

Implementing Change in Early Years: Insights from the EEF's Guide to Effective Implementation

Katrina Di Girolami, The Great North Early Years Stronger Practice Hub

The start of a new academic year in early years settings, is a time of new opportunities and revitalised energy. It's a time when practitioners and leaders can introduce new strategies, refine existing practices, and set goals for the months/year ahead. However, implementing change in early years requires a thoughtful approach, one that is carefully planned and responsive to the unique needs of young children.

The [Education Endowment Foundation's \(EEF\) Guide to Effective Implementation](#) provides a plan for achieving this, ensuring that new initiatives are both impactful and sustainable.



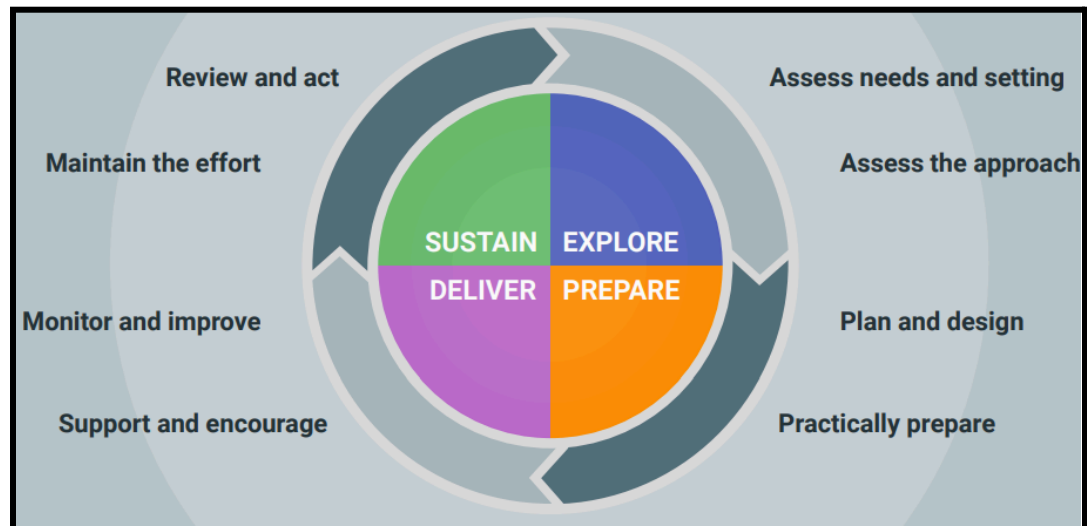
Why Focus on Early Years?

Research consistently shows that high-quality early years education has a hugely positive impact on children's development and long-term outcomes. As such, any changes or new initiatives introduced in these settings can have significant, lasting effects. Whether it's a new phonics program, an outdoor learning strategy, or an updated approach to behaviour management, the way these initiatives are implemented can determine their success.

The EEF's Four-Stage Model

The EEF's guide to effective implementation breaks down the process into four key stages:

1. Explore
2. Prepare
3. Deliver
4. Sustain



Each stage is designed to help practitioners and leaders plan, introduce, and embed changes in a way that maximises their chances of success.

Stage 1: Explore – Setting the Foundation

The start of a new academic year is a key opportunity to explore and identify the most pressing needs within your setting. In early years, exploration involves identifying the specific needs of the children and the setting as a whole. This might involve assessing developmental data, observing children and gathering key information from staff, parents/carers and other professionals.

Key Actions:

- **Needs Analysis:** Use the first few weeks of the academic year to gather data and insights, this could involve reviewing previous years data and observations too. Identify any gaps in learning, behavioural challenges, or areas where children could benefit from additional support.
- **Consultation:** Engage with staff and parents/carers to understand their perspectives. Early years practitioners often have invaluable insights into what works and what doesn't, while parents/carers can provide important context about their children's needs.
- **Evidence Review:** Use resources like the [EEF's Early Years Toolkit](#) to explore evidence-based strategies that could address the identified needs. This ensures that any changes are rooted in proven approaches.

Stage 2: Prepare – Laying the Groundwork

Preparation is critical to the success of any new initiative. In early years, this stage involves careful planning, training, and ensuring that the new strategy is tailored to the developmental stages of the children.

Key Actions:

- **Set Clear Objectives:** Define what you want to achieve with the new initiative. For example, if implementing a new language development program, the objectives might include measurable improvements in vocabulary and communication skills by the end of the term. Ensure that the goals of the new initiative are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). Align these objectives with the settings overall improvement plan, e.g. your school development plan.
- **Tailor to Early Years:** Adapt the initiative to the early years context. This might involve simplifying activities, incorporating more play-based learning, or adjusting the pace of implementation to align with young children's learning pace.
- **Create a Detailed Plan:** Develop a step-by-step plan that outlines who will be responsible for each aspect of the implementation, what resources will be needed, and what the timeline will look like.

- Engage Stakeholders: Early in the academic year, take time to build buy-in from all stakeholders, including teachers, support staff, students, and parents/carers. Clear communication about the purpose and expected outcomes of the initiative is essential.
- Professional Development: Provide training for staff to ensure they are confident and equipped to deliver the new initiative. Early years practitioners may need specific training on how to integrate the new approach into their day-to-day interactions with children.

Stage 3: Deliver – Bringing the Plan to Life

The delivery stage is where the new initiative is put into practice. In early years settings, this requires a focus on consistency, observation, and responsiveness. The EEF emphasises that effective delivery is not about perfection from day one but about being adaptive and responsive as the initiative is rolled out.

Key Actions:

- Start Small: Introduce the new initiative gradually, perhaps starting with a pilot in one classroom or with a small group of children. This allows for adjustments based on initial observations and feedback.
- Monitor and Support: Regularly observe how the initiative is being implemented. Provide ongoing support to practitioners, such as coaching sessions or collaborative planning time, to help them refine their practice.
- Engage Children: Ensure that the initiative is engaging and developmentally appropriate for the children. For example, if introducing a new storytelling approach, make sure it's interactive and allows for plenty of child-led exploration.
- Foster a Positive Culture: Strive for a school culture that embraces change and encourages experimentation. At the beginning of the academic year, set the tone for a supportive environment where staff feel comfortable taking risks and learning from challenges.

Stage 4: Sustain – Embedding Long-Term Change

The final stage of the EEF's guide focuses on sustainability. Too often, new initiatives lose momentum after the initial excitement fades. In early years settings, this means ensuring that new practices become part of the daily routine and continue to benefit children over time.

Key Actions:

- **Embed Practices:** Work with staff to integrate the new initiative into the daily routine. This might involve creating new resources, adjusting lesson plans/timetables, or modifying the physical environment to support the change.
- **Review and Reflect:** Schedule regular reviews to assess the impact of the initiative. Use this time to reflect on what's working, celebrate successes, and make any necessary adjustments.
- **Plan for Longevity:** Think about how to sustain the initiative beyond the current academic year. This could involve training new staff, identifying key staff members who can champion the initiative moving forward, securing ongoing resources, or setting up peer support networks among practitioners.

Conclusion

Implementing change in early years settings at the start of a new academic year is a powerful opportunity to enhance children's learning and development. By following the EEF's Guide to Effective Implementation, practitioners can ensure that new initiatives are thoughtfully introduced and have a lasting, positive impact on young children. As you prepare for the new academic year, consider how these principles can guide your approach to implementing change. With careful planning and a focus on the unique needs of early years, your initiatives can help create a nurturing and enriching environment where every child can thrive and make progress.

Our Top 5 Tips for Successful Implementation in Early Years using the EEF's Guide to Implementation

Implementing change in early years settings is a complex process, but by following these tips that are rooted in the EEF's research and guidance, you can increase the likelihood of successful, lasting improvements. Each step, from diagnosing needs to sustaining change, is crucial in creating a positive impact on the learning and development of young children.

Here are our five top tips for successful implementation:



Start with a Clear Diagnosis of Needs

Tip: Before introducing any change, conduct a thorough assessment to identify the specific needs of your early years setting. This involves gathering data on children's developmental progress, consulting with staff, and engaging parents/carers.

Why Does It Matter?

Understanding the needs of your setting allows you to select the most appropriate intervention. According to the EEF's Guide to Effective Implementation, the "Explore" stage emphasises the importance of diagnosing issues and considering evidence-based interventions that align with these needs.

2

Select Evidence-Based Interventions

Tip: Choose interventions that have a strong evidence base, particularly those that have been shown to be effective in early years settings.

Why Does It Matters?

The EEF highlights the importance of selecting strategies supported by robust evidence. Their Early Years Toolkit provides summaries of research on various approaches, helping you make informed decisions about what is likely to work best in your context.

3

Plan and Prepare Thoroughly

Tip: Develop a detailed implementation plan that includes clear objectives, timelines, and roles. Ensure that all staff members are adequately trained and understand their role in the new initiative.

Why Does It Matters?

According to the EEF, the "Prepare" stage is critical for setting the foundation for successful implementation. Planning should be comprehensive and consider the specific developmental needs of young children, ensuring that the initiative is appropriate and achievable within your setting.

4

Pilot and Adapt

Tip: Start with a small-scale pilot of the new initiative before rolling it out more widely. Use this period to observe, gather feedback, and make adjustments as needed.

Why Does It Matters?

The EEF's guidance suggests that piloting allows you to refine your approach based on real-world application. This strategy helps to identify potential challenges early and adapt the initiative to better fit your setting.

5

Embed and Sustain the Change

Tip: Focus on embedding the new practice into the daily routines of your setting. Regularly review progress, celebrate successes, and make adjustments to ensure the initiative remains effective over time.

Why Does It Matters?

The "Sustain" stage of the EEF's implementation guide emphasises the importance of long-term planning and continuous improvement. Embedding change requires ongoing support, reflection, and adaptation to ensure that the benefits are sustained and that the initiative becomes a natural part of your setting's culture.