Early Skills for Life Pilot Project

Overview

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is funding Partnership for Children (PfC) to pilot (try out) the Early Skills for Life (ESfL) programme with 20 early years (EY) settings between September 2026 and May 2027. Early Skills for Life is a 20-week universal programme for three to four year olds (with additional targeted elements) to promote self-regulation and personal, social and emotional development (PSED) in children using storybooks and play-based activities. The EEF have commissioned Oxford MeasurEd to independently evaluate the pilot. The evaluation team will assess the feasibility, perceived impact on children's self-regulation and personal, social and emotional development and perceived changes in staff and families as well as potential scalability of Early Skills for Life. The evaluation will also explore how settings implemented the programme and their motivation to engage with the programme. Self-regulation is an area of promise to improve outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence from EEF's Early Years Toolkit suggests that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to begin early years education with weaker self-regulation skills than their more affluent peers so they might be more likely to benefit from early years programmes that teach self-regulation strategies.

Early Skills for Life was previously funded through EEF's Early-Stage Programme Development work, which supports the development of programmes in areas where there are gaps in the evidence. After showing evidence of promise in this earlier stage, this pilot will address the readiness of the programme for a larger scale trial.

What does the programme involve?

Each fortnight, practitioners deliver four core components:

1. a whole-class circle time with a story and guided discussion (15-20 mins)
2. ongoing story extension activities integrated into wider provision
3. two adult-led small-group activities for targeted children (15-20 mins each)
4. a repeat of the small-group activity in the second week.

There is also a family engagement element to the programme. Settings will be asked to:

- share project information leaflet designed by PfC with parents/carers
- offer a minimum of two stay and play sessions to parents/carers of children taking part in the programme
- encourage parents/carers to watch two online webinars designed by PfC

All continuous professional development (CPD) is delivered online and includes a pre-programme online onboarding session, two training sessions, and a mid-point CPD webinar. A senior member of staff (the Project Lead) also attends two network meetings to share best practice, alongside conducting two observations and two practitioner reflection meetings to support implementation and programme sustainability.

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Registered Charity number: 1089810

At each participating nursery a senior member of the early years staff (Project Lead) will oversee the project. PfC's Programme Development Lead will support Project Leads and nurseries with the implementation of the programme.

The Project Lead will need to:

- oversee and support programme implementation at the setting
- conduct two observations and two reflection meetings with practitioners delivering the programme
- ensure practitioners have access to all programme resources, including the programme manual with 20 weeks of content including support with family engagement
- ensure at least 10 storybooks from the booklist or suitable alternatives are available during delivery
- ensure practitioners submit their delivery logs to PfC on a fortnightly basis during programme implementation

What are the benefits of participating?

By taking part, your setting will receive free of charge planning, resources and supporting materials for a play-based programme grounded in EY pedagogy and evidence. You will also receive training sessions and online support, reflecting key messages from the latest educational research. Importantly, this is a great opportunity to add to the developing evidence base and knowledge on what works well in EY PSED provision in England.

Eligibility

Your nursery is eligible to take part as long as:

- at least two members of staff at your nursery attend the training delivered by PfC
- your nursery is not delivering similar interventions that may conflict with the pilot over the academic year 2026/27. This includes taking part in another EEF early years pilot/trial, with the exception of Maths Champions, or a Research School evidence into action partnership in which participating practitioners are involved.
- you are able to deliver the programme to three–four-year-olds only - we won't be able to include settings with joined rooms
- you expect a minimum of 10 pupils aged three and four to attend nursery for a minimum of 15 hours per week during the 2026/27 academic year
- you can select up to six children below developmental goals for the targeted group

Who is running the project?

Partnership for Children, a children's mental health charity with over 20 years of experience of designing and delivering social and emotional learning programmes, are the developers for Early Skills for Life and will lead this project. This pilot project will be independently evaluated by Oxford Measured, a boutique education consultancy, who will assess the feasibility, perceived impact on children's self-regulation and personal, social and emotional development and perceived changes in staff and families as well as potential scalability of Early Skills for Life. The evaluation will also explore how settings implemented the programme and their motivation to engage with the programme. These findings will be published in an evaluation report.

How does the Pilot work?

The evaluation will investigate whether the ESfL pilot:

- indicates that the programme has potential for future success in relation to children's outcomes
- is feasible to implement for nurseries, nursery staff and parents/carers and ready to be evaluated at a larger scale

The evidence will inform EEF decisions about whether the potential impact of ESfL should be evaluated in a large-scale trial. The evaluation will also shape the design of a possible trial by providing deeper understanding of:

- the reason how the programme works and its impact
- potential outcome measures that could be used to evaluate impact

All nurseries participating in the ESfL pilot are required to take part in the evaluation. This includes sharing agreed staff details with the evaluation team, distributing information to parents/carers and:

- allow Project Lead to participate in a 45-minute interview during nursery opening hours (if invited by the research team)
- encourage all participating staff (Projects Lead and practitioners) to take part in a short online survey after the programme (Project Lead) and before and after the programme (practitioners)

Six nurseries will be selected for site visits, which will involve interviews, classroom observations, and a possible parent/carer interview. These nurseries will also pilot a child questionnaire at the end of the programme and support related logistics and data sharing. A £250 payment will be provided to nurseries that complete all site visit activities.

Are there any costs involved?

No. All settings will receive book tokens (£100) to purchase up to 10 books recommended to use as part of the programme and a contribution towards staff costs (£7.50 per hour per practitioner) for time spent taking part in professional development activities.

How will data be used?

Oxford MeasurEd, as the independent evaluator of the pilot, will collect and process personal data for evaluation activities, including surveys, interviews, observations and outcome measures. This may include staff contact details and, where relevant, child-level data. The data will be used to assess how the pilot is delivered and its impact. All data will be handled securely, confidentially and in accordance with data protection law. Further details are available in Oxford MeasurEd's evaluation privacy notice.

Partnership for Children (PfC) will collect personal data from participating settings, such as names and contact details of project leads and practitioners, job roles, training attendance, and relevant project communications. This information is used to manage programme delivery and support the evaluation. PfC also collects delivery logs, which do not contain personal data. PfC does not collect pupil-level data. Further information is available in PfC's privacy notice.

What is the timeline for this project?

Expression of interest deadline	Thursday 12th March 2026 – 11am
Attend one of the following information sessions	Monday 23rd March 2026 1.30-2.30pm Tuesday 24th March 2026 10-11am Tuesday 24th March 2026 6-7pm
Memorandum of understanding signed	April/May 2026
Setting onboarding session	June/July 2026
Online training sessions	September 2026
Programme delivery	October 2026 - May 2027

Interested in participating?

Register your interest here: Early Skills for Life Project 2026-2027 - Expression of Interest Form.

If you have any questions about the Early Skills for Life programme, please contact Jayne Carter (Programme Development Lead) at info@partnershipforchildren.org.uk.

If you have any questions about the evaluation, please contact Jonah Bury and the Oxford MeasurEd evaluation team at esfl-evaluation@oxfordmeasured.co.uk