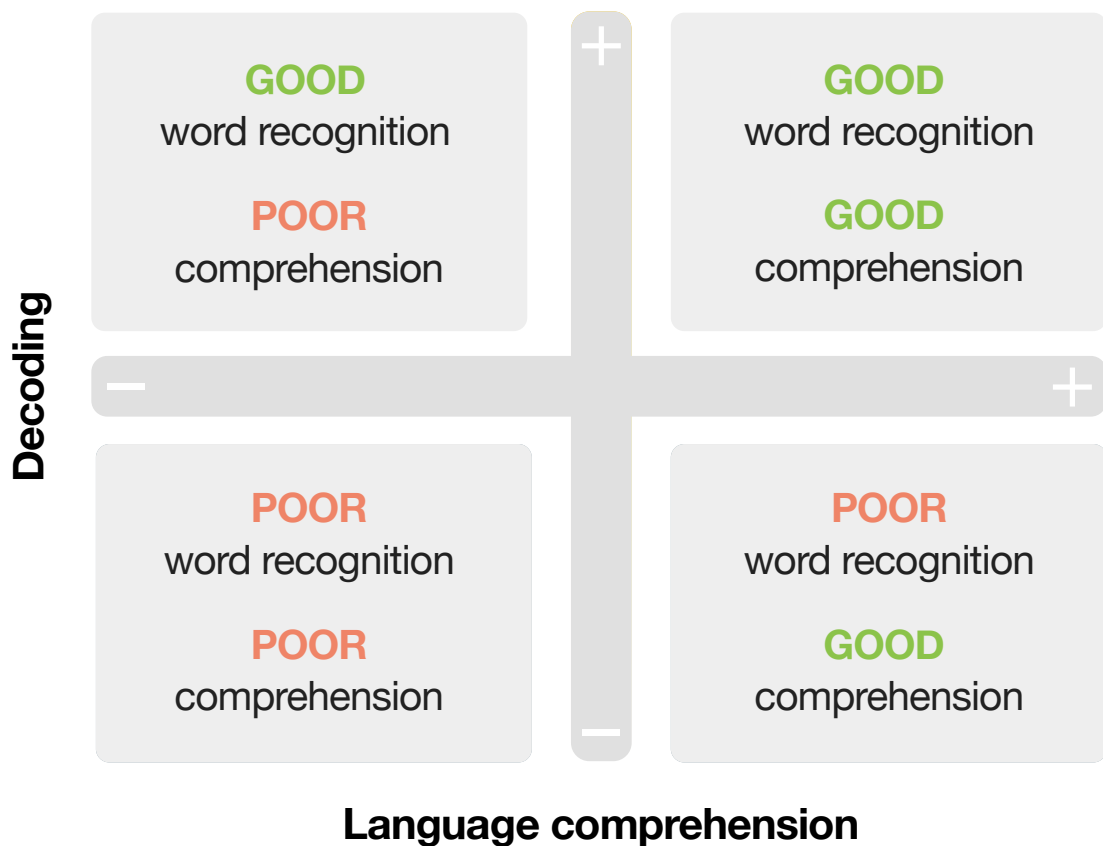
Decoding

Language comprehension

Figure 2: 'The Simple View of Reading' (Adapted from Gough, P. B. and Tunmer, W. E., 'Decoding, Reading, and Reading Disability.')[17]

Box 3: The PEER framework

This is a simple sequence that can be used to support shared, or 'dialogic', reading. When reading together, adults can pause and:

- **P**rompt the child to say something about the book;

- **E**valuate their response;

- **E**xpand their response by rephrasing or adding information to it; and

- **R**epeat the prompt to help them learn from the expansion.[23]

For example, if an adult and child were looking at a page in a book about a zoo, the parent might point at a picture and say, 'What is that?' [prompt]. The child replies, 'zebra', and the adult responds, 'That's right [evaluation]—it's a black and white stripy zebra [the expansion]; can you say, "stripy zebra"?' [the repetition].

There are five main types of prompts that can be used as part of the PEER sequence. The prompts can be remembered using the acronym CROWD:

- **C**ompletion—leave a blank at the end of a sentence for children to complete (this works particularly well with books with rhymes or repetitive phrases);

- **R**ecall—ask children about something they have already read (these prompts support children to understand the story plot);

- **O**pen-ended—often with a focus on pictures in books (this works well with illustrations and encourages children to express their ideas);

- **W**h—prompts that begin with 'who', 'what', 'where', 'why', and 'when' ('what' questions can be used to develop vocabulary); and

- **D**istancing—connects the book to children's own life experiences and provides an opportunity for high quality discussion.

Singing and rhyming activities are likely to help children develop phonological awareness.[24] As phonological awareness develops, children become increasingly able to hear and manipulate smaller units of sound.[3] Children with well-developed phonological awareness can spot and suggest rhymes, count or clap the number of syllables in a word, and can recognise words with the same initial sounds such as 'money' and 'mother'. Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness. It involves hearing and manipulating the smallest unit of sound, the phoneme, and is discussed further in Box 4.

"There is strong evidence in favour of an approach that is balanced between comprehension and decoding"

There is strong and consistent evidence in favour of an approach that is balanced both between comprehension and decoding and within these dimensions; any individual component, such as vocabulary development or alphabet knowledge, should be viewed as necessary but insufficient for long-term success.[4,18]

However, this does not mean that all aspects should receive equal time as some aspects, such as alphabet knowledge, can be taught relatively quickly. This highlights the importance of using high quality assessment information to adapt teaching to ensure that it is both effective and efficient (Recommendation 6).

Approaches to develop early reading can often also be integrated successfully with communication and language approaches (Recommendation 1) and may also benefit from parental engagement (Recommendation 5).[24] Studies indicate that when new approaches are introduced, high quality training and professional development is likely to increase impact.[24,29]

Box 4: Phonics in the early years

Phonics approaches aim to improve phonemic awareness, which is the ability to hear individual speech sounds, and to teach children about the relationships between speech sounds and letter combinations.

In Key Stage 1, there is very extensive and consistent evidence that systematic phonics teaching should be included as part of an overall balanced approach to developing reading.[25,26] The EEF's guidance report, Improving Literacy In Key Stage One,[25] highlights features of effective phonics programmes at primary school.

In the early years, there is evidence that early literacy programmes that include activities related to phonemic awareness and phonics skills lead to better literacy outcomes than programmes without these components.[27] However, fewer studies have been conducted in the early years than at primary school, meaning that further research would be beneficial in this area. To date, very few studies appear to have assessed the impact of phonics instruction on three or four-year olds. It would be valuable to conduct more research to identify the most effective ways to develop phonics and phonemic awareness for this age group.

Based on evidence from primary schools, it is likely that the quality of phonics provision is as important as the quantity of instruction provided,[28] so settings should adopt an approach or programme with secure evidence of effectiveness. Features of effective programmes include:

- **systematic**—use an explicit, organised and sequenced approach, as opposed to incidentally or on a 'when-needed' basis;

- **training**—ensure all staff have the necessary pedagogical skills and content knowledge, for example, sufficient linguistic knowledge and understanding;

- **responsive**—check if learning can be accelerated or extra support is needed (see Recommendation 6);

- **engaging**—lessons that engage children and are enjoyable to teach;

- **adaptations**—carefully consider any adaptations to the programme as they may reduce its impact; and

- **focus—**a dynamic approach to grouping children is likely to help focus effort and improve teaching efficiency by building on what children know and can do (see Recommendation 6).[25]

Writing is a challenging activity for young children because it combines the expression of meaning (composition) with the physical skills of handwriting (transcription) and spelling.[30,31] Children also need to learn about features of writing, which includes concepts about print (see Box 5) through to more advanced ideas about different types of writing.

Reading and writing focus on the reception and production of meaning respectively, but they share many underlying processes. Furthermore, the two can be mutually reinforcing—improving reading can support the development of writing (for instance, learning phonics can be integrated with practising writing letters).

> *"Accurate letter formation is an essential early skill that forms the basis of a fluent handwriting style."*

Effective writing is underpinned by children's expressive language capabilities (Recommendation 1).[3,24] It is important, therefore, to develop and monitor children's capability to formulate and articulate increasingly sophisticated sentences and express them in writing.[3] Children should have a broad range of opportunities to develop their expressive language. Activities might include storytelling, group reading, or role play.[16,24]

Accurate letter formation is an essential early skill that forms the basis of a fluent handwriting style. In turn, this supports writing composition: if handwriting is slow or effortful then children are less able to think about the content of their writing (see Box 6).[30,32] Therefore, it is important to develop the foundations of a fast, accurate, and efficient handwriting style. As part of this, it is important to look at both the product and process of children's writing. For example, a child may accurately form the letter 'm' using four separate strokes but begin on the right-hand side; this may lead to a satisfactory product, but the inefficient process will hinder the development of a fluent handwriting style (see Box 7).

Extensive practice is needed to develop effective handwriting, so developing children's motivation to communicate through writing is likely to be important.[33] Some studies indicate that the use of attractive writing tools can motivate children to communicate through writing,[34] although the effects may be short-lived. Motivation can also be enhanced by encouraging children to write for a range of purposes and audiences with opportunities to 'publish' their writing by sharing it with the intended audience.[35] Not only does this make the activity more motivating and meaningful, it can also support children to take increasing responsibility for managing and evaluating their writing.
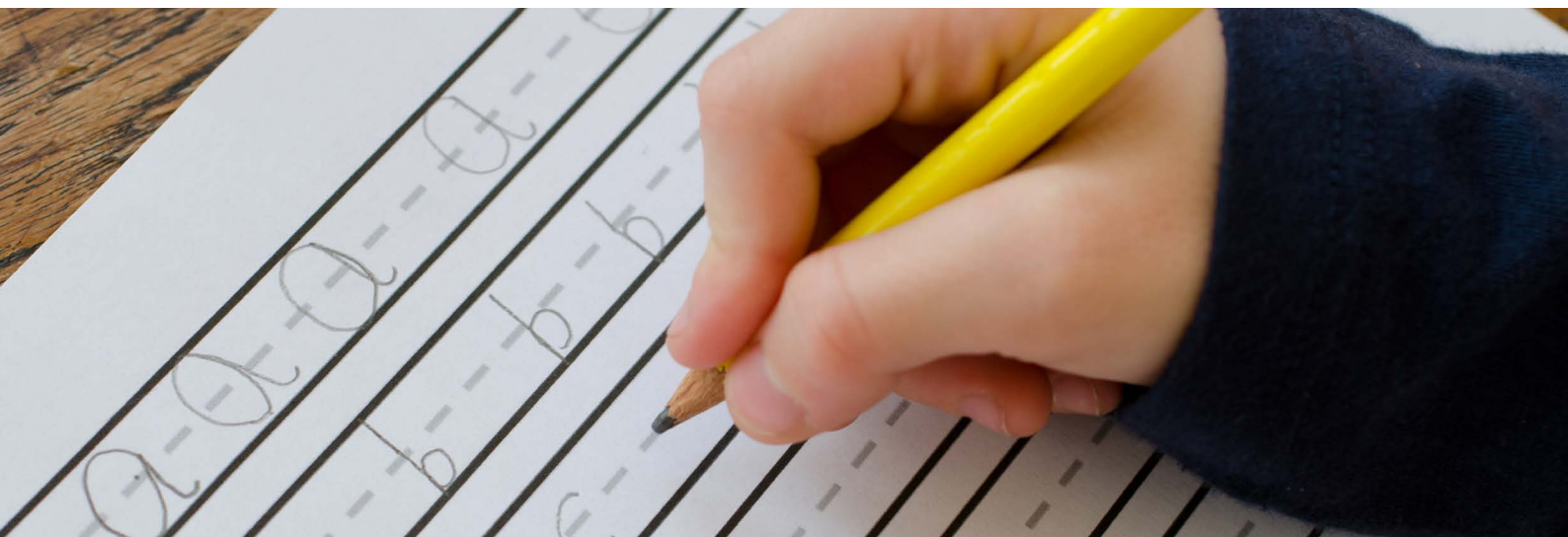
There is some evidence that, for younger children, unstructured activities—such as drawing a picture of their choice—are most effective at improving writing.[36] As children get slightly older, there is some evidence that more structured activities with guidance about what to draw or write, such as copying letters or symbols, are more effective at improving writing.[33]

Box 5: Concepts about print

Some young children will arrive with good concepts about print, but not all will, so this should be explicitly taught. Concepts about print are crucial for both reading and writing activities.

Examples of concepts about print include:

- Print has meaning
- Print can have different purposes
- Text is read from left to right

- The different parts of a book
- Text is read from top to bottom
- Page sequencing

Box 6: Handwriting difficulties

Handwriting is a complex activity that involves the co-ordination of motor and visual-motor skills.[37] Up to 30% of children may experience handwriting difficulties, so it is important to carefully monitor and plan appropriate support and intervention.[38] Such children are likely to benefit from individualised instruction,[30] but it is important to identify the specific issue before planning further support.[38] It is also challenging for children to unlearn poor habits, so dealing with handwriting issues early—for example, by ensuring appropriate grip—is likely to be more effective than later intervention.

Box 7: The product and the process of handwriting
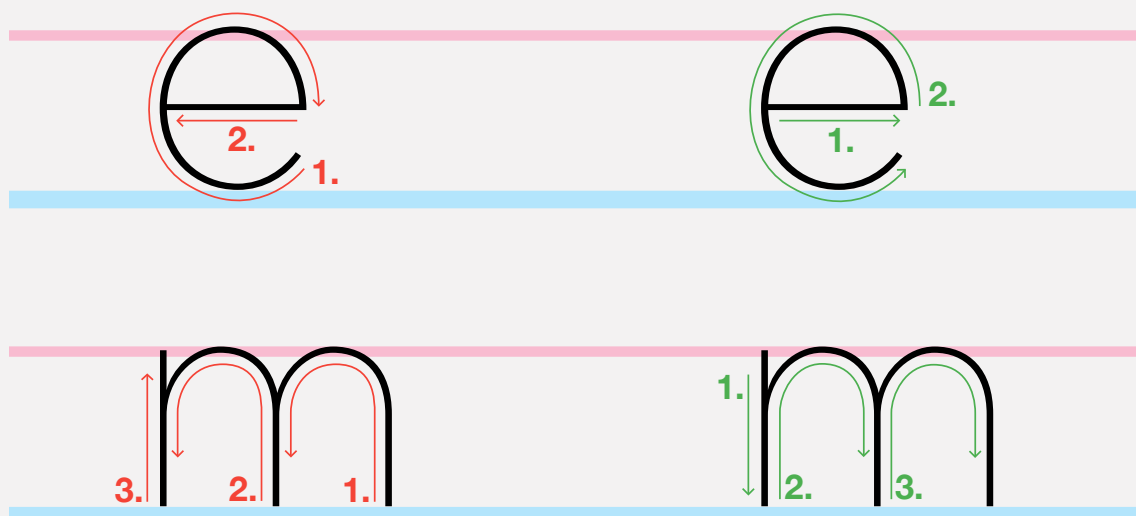
It is important to monitor both the product and process of children's handwriting. For the letters above, the product is good in both cases, but the inefficient process of forming the letters on the left will hinder the development of a fluent handwriting style.

4 Embed opportunities to develop children's self-regulation

Children's self-regulation skills affect their ability to manage their own behaviour and aspects of their learning. Children who can self-regulate effectively are likely to be able to motivate themselves to engage in learning and use strategies to help them learn, as well as be able to control their emotions, for example by resisting mood swings.[11,39]

Although more research has been done to explore self-regulation in schools than early years settings, it has been shown that children as young as three can begin to self-regulate.[40–42]

> " There is evidence that children with well-developed self-regulation skills are more likely to succeed."

There is evidence that children with well-developed self-regulation skills are more likely to succeed.[11] Further, there are indications that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to begin nursery or reception with weaker self-regulation than their peers.[40,43] A focus on self-regulation is therefore particularly likely to benefit children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[11]

Activities to develop self-regulation typically include supporting children to plan, monitor and evaluate activities or learning.[11] One simple approach to developing self-regulation involves using a 'Plan-Do-Review' cycle (see Box 8).

Adults can support children to develop their ability to self-regulate by explicitly articulating their own thinking.[39] For example, when introducing a counting game, an adult might model how to ask questions to check whether the answers are correct, see Box 9.

Likewise, children can be encouraged to articulate their own thinking through carefully designed activities. Often, this might involve using stories or characters.[11] For example, adults can take on the role of characters and ask the children to explain how they approach familiar tasks. In a shape-matching activity the character might ask "Why are you setting out all the shapes first?" Or, "Don't all the blue shapes go together?" This process of dialogue is designed to

Box 8: 'Plan-Do-Review'

This is a simple framework that can be used to promote self-regulation.

- **Plan**—discuss with children what they are going to do. This may be based around their own goals or goals set by the adult. The planning may include children identifying things that will be challenging, and where they will need to persevere, or thinking about how they can do the activity better based on previous experiences.

- **Do**—children undertake the activity. It may help to remind children of their planning. If their plan was recorded, then they can refer to it at this stage.

- **Review**—during the planning stage, children may have set goals and they can then use these to review their performance. This may be done with other children or with an adult.

For example, during a building activity with blocks, David might plan to build a tower. An adult might help David draw a sketch, and ask him to consider what worked and what did not the last time he built a tower–this is known as activating prior knowledge.

During the activity, David might refer back to the sketch, to check if the tower is on track or to consider what his next step will be. At the end of the activity, David might be encouraged to compare his tower to the plan and asked which strategies helped him achieve his goals.

It may sometimes be appropriate to use multiple, shorter cycles of 'Plan-Do-Review' rather than one longer cycle to help children maintain focus.
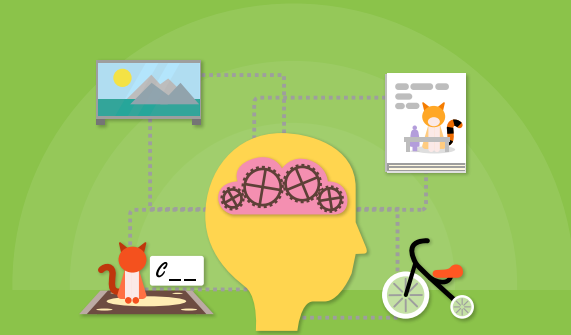
encourage children to think about what they know and how they know it, and may reveal information about how children understand key concepts.[41]

As children develop the ability to self-regulate in particular areas, explicit support from adults can be gradually withdrawn (Figure 3). This process of transferring responsibility from adult to child is designed to support children to achieve feelings of control and independence.[41,44–46]

The EEF's guidance report on metacognition and self-regulated-learning provides more detail on these approaches, but it is not specific to early years.[45]

Due to the range in effects observed in studies—and early years professionals reporting that it can be challenging to do effectively—professional development is likely necessary to maximise the benefits of developing self-regulation.[11]
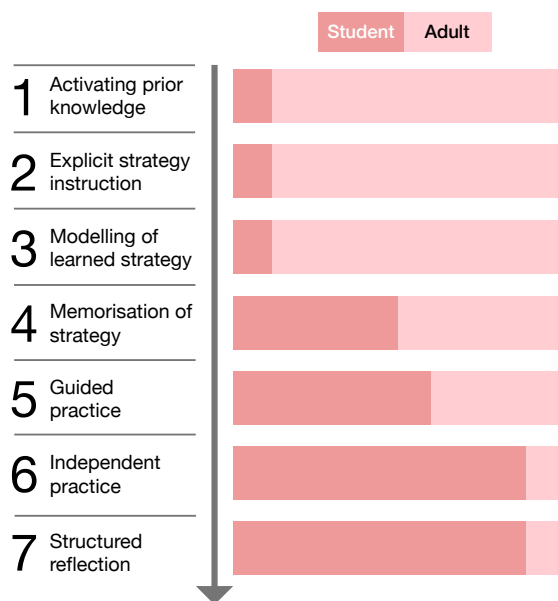
		Student	Adult
1	Activating prior knowledge		
2	Explicit strategy instruction		
3	Modelling of learned strategy		
4	Memorisation of strategy		
5	Guided practice		
6	Independent practice		
7	Structured reflection		

Figure 3: A process for transferring responsibilty from adult to child

Box 9: Modelling

In a game, children have to decide whether John and Jane have the same number of pieces of fruit.

Saima, the nursery teacher, explicitly explains the questions she uses to help her play the game: "First, I ask myself 'How many pieces of fruit does John have?', second, I ask myself 'How many pieces of fruit does Jane have?', third, I ask myself 'Do John and Jane have the same amount of fruit?'"

She then models using this process to play the game, pausing to ask children questions like "What should I do next?" in order to check their understanding.

The game gives Saira the opportunity to model both a learning strategy (self-questioning) and behaviours such as turn-taking and persistence (for example, when facing more difficult examples).

5 Support parents to understand how to help their children learn

Overall, there is consistent evidence that the level and quality of parental involvement in learning is linked to a child's communication, language, and literacy capabilities.[47] In addition, there is evidence that efforts to support parents in helping their children learn have the potential to improve outcomes for children.[47] However, not all approaches appear to be effective, meaning that it is important to think carefully about how to promote parental engagement.[48]

"Promoting shared reading should be a central component of any parental engagement approach"

Promoting shared reading should be a central component of any parental engagement approach (see also Recommendation 2). Studies highlight the benefits of reading to children before they are able to read themselves, and—when they do begin to read—the value of parents reading with them.[47] Parents can support their children in a variety of ways, for example by asking questions or by linking the topic of the book to real-life examples (see Box 10).[49,50] Running training workshops for parents with explicit advice on reading is likely to be helpful.[47] The potential benefits also extend beyond developing early literacy capabilities to improving parent-child relationships, for example.[49]

In general, approaches that focus on how to read *effectively* with children appear to be more successful than those which focus more broadly on the promotion of reading or on the provision of books.[50] In addition, approaches such as occasional home visits or setting homework tasks have generally been less successful.[48] Common explanations for why parental engagement approaches fail can relate to expertise—for example, parents wanting to help but not knowing how to help successfully, or intensity—for example, a home visit programme could be popular but simply not provide enough support to lead to a change in behaviour.[50]

It is important to acknowledge the challenge of successful parental engagement. For example, four EEF-funded studies aimed at engaging parents of primary-aged children to improve their children's literacy found it difficult to attract and retain the parents who were eligible to attend.[51–54] These studies, combined with the wider evidence, suggest that it is challenging to develop and sustain successful approaches.[47]

In addition, though the evidence-base related to parental engagement in the early years is stronger than for older children, many studies investigating parental engagement have significant methodological weaknesses, underlining the need for continued research in this area.[55,56]

Box 10: Shared reading tips

Tip 1: Ask questions about the book.

Parents can support their child by asking a range of questions about the book they are reading together.

- The **'five Ws'**—**w**ho, **w**hat, **w**here, **w**hen, and **w**hy—can provide useful question stems for parents.

- Parents should use a mixture of **closed questions** (which can be answered with a single word, or a small number of words) and **open questions** (which require a fuller response).

- Children might also be asked to **summarise** what has happened in the book or story so far, and to **predict** what will happen next.

Tip 2: Link reading to the real world.

- By talking about links between the book and real life, parents can make the story more interesting and help children develop their understanding of ideas in the book. For example, while reading about Cinderella going to the ball, a parent might discuss the similarities between a ball and a birthday party.

Adapting teaching and learning based on high quality information, collected through observation and assessment, can support all children by ensuring that the challenge and support that they receive is appropriate. This is likely to be especially important in early years settings due to the wide variation in children's initial starting points and fast rate of progression.

A helpful distinction might be made between using assessment to monitor a child's progress and using it to diagnose a child's specific capabilities and difficulties. Once children are identified as struggling through monitoring, the next step should be to identify accurately the specific aspect of learning they are finding difficult. A range of diagnostic assessments are available, and staff should be trained to use and interpret these effectively.[57] However, the available assessment tools range in quality, purpose, and ease of use. The EEF's Early Years Measures Database is a free online resource that provides an overview of different measures that can be used with young children.[58]

"The results of diagnostic assessments can be very useful, however, they should be used to supplement, not replace, professional judgement"

Areas that commonly need additional focus include speech and language,[3] motor skills to support writing,[38] and sensory needs.[59,60] Each of these issues is more common among—though not exclusive to—children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[3,61,64,65] The results of diagnostic assessments can be very useful, however, they should be used to supplement, not replace, professional judgement about a child's current capabilities and the best next steps.

Before collecting information, it is critical to plan what you will do with it. Clarity of purpose is a hallmark of effective assessment.[66] This requires more initial thought, but it can save considerable time by avoiding the collection of unnecessary information—this is especially important with younger children as data is normally collected individually and can be time consuming.[6]

As young children develop at different rates, it is also important to avoid using assessments for labelling. For example, studies suggest that around 70% of children with early language difficulties—sometimes described as 'late talkers'—will 'grow out' of them and catch up with their peers, while a smaller number will develop difficulties at a later age.[3] This finding does not mean that early years settings should withhold additional support to children who appear to be struggling, but highlights that assessment should not be used to divide children into fixed categories.
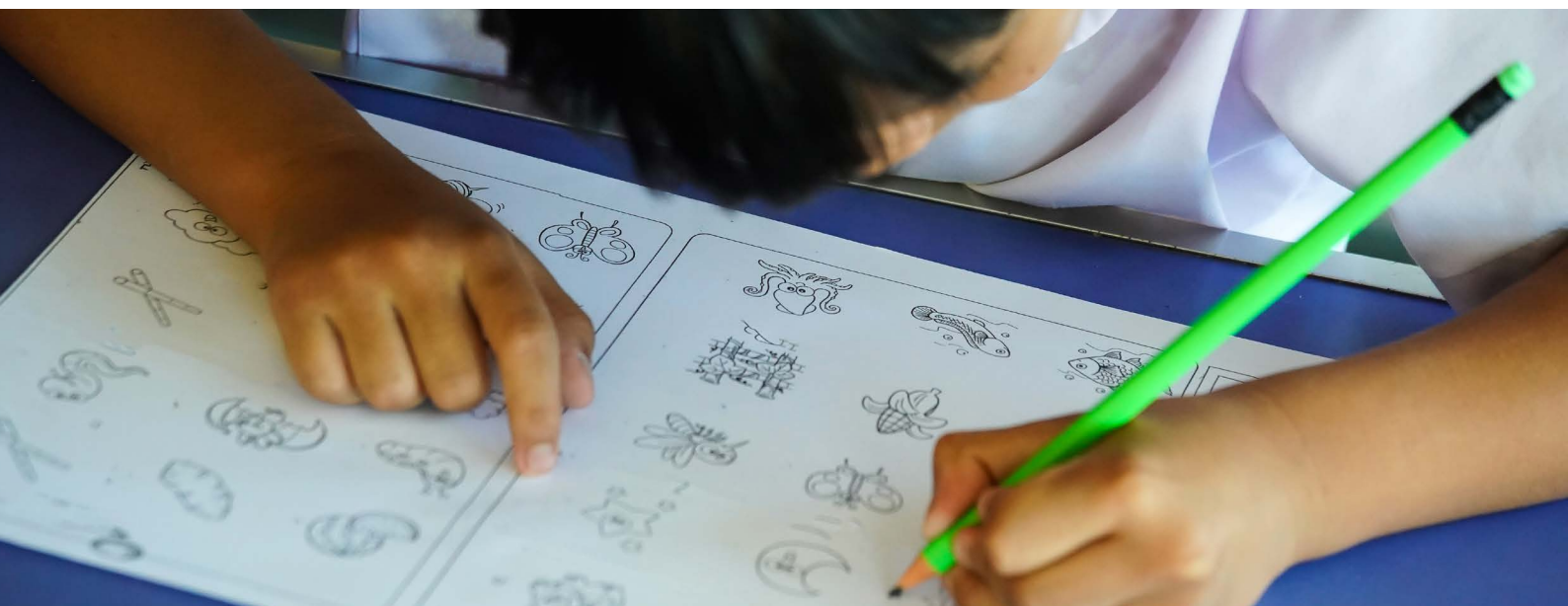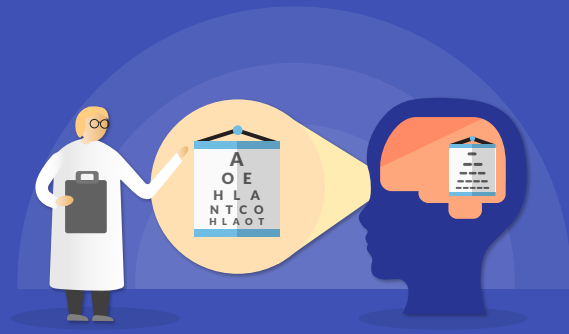
Box 11: Sensory needs

Good eye health supports early literacy as well as wider wellbeing,[67] yet studies consistently indicate that many children have unidentified needs that could be easily remedied.[59,60,61,62] Common eye conditions include refractive error (near- and short-sightedness and astigmatism), amblyopia (lazy eye), and strabismus (squint).[65] Estimates for the prevalence of these issues vary, but it is possible that around 13% of children in the U.K. may have an undiagnosed need.[60] These issues can affect all children, but those from disadvantaged backgrounds and certain ethnicities are more likely to be affected.[63,64,65]

The NHS funds eye examinations and glasses for children, yet many families do not use this service.[68] The U.K. National Screening Committee recommends that all children aged four to five should be included in the national screening programme to prioritise children who need a further examination;[69] however, the commissioning of these services varies by local area.[65,70] Furthermore, in areas that do provide a service, it may not be comprehensive enough to identify all possible issues,[60] and even children identified by the screening for further support may not attend subsequent appointments which are usually left to parents to arrange.[68]

There is also some evidence that children with hearing impairments, including temporary issues such as glue-ear (otitis media), may go unidentified and this can impact on their learning.[3] Many of these issues will naturally resolve themselves, but others may need further investigation and treatment. Reduced hearing can inhibit the development of phonological awareness—the ability to distinguish between sounds. If children respond differently when spoken to from behind compared to when addressed face-to-face, this suggests that they may have a potential problem which should be investigated further.

To maximise positive outcomes, it may help to consider the following:

- What screening services are commissioned in your local area?

- What do you do to ensure all children with possible sensory needs are identified?

- What do you do to ensure children given glasses, or other treatments, use them?

Box 12: Assessing phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is a necessary, but not sufficient, component of reading. It provides one of the best predictors of early reading difficulties.[4] Children with underdeveloped phonological awareness will benefit from focused small group or one-to-one support.

The components of phonological awareness can be assessed by focusing on:

- **words**—ask the child to count the number of words in a sentence you say;

- **syllables**—ask the child to count the number of syllables in a word;

- **rhyming**—ask children to create a rhyming string based on a prompt;

- **phoneme blending**—sound out phonemes ('s-o-ck') and ask what it means; and

- **segmentation**—check if children can identify the start, middle, and end of words.

7 Use high quality targeted support to help struggling children

Early years settings should use small-group or one-to-one support to help struggling children. There is good evidence that such activities—informed by diagnostic assessment (see Recommendation 6)—can improve children's communication, language, and literacy capabilities.[2,71] It can be helpful to think about targeted support through a tiered model of 'waves' whereby high quality initial teaching is supplemented by small-group support and subsequently individualised support as necessary.[3]

Consider the following to make the most of targeted support:[25]

- use your most capable staff to support children with the greatest needs;

- provide training and support for staff using targeted activities;

- quality is generally more important than quantity;

- sessions should be brief, regular, and sustained; and

- provide adults leading the activity with structured supporting resources or activity plans with clear objectives.

In particular, existing research underlines the importance of providing specific training to the adults providing small-group or one-to-one support; high quality training is a common feature of almost all effective small-group interventions.[3] It is also important that explicit connections are made between targeted interventions and everyday activities or teaching. These links can be made by ensuring that adults delivering additional support have time to discuss this work with their colleagues and by purposefully asking children questions about the content of targeted support.[72]

In addition, a number of formalised programmes, typically comprising training and supporting resources, are available to support the teaching of communication, language, and literacy. Many of these programmes claim to be supported by evidence, but it can be challenging to assess these claims or make comparisons between programmes. Resources like the EEF's promising programmes list and the Evidence 4 Impact database provide guidance on the existing evidence for different programmes.[73,74] (See Box 14.) Using a programme that has been evaluated as promising is a good starting point, but considering the issues above will help to maximise the impact of any programme.

In addition to using evidence-based programmes, some specialist services are likely to be best delivered by other professionals such as speech and language therapists.

Box 13: Who should deliver targeted interventions?

The evidence suggests that interventions delivered by teaching assistants (TAs) can have a positive impact on attainment, but on average this impact is lower than when delivered by a teacher. Crucially, these positive effects only occur when TAs work in structured settings with high quality support and training. When TAs are deployed in more informal, unsupported instructional roles, they can impact negatively on children's learning outcomes. In other words, what matters most is not whether TAs are delivering interventions, but how they are doing so. In this context, structured evidence-based programmes provide an excellent means of aiding high quality delivery.

The EEF's Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants report provides more guidance.[72]

Box 14: Evidence-based interventions

There are a number of interventions available that aim to support children who are struggling. However, it can be challenging to identify the interventions that have the most promise. Adopting interventions that have been rigorously evaluated with promising findings is likely to provide a good starting point. The EEF's list of promising projects identifies the projects that the EEF has evaluated with promising findings.[73] As the EEF evaluates more projects, this list will grow.

One intervention that has been rigorously evaluated, with positive findings, is the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI).[2] It aims to improve children's listening, narrative and vocabulary skills by training teaching assistants to deliver a series of individual and small group sessions to children with relatively poor spoken language skills. The EEF funded evaluation found that children receiving NELI made improvements in their oral language equivalent to four months' additional progress.
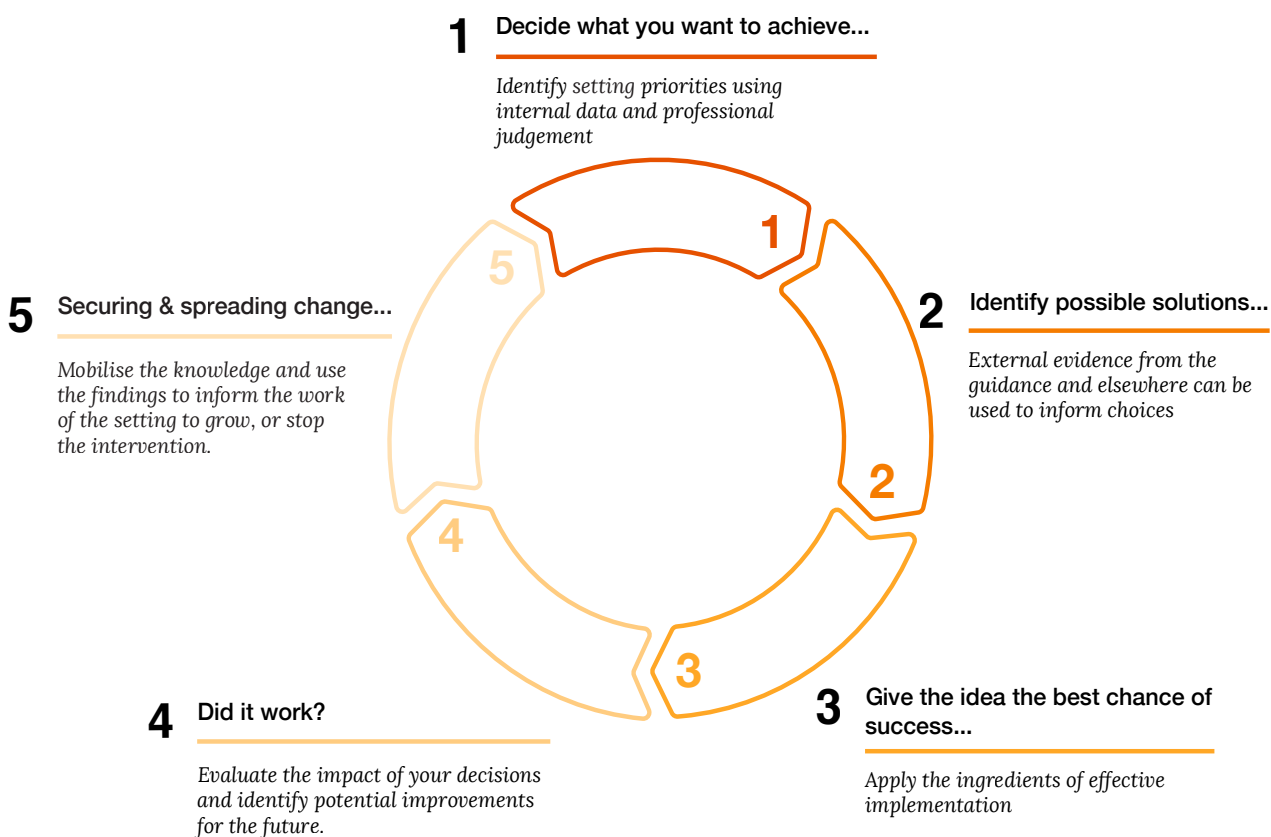
ACTING ON THE EVIDENCE

There are several key principles to consider when acting on this guidance.

These recommendations do not provide a 'one size fits all' solution. It is important to consider the delicate balance between implementing the recommendations faithfully and applying them appropriately to your setting's particular context. Implementing the recommendations effectively will require careful consideration of how they fit your setting's context and the application of sound professional judgement.

The recommendations should be considered together, as a group, and should not be implemented selectively. Further, it is important to consider the precise detail provided beneath the headline recommendations. For example, settings should not use Recommendation 7 to justify the purchase of lots of interventions. Rather, it should provoke thought about the most appropriate interventions to buy.

Inevitably, change takes time, and we recommend taking at least two terms to plan, develop, and pilot strategies on a small scale before rolling out new practices across the setting. Gather support for change across the setting and set aside regular time throughout the year to focus on this project and review progress. You can find out more about implementation in our guidance report ['Putting Evidence to Work – A School's Guide to Implementation'](#).

Figure 4: An evidence-informed school improvement cycle

1 Decide what you want to achieve...

Identify setting priorities using internal data and professional judgement

2 Identify possible solutions...

External evidence from the guidance and elsewhere can be used to inform choices

3 Give the idea the best chance of success...

Apply the ingredients of effective implementation

4 Did it work?

Evaluate the impact of your decisions and identify potential improvements for the future.

5 Securing & spreading change...

Mobilise the knowledge and use the findings to inform the work of the setting to grow, or stop the intervention.

This guidance report draws on the best available evidence regarding the teaching of communication, language and literacy to children in the early years. The primary source of evidence for the recommendations is the Early Years Teaching and Learning Toolkit, which is a synthesis of international research evidence developed by Professor Steve Higgins and colleagues at Durham University with the support of the Sutton Trust and the EEF. However, the report also draws on a wide range of evidence from other studies and reviews regarding literacy development and teaching. The emphasis is on rigorous evaluations that provide reliable evidence of an impact on children's learning outcomes. The intention is to provide a reliable foundation of what is effective, based on robust evidence.

The report was developed over several stages. The initial stage produced a scoping document that set out the headline recommendations and supporting evidence. This was then revised with support and feedback from an advisory panel of teachers and researchers.

We would like to thank the many researchers and practitioners who provided support and feedback in producing this guidance. We would like to give particular thanks to our advisory panel: Charlotte Clowes, Professor Julie Dockrell, Professor Steve Higgins, Sandra Mathers and Professor Dominic Wyse.

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