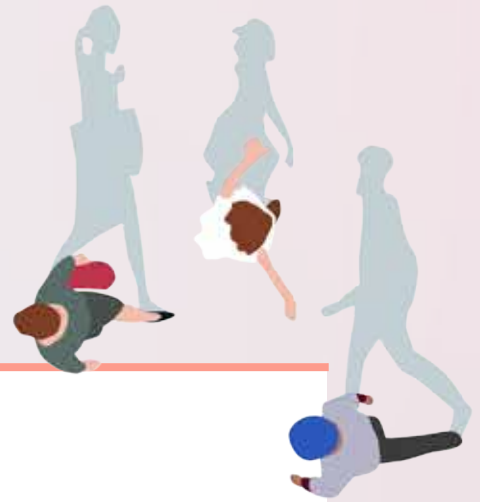




What Works for
**Children's
Social Care**



EVALUATION OF OUR SKILLS

PILOT EVALUATION REPORT

May 2022





What Works for Children's Social Care

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CWSW	Children who currently have a social worker, or have had a social worker in the last six years
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial
Special Guardianship Order	A legal order giving a carer – usually a relative – shared parental responsibility for a child with the parents.
Virtual School Heads/Teams	Local authority staff with a statutory responsibility for the education of all children in care and who have left care through adoption, a Special Guardianship Order or Child Arrangement Order. Their remit was recently extended to a non-statutory strategic leadership role promoting education outcomes for children with a social worker or who have had a social worker
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This is the report of an evaluation of Our Skills, an online course aimed at parents and carers of children in Reception or Year 1 who have ever had a social worker (CWSW)². It aims to support parents and carers to support their children's reading and learning at home. It involved 10 sessions just for parents and carers, and 10 where children also join in. The course was delivered by tutors from organisations that specialise in family learning. These tutors delivered 28 courses (not all of which were completed), to a total of 110 parents and carers and 103 children, from 33 schools, in different parts of England.

Our Skills covers phonics, reading strategies, story telling, learning to read, learning through play, and how reading is taught in schools. It involves discussion, resources and activities. It was delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted on recruitment of schools and parents/carers.

Research questions addressed by the pilot evaluation

1. **Evidence of feasibility** – Was it feasible to implement Our Skills as an online programme for the parents/carers of CWSW?
2. **Evidence of promise** – What evidence is there that Our Skills can have a positive impact on family literacy environments and children's attainment?
3. **Readiness for trial** – What if any further work is required for Our Skills to be ready for trial?

Methods

The study involved:

- A survey of parents/carers who attended Our Skills sessions, covering understanding of, confidence in, and frequency and enjoyment of reading with children completed at three points – in the first and final sessions and three months later: 68 parents/carers took part in the first survey, 38 in the second and 59 in the follow-up survey.
- Interviews with parents/carers, tutors and managers, schools and Virtual School teams, asking about their involvement (43 interviews), and two focus groups with the programme developers.

² By this we mean children who are adopted, or who are or have been a looked after child, fostered, cared for under a Special Guardianship Order, cared for by someone else in their family; children who have or have had a child in need or child protection plan; and children who have received social work support as a disabled child or statutory social work support following a social work assessment.

- Observation of six sessions, and a Delivery Record completed by 10 tutors
- Analysis of register data provided by tutors.

Key findings

The table below provides a summary of the findings in response to each of the research questions.

Table 1 Summary of study findings

Evidence of feasibility	Findings
Was it feasible to implement Our Skills as an online programme for the parents/carers of CWSW?	Our Skills was developed as a face-to-face programme. The decision to deliver Our Skills online was made late on in planning, and it was not fully developed as an online programme. There were implementation challenges, some relating to COVID-19 and others not. Feasibility could be increased but it remains unclear whether an online programme is feasible for this content and population.
Did the programme reach the intended audience and what implementation strategies were used?	Take-up of Our Skills by schools and families was very low, with challenges from COVID-19, identifying eligible families, online delivery, and programme duration. The most effective strategies for recruiting schools used existing connections and for recruiting parents/carers involved direct contact.
Was the programme delivered as intended, what adaptations were made and why?	The programme was originally intended to be delivered face-to-face but delivered online as a result of Covid. It was largely delivered as intended. A significant number of courses did not deliver all 10 parent/carer and joint sessions, but there was good adherence to the intended content. Adherence to some intended teaching strategies was inhibited by delivering online, and school engagement was low. Adaptations were made to resources and approaches to conveying the content.
Was the programme acceptable to and appropriate for parents/carers and schools?	Parents/carers interviewed were very positive about the programme and tutors (although those providing feedback are biased towards more complete attenders). However only 50 per cent of those participating attended 5+ sessions. The programme was very well accepted by participating schools.
Evidence of promise	Findings

What evidence is there that Our Skills can have a positive impact on family literacy environments and children's attainment?

There is clear evidence of promise.

What perceived impacts were identified by parents/carers and by schools, and how far did parent/carers report change over time?

The evaluation shows evidence of promise, where the programme is delivered at the intended dosage, in impacts on parent/carers confidence, enjoyment of reading with children, understanding how schools teach phonics and reading and children's enjoyment of reading. There was indicative evidence of changes in behaviour to support children's reading. There was no evidence of changes in schools' approaches.

Is there evidence to support the outcomes and mechanisms of change in the draft theory of change?

There is evidence to support changes relating to confidence, understanding and enjoyment and indicative evidence that these may support changes in behaviour and reading attainment.

Was there any evidence of potential unintended consequences or negative effects

There was no evidence of unintended or negative consequences apart from a statistically significant reduction in story telling, which may indicate displacement by reading.

Readiness for trial

Findings

What if any further work is required for Our Skills to be ready for trial?

The next phases of evaluation should involve further development of the programme to optimise Our Skills fully whether for online, face-to-face or hybrid delivery.

Can Our Skills be delivered consistently across delivery partners and schools?

The evidence suggests that Our Skills can be delivered consistently. Risk may be mitigated by a hybrid online and face-to-face delivery model.

Are any changes needed to the programme materials, resources and implementation strategies including training?

To deliver Our Skills online or as a hybrid programme, changes would be needed to recruitment strategies and programme resources.

What aspects of the programme delivery should be addressed in fidelity criteria?

Key areas would be tutor requirements; adherence to programme structure; attendance; school engagement; and adherence to content and teaching strategies

Discussion, conclusion and recommendations

Our Skills was originally developed for face-to-face delivery, and adapted shortly before delivery began for online delivery because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic also posed challenges to reaching the intended audience, and despite intensive activity to recruit schools and families using a range of strategies, take-up by schools and families was very low. The most effective recruitment strategies for both schools and families involved direct contact.

There were challenges in delivering Our Skills online, and questions remain about whether an online programme is feasible for the intended population and content. Despite this, the programme was largely delivered as intended, and there was good adherence to the intended content and teaching strategies, although working online made some teaching strategies difficult such as individual coaching of parents/carers.

It was not possible for all tutors to delivery all the intended sessions (some sessions were missed or combined), and only half of participating parents/carers attended five or more parent/carer sessions. The programme was generally liked by the parents interviewed in the evaluation, and very well accepted by participating schools.

There is clear evidence of promise for parents/carers who participated more fully and received the intended dosage. There was evidence of change in parent/carer confidence, enjoyment and understanding in relation to children's reading, and in children's enjoyment of reading. There were also some indicative evidence of change in parent/carer behaviours. This is in line with the mechanism of change, although there was no evidence of changes in schools' approaches which is anticipated in the theory of change.

In terms of readiness for trial and future development of the programme, there are outstanding questions about whether Our Skills should in future be delivered online, face-to-face or in a hybrid mode. It is also not clear whether a 10-session course is viable for the intended audience outside the context of COVID-19, although on balance the evidence suggests some modification would be desirable, for example a modular approach.

There are also outstanding questions about whether the eligible population should be widened to include families who have not had a social worker but need support with children's reading. Social care and school information systems do not current facilitate the identification of the eligible population, there are concerns about the stigma of a programme targeting families in this way, and the heterogeneity of the population is also challenging to delivery. An alternative approach in which Our Skills is a universal but targeted programme may be more appropriate.

There is also a need for further work considering how to improve take-up by schools and families and how to get schools more involved in delivering and supporting the programme.

Overall, we recommend that recruitment strategies, course content and delivery are developed and tested further as a Pilot Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT), with an Implementation and Process Evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Project background

Our Skills is a family literacy programme which aims to increase the educational attainment and life chances of children in Reception or Year 1 who have (or had) a social worker (CWSW). It involves 10 weekly sessions, each session involving parent/carer time and joint parent/carer and child time. For this pilot evaluation, Our Skills was delivered online, by tutors from delivery partner organisations, who were trained in the programme. It involved content on phonics, reading with children, home literacy practices, how children learn, and how literacy is taught in primary schools.

Rationale for Our Skills

Children and young people who have had a social worker often cite education as playing an important role in their lives (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked after Children and Care Leavers, 2012; Kelly, 2017). However, by age seven, there is a very large educational 'attainment gap' for CWSW (Berridge et al., 2020; Sinclair et al, 2020).

There is increasing policy attention and support for the education of CWSW, including a higher level of funding through the Pupil Premium Plus. In addition, the Virtual School Head is a statutory role responsible for the education of all CWSW, which has been extended with a new non-statutory strategic leadership role from the 2021-2022 academic year to narrow the attainment gap (Department for Education, 2021).

Improving the engagement of parents/carers and home learning environments may improve the educational outcomes for children who are disadvantaged, including CWSW (Sinclair et al., 2020, Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2013). The home learning environment is shown to have powerful effects on literacy and numeracy in early primary school for the general population (Melhuish et al., 2008) and has been particularly pertinent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Andrew et al., 2020; Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020). Some educational interventions delivered by foster carers within the home setting have been shown to have positive educational outcomes (Evans, Brown, Rees, & Smith, 2016). Likewise, focussing on the home learning environment may improve the educational outcomes for CWSW (Sutcliffe, Gardiner, & Melhuish, 2017).

An Education Endowment Foundation review found that parental engagement interventions had an average impact five months' progress over the course of a year for pupils in early years settings (e.g., Reception) and four months' progress for pupils in primary school, with impacts higher for pupils with low prior attainment (Axford et al, 2019). The review recommended tailoring communications to personalised messages that could promote positive interactions about learning and considering the support schools can give to parents for high-quality home learning, such as tips, support and home learning resources.

Origins of Our Skills

Our Skills was adapted from Family Skills, a family literacy programme designed to support children in Reception for whom English is an additional language (EAL). Evaluation of Family Skills found no effects on literacy progress for eligible children and modest impacts for

children whose parents attended at least one session (Husain et al., 2018). An exploratory subgroup analysis indicated more positive impacts for CWSW (Sanders et al., 2020).

WWCSC commissioned the developers of Family Skills (Learning Unlimited, the Campaign for Learning and an academic from the Institute of Education, UCL) to create a new programme adapted for CWSW, named Our Skills. The content was adapted following consultation with stakeholders:

- Reduced EAL content, and inclusion of references to social work in the programme manual.
- Providing for multi-school courses. It was anticipated that the low prevalence of CWSC meant some courses would need to involve more than one school.
- Information for tutors on the sensitivity and confidentiality about a child's current social work involvement and support, particularly in recruitment.
- Expanding to children Year 1 as well as Reception, with the aim of including more children per school to make Our Skills more viable.
- Additional content on metacognition, building resilience, positive parenting, and growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), including a new 'learning to learn' session.

The programme was modified further to be able to be delivered either in-person, online or a combination of these modes, and in the event was delivered online.

Our Skills: description

This section follows the TIDieR framework to describe the Our Skills programme as intended, and the modifications made in implementation.

Table 2 Our Skills Description

Brief name
Our Skills
Why: Rationale, theory or goal of essential elements
Parental engagement in children's learning, and the quality of home learning environments, are well evidenced as influences on children's educational outcomes (Axford et al., 2019), and evidence highlights the value of partnership between parents/carers and school staff.
What (materials): Materials used in delivery or training and location
Background to Our Skills, instructions for preparatory liaison with schools and detailed content for each session, with supporting resources to be used, are set out in a manual, the Our Skills toolkit. Families are provided with an individual and extensive set of resources.
What (procedures): Procedures, activities and processes used including enabling and support activities

Our Skills involved the recruitment of schools with eligible CWSW, recruitment of tutors, and training of tutors (two 2.5 hour virtual workshops, ongoing support, and toolkit). Schools recruited eligible parents and carers, with the support of tutors.

Our Skills involves 10 parent/carer only sessions, and 10 joint sessions for children and parent/carers. It includes content on phonics, reading strategies, stories and storytelling, learning to read, learning through play, and primary education. Tutors sought preparatory information from schools about phonics teaching and participating children's phonics levels in advance of delivery. Teacher/TA support and/or input is also requested in four sessions. Additionally, there are three visits and talks: a library visit, school tour, and a reading and phonics talk by the school.

Delivery involves a combination of tutor verbal input, discussion, modelling, practising, learning activity and games. Detailed plans for each session are set out in the Our Skills Toolkit.

What (procedures): Recruitment of schools and participants

The eligibility criteria were children currently or previously: adopted, looked after, with a Special Guardianship Order, with Child Protection or Child in Need Plan, with a social worker in the Disabled Children's Social Work Team, or receiving statutory social work action following a social work assessment.

Schools were asked to recruit parents/carers, given recruitment materials, asked to take a whole school approach, and encouraged to contact parents/carers directly.

Who provided: Expertise, background and specific training of providers

Family or adult learning tutors employed by local authorities and voluntary sector organisations, with expertise in family learning and robust quality assurance arrangements. Tutors received two 2.5-hour training webinars and tutors were invited to drop-in sessions and to contact the developers for further support.

How: Modes of delivery

Our Skills was initially developed to be face-to-face, then developed further for blended delivery, and late in the development it was decided it should be delivered entirely online. Delivery for the study was online and to small groups.

Where: Types of locations including infrastructure

Online, to participants in their own homes. Participants used their own mobile phones, laptops or tablets, or were provided with laptops or tablets by schools or delivery partner organisations.

When and how much: Number of times delivered, over what period

Intended delivery was 10 weekly parent/carer sessions lasting around 90 minutes and 10 weekly joint sessions involving parents/carers and children lasting 30-40 minutes.

Tailoring: Any plans for personalising or adaptation

Tutors were asked to gather information from schools and to differentiate delivery to the specific phonics schemes used by participants' schools and to each child's phonics level, to differentiate by

parent/carer's literacy skills and existing knowledge, and to differentiate by English language skills. The Toolkit includes resources to support differentiation, including phonics materials at multiple levels. Tutors were advised to deliver each session in line with the core content set out in the Toolkit, but to vary or supplement resources to support differentiation and engagement.

Modifications: Changes made during the course of the study

Shortly before delivery began, it was decided that delivery would be entirely online.

How well (planned): Assessment and maintenance of fidelity or adherence

Our Skills developers observed sessions and gave feedback to tutors on quality and fidelity. Adherence was assessed by the evaluation team through Delivery Records completed by 10 tutors covering all session delivery, observation of six sessions, and interviews post-delivery with 10 tutors and 15 parents/carers.

How well (actual): Extent to which delivered as planned

Information about the number of sessions delivered was provided for 23 of the 28 courses delivered. Of these 23 courses, 13 delivered 10 parent/carer sessions and 11 delivered 10 joint sessions. Sessions were on average shorter than planned, reflecting the constraints of online delivery. Other modifications made were adapting resources and specific activities to learner levels or for online delivery including to parents/carers participating by mobile phone. One course was delivered in person to individual parents/carers; at least one course was delivered by two tutors each leading on different sessions, and one school ran four courses with parents/carers moving between courses depending on which days of the week best suited them to attend.

A logic model was developed through two workshops led by WWCS and involving WWCS evaluation and programme staff, the developers and the evaluation team, shown in Appendix A.

Previous evaluation

Our Skills had not previously been evaluated. The evaluation of Family Skills highlighted implementation challenges, particularly low take-up and need for intensive family recruitment; retention; duration of sessions; identifying the optimal time of day for delivery, and the need for more liaison between tutors and schools (Cara, 2018; Husain et al., 2018). The evaluation of Family Skills also highlighted the challenges for schools in completing additional literacy assessments for the evaluation (Husain et al., 2018). The pilot evaluation of Our Skills therefore did not include additional literacy assessments.

Pilot Context

The COVID-19 pandemic context

It was initially anticipated that Our Skills would be delivered to 300-400 primary schools (around 2,400 eligible pupils) as a face-to-face programme, and evaluated as a randomised controlled trial (RCT), with delivery to begin in February 2021. School recruitment began in September 2020. Schools had begun to reopen from COVID-19 closure in June 2020, although many pupils did not return until September 2020 and schools operated kept year or class groups in 'bubbles' to reduce exposure to infection. A new variant of COVID-19 meant

that schools in 'hot spots' closed in December 2020. Schools reopened briefly at the start of January 2021 but a national lockdown from 6 January 2021 meant only children of key workers and vulnerable children were allowed in schools. On 22 February 2021 the UK government announced an easing of lockdown measures and return to school for all year groups from 8 March 2021. It was during this 2021 lockdown that the recruitment of parents began. Our Skills launched and began during the time period from 22 February to 8 March when schools were preparing for re-opening or had just re-opened but were still operating under the bubble system.

These arrangements had three particular implications for the intended RCT:

- First, the programme developers adapted Our Skills initially to be appropriate for hybrid virtual and in-person delivery, and in February 2021 WWCS directed that Our Skills should be delivered entirely online.
- Second, the recruitment of schools and families took place at a time when schools were under intense and changing pressures arising from COVID-19. By 8 December, only 44 MoUs had been signed by schools despite extensive recruitment efforts, and the deadline for recruitment was extended to end January 2021.
- Third, the COVID-19 pandemic also led to the cancellation of statutory assessment tests (SATs) in the 2020/21 school year, including the cancellation of Key Stage 1 SATs on 18 January 2021. As a result, the pupil attainment outcomes intended to provide the key outcomes for the RCT would not be available.

In the light of these three factors, the evaluation was re-scoped as a pilot evaluation, without a control group, with the implementation evaluation reduced in scale and without the cost analysis that had initially been planned. In this new pilot evaluation design, it was hoped that around 50 schools would take part in Our Skills and that parents/carers of around 300 children would be invited to participate. However, the continued pressures on schools meant that actual participation of schools and families was much lower.

It was agreed that recruitment of schools should continue until the end of January 2021 and delivery of Our Skills begin in the week commencing 22 February (although no courses began this week) or week commencing 1 March.

Recruitment of schools and families

WWCS issued a call for expressions of interest from local authorities and schools through their website, and Virtual Schools were asked to nominate schools for participation in the project, although this led to few active contacts. Recruitment was mainly by the programme developers and delivery partners. A series of four webinars for schools or virtual schools and three webinars for delivery partners were held in October-December 2020. School recruitment was particularly targeted at disadvantaged areas and priority regions across England, typically large cities with high numbers of target children.

Schools were asked to identify and offer the programme to all eligible families and were provided with recruitment materials. Where parents/carers agreed, contact details were

passed to delivery partner organisations for enrolment, and resource packs were given to each family to support engagement.

Delivery of and participation in Our Skills

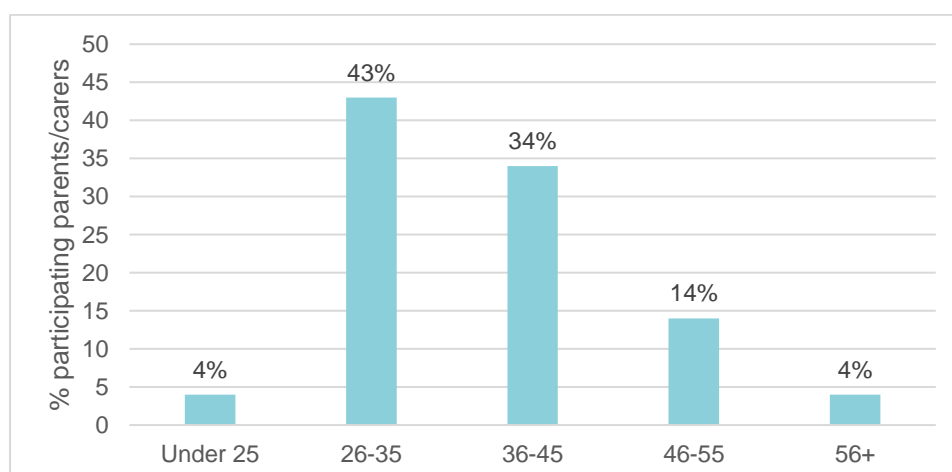
Courses run

In the end, 28 Our Skills courses took place (not all completed), involving families with children from 33 schools, mainly located in the Northwest, Yorkshire & Humberside, and London, with the remainder in the North East, East or West Midlands, South East and South West. 110 parents/carers and 103 children took part in at least one session. The courses were delivered by 24 tutors from 16 delivery partner organisations. Seven courses brought together children from more than one school (two, three or five schools), because there were too few participating children for a dedicated course for the school. Course delivery began in the week commencing 1 March 2021. Not all courses involved 10 sessions as intended, either because it was not possible to fit all 10 into the time available, or because parents/carers stopped attending. Overall, of the 23 courses for which this information is available, 20 delivered at least seven parent/care sessions and 16 delivered at least seven joint sessions.

Participating families

We have demographic information about the families that participated both from enrolment and register data and from the survey. Of the 110 parents/carers enrolled and recorded in register data as having taken part in at least one session, 88 were women and 12 men (with no information recorded for 10). Most participating parents/carers were aged 26-45.

Chart 1 Age of participating parents/carers



Source: Enrolment and register data
Base: Information provided for 100 parents/carers

Of those participating in the survey, 65 per cent were the birth or step parent of the child. The remainder were foster carers (8 per cent), caring for the child under an SGO or applying for one (8 per cent), adoptive parents (7 per cent), or had other relationships to the child. Almost all parents/carers lived with the child. The children involved were split evenly between Reception and Year 1. The survey data show that girls were slightly more likely to

have participated than boys and most parents/carers (65 per cent) had an older child or children who have already gone through Reception and Year 1.

Pilot Evaluation

The pilot evaluation aimed to establish the feasibility of delivering Our Skills online to the intended population, whether it has evidence of promise, and whether it is ready for trial. It was designed to be proportionate to the stage of programme development, and to the stressors placed by COVID-19 on schools, and involved:

- Focus groups with the programme developers and qualitative interviews with parents/carers, tutors, delivery partner organisation managers, school representatives and representatives from Virtual School Teams
- Observation of sessions
- Completion of a Delivery Record by a sample of tutors
- Analysis of enrolment and register data collected by the programme developers
- A pre-post survey of parents/carers with a three-month follow-up to measure changes in home reading confidence and behaviours and perceptions of impacts

The pilot evaluation did not include a counterfactual nor other measurement of impact: all evidence about potential outcomes was exploratory only based on the reports of those involved. No cost analysis was undertaken given the unusual circumstances of programme delivery.

METHODS

Research questions

1. **Evidence of feasibility** – Was it feasible to implement Our Skills as an online programme for the parents/carers of CWSW?
 - a. Did the programme reach the intended audience and what implementation strategies were used?
 - b. Was the programme delivered as intended, what adaptations were made and why?
 - c. Was the programme acceptable to and appropriate for parents/carers and schools?
2. **Evidence of promise** – What evidence is there that Our Skills can have a positive impact on family literacy environments and children’s attainment?
 - a. What perceived impacts were identified by parents/carers and by schools, and how far did parent/carers report changes over time?
 - b. Is there evidence to support the outcomes and mechanisms of change in the draft theory of change?
 - c. Was there any evidence of potential unintended consequences or negative effects?
3. **Readiness for trial** – What if any further work is required for Our Skills to be ready for trial?
 - a. Can Our Skills be delivered consistently across delivery partners and schools?
 - b. Are any changes needed to the programme materials, resources and implementation strategies including training?
 - c. What aspects of the programme delivery should be addressed in fidelity criteria?

The first and second sets of questions, addressing evidence of feasibility and of promise, are addressed in the substantive sections below, and the third set of questions, addressing readiness for trial, are addressed in the Discussion section.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, it was agreed that experiences of delivering Our Skills would be relevant to future delivery of the programme. In our analysis, we aim to distinguish between factors that pertain to COVID-19, and those that would pertain under other conditions.

Protocol Registration and Ethical review

A protocol was developed for the RCT and implementation evaluation, subsequently adapted to the re-scoped pilot evaluation, and published on the WWCS website and the Open Science Foundation in February 2021. The original RCT design was reviewed by WWCS's independent ethical review panel initially to secure approval to proceed with randomisation, in November 2020. A full application was submitted and went to panel in early January 2021. The ethics panel was notified of the decision not to proceed with the RCT and approved the revised application.

Research design

The evaluation design was informed by implementation science, a field of study which aims to close the gap between research and practice and promote the uptake of evidence-informed programmes and practices into 'business as usual' to improve service quality, by understanding implementation in the context of organisations and service systems (Eccles & Mittman, 2006; Glisson et al., 2012). Two implementation science frameworks were used in the study design. First, Proctor et al.'s conceptual model of implementation outcomes (2009, 2011): the evaluation focused on feasibility, appropriateness and acceptability, as lead implementation indicators.

Second, the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR), which synthesises information and evidence about determinants of implementation effectiveness (Damschroder et al., 2009). This led to exploration of issues relating to the programme itself (e.g. relative advantage, adaptability, complexity of Our Skills); individuals involved in delivery (skills, expertise, self-efficacy and beliefs of tutors); organisational setting (of schools and tutor organisations); outer setting (COVID-19, school improvement strategies); and implementation processes.

Table 3 Research questions and methods

Research question	Indicator	Method
Evidence of feasibility Was it feasible to implement Our Skills as an online programme for the parents/carers of CWSW?	Reach and implementation strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of schools to whom Our Skills was offered, number taking part, and reasons for non-participation • What strategies were used to identify and approach schools? • What strategies were used to identify and approach eligible families? • Number of families eligible and number taking part • Reasons for parent/carer participation and non-participation • Proportion of families completing the programme and factors influencing non-completion 	Programme admin data, interviews with tutors, schools, LA representatives, parent/carer interviews
	Delivery as intended and adaptations made <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was the programme adapted to parents/carers of CWSW and in light of earlier evaluation findings (Cara, 2018; Husain et al. 2018)? 	Programme developer focus groups Observation, delivery

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What types of adaptations were made by delivery partners and why? • Were school staff involved in programme delivery and what enablers and barriers were identified? 	<p>record, and tutor interviews, tutor and school interviews</p>
	<p>Acceptability and appropriateness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the range of views among parents/carers about the acceptability of the programme and its fit with family norms, culture and context? • What is the range of views among school staff about the acceptability of the programme and its fit with literacy teaching and schools' approaches to parent/carer engagement? • What other interventions do schools provide to support home literacy environments for this population? 	<p>Parent/carer interviews</p> <p>School staff interviews</p> <p>Parent/carer & school interviews</p>
<p>Evidence of promise</p> <p>What evidence is there that Our Skills can have a positive impact on family literacy environments and children's attainment?</p>	<p>Potential impacts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the range of perceived impacts identified by parents/carers? • Is there measurable change in parent/carer perceptions of children's enjoyment of reading and in parents'/carers' literacy behaviours, knowledge, confidence and attitudes, immediately and three months after the course ends? • What is the range of perceived impacts identified by schools? 	<p>Parent/carer interviews</p> <p>Parent/carer surveys</p> <p>School interviews</p>
	<p>Mechanisms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do delivery partners report increased awareness of family needs and expertise in meeting them? • Do parents/carers report increased understanding of phonics and how it is taught, and increased communication with schools? • Do parents/carers report increased knowledge and confidence in supporting children's literacy and changes in behaviours? • Do parents/carers report feeling part of a community with other parents? 	<p>Delivery partner interviews</p> <p>Parent/carer interviews & survey</p> <p>Parent/carer interviews and survey</p>

<p>Readiness for trial</p> <p>What if any further work is required for Our Skills to be ready for trial?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do parents/carers use the programme activities outside sessions and have positive family literacy experiences? • Do school staff describe increased awareness of family needs and confidence in meeting them? • Do schools report increased communication with parents/carers? • Are there any differences in how the programme was perceived to operate and impact, compared with the theory of change? 	<p>Parent/carer interviews</p> <p>Parent/carer interviews and survey</p> <p>School interviews</p> <p>School interviews</p> <p>All interviews</p>
	<p>Consistency in delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent is Our Skills delivered consistently between delivery partners? 	<p>Observation, delivery record and delivery partner interviews</p>
	<p>Programme materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description of any necessary changes or additional to programme materials, resources and implementation strategies 	<p>Review of all study findings</p>
	<p>Fidelity criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed features of programme for structural and dynamic fidelity criteria 	<p>Observation, interviews, programme developer focus groups, survey</p>

Data Collection

Survey Data

The three-wave online survey of parent/carers collected information on core outcomes which Our Skills aims to improve at the start and end of the course (Waves 1 and 2), and again three to four months after the week that most courses delivered Session 10 (Wave 3 - key outcomes only to maximise response).³ The surveys also collected demographic and broad

³ A number of the outcome measures used were taken from the evaluation of Family Skills (Cara, 2018)

programme attendance information, and perceptions about how participation in Our Skills had changed the home reading environment.

The surveys were set up in Qualtrics and completed on phones, tablets or laptops. Wave 1 was administered during Session 1 (shortly after for those not attending the session).⁴ Wave 2 was administered in Session 10 (with the survey link sent to those not attending).⁵ Wave 3 was administered by one of the programme developers who sent the survey link by email and text to all parents/carers who attended one session, three to four months after the week when most courses delivered Session 10, with two reminders sent and a £10 voucher sent.⁶

Delivery record

Ten tutors completed the Delivery Record. Tutors were asked to log parent/carer attendance, whether they delivered each activity and exercise and used the resources provided, any adaptations made, and duration of sessions.

Observations of sessions

Research team members documented observations of six sessions (parent/carer only and joint sessions) and a semi-structured template completed covering key content on reading and phonics, learning to learn, and learning through play.

Administrative programme data provided by programme developers

This data included number of: schools approached by December 2021, schools returning MoUs, courses taking place and associated schools and tutors, and enrolment and registration data. At enrolment, information about family circumstances was collected by tutors using Google forms. A register was completed by tutors for each course using an Excel template.

Interviews

Interviews and focus groups were conducted remotely over the phone or Zoom and focussed on the implementation experiences, and perceived impacts.

⁴ Eighty parent/carers started the survey, 68 of whom completed one or more questions. A short survey completed by six tutors showed that some did not incorporate the survey into time 1 and that that not all parents/carers who joined after Session 1 had the survey shared with them.

⁵ Forty three parent/carers started the survey, 38 of whom completed one or more questions.

⁶ Sixty two parent/carers started the survey, 59 of whom completed one or more questions.

Sample recruitment and selection criteria

Parent/carer survey

Tutors were asked to invite all participating parents/carers to take part in the Wave 1 and Wave 2 surveys. The Wave 3 survey was sent to all parents/carers who had attended at least one session.

Observation

Eight tutors were randomly selected for observation of one session of course delivery each. As there were some clashes with observation being undertaken by the programme developers, only six observation sessions went ahead.

Delivery Record

Ten different tutors were randomly selected and asked to complete a simple checklist after every session, documenting components delivered and any adaptations made to programme content or delivery.

Qualitative interviews and focus groups

Programme developers:

Two focus groups were undertaken with the programme developers, at the beginning and end of the programme delivery period.

Tutors and delivery partner supervisors:

We selected tutors and delivery partner managers for interviews based on the number of courses they were running, the number of tutors delivering a course, and whether they were running combined courses for multiple schools or for a single school.

Parents/carers:

Fewer parents/carers were interviewed than intended, reflecting lower than expected participation in Our Skills. Parents/carers were invited to provide their contact information in the Wave 2 survey if they agreed to be contacted for an interview, and tutors asked to approach parent/carers who had attended one or more sessions but did not attend Session 10. An incentive of £20 was offered. We also endeavoured to reach parents/carers who had been invited to join Our Skills but who did not participate, asking five schools to approach non-participating families on our behalf, but no families were identified.

Given low numbers, we sought to interview all parents/carers who agreed to be contacted for an interview, without any selection. Table 4 shows the profile of the parents/carers interviewed.

Table 4 Profile of parents: qualitative interviews

	n		n
Child school year		Parent additional needs⁷	
Reception	7	Yes	5
Year 1	8	No	10
Relationship to child		No. of sessions attended	
Birth parent	13	5-8	4
Foster carer	1	9-10	10
Other (grandparent)	1	Course terminated early	1
Parenting status		Child additional needs	
Single parent	7	Yes	6
Couple	8	No	9
Parent doing paid work			
Yes	1		
No	14		

Base: Parents/carers participating in qualitative interviews, n=15

Schools

Schools were selected purposively to ensure diversity in region, urban/rural location, number of children eligible and taking part, and whether their course was combined with other schools.

LA representatives

We contacted local authorities that had nominated schools for the Our Skills programme.

Data management and processing

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The surveys were administered using Qualtrics and downloaded into SPSS for data management and analysis. Significance testing has been done using SPSS Complex Samples. Survey participants who had opened the survey but not answered any questions after the consent question were excluded from the analysis.

Binary variables were derived for each outcome measure⁸, which reduced the risk of small cell sizes, given the modest sample sizes. When reporting on cross-sectional change over

⁷ Additional needs recorded were those mentioned in interviews either in response to a question or in participants' commentary. They include dyslexia and other reading difficulties, illness, disability, and limited use of English language.

⁸ With the exception of the measure on who was responsible for helping their child to read and write, for which a three-item outcome measure was derived.

time, the Wave 2 and Wave 3 data were weighted to match the profile of the Wave 1 participants in terms of the child's school year group.⁹

To link survey responses across waves, parent/carers were asked to provide the first two letters of their first name and the day of the month of their birth. Most survey participants provided the information to enable the linkage (52 out of 68 at Wave 1; 29 out of 38 at Wave 2); 55 out of 59 at Wave 3). However, only 16 parent/carers could be linked with any certainty between Waves 1 and 2, and 10 between Waves 1 and 3.¹⁰

Analysis

Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative interview data were analysed following thematic analysis principles. Key themes in the data were identified both inductively (themes stemming from the research questions, informed by CFIR) and deductively (themes emerging from the data). Data were coded and summarised using the Framework method, a matrix-based approach (Gale et al., 2013) in which a series of thematic matrices were drawn up for each study population, with columns representing sub-topics and rows representing individual participants. Data from different study elements were triangulated, and compared with the logic model, to identify consistencies and variation.

Quantitative data analysis

The survey data have been used for the following purposes:

- To describe the profile of parent/carers attending Our Skills (see Section 3);
- To report on changes over time in parent/carers' confidence and behaviours, as well as perceived changes in their children's confidence and enjoyment (see Section 6);
- To provide feedback from parents/carers about what they felt about Our Skills, using data collected in the Wave 2 survey at the end of the course (see Section 6).

The change over time analysis involves data collected at the start and end of the course (Waves 1 and 2), and again three or four months later (Wave 3) to test how far any early changes are maintained. While the original intention was to measure change longitudinally (i.e. tracking the same parent/carers across the waves), the small numbers of parent/carers with longitudinal data (see above) preclude this.¹¹ Rather, the analysis involves a cross-sectional comparison of parent/carers who completed the survey at each wave. Although the data are weighted as described above, there is a risk that some of the observed change over

⁹ Although, ideally, more variables would have been included in the matching, this was the only profile variable asked in all three waves (given the Wave 3 survey was slimmed down to maximise response).

¹⁰ This is because (a) some parent/carers took part in some waves and not others and (b) duplicate identifiers, particularly in Wave 3, meant it was not known whether the same parent/carer completed the survey twice or whether there were parent/carers with the same linking information. (The cross-sectional analysis includes these cases, as exploratory analysis found that excluding them did not change the nature of the results.)

¹¹ When the sample is restricted only to those with longitudinal records, the findings appear to be *broadly* in line with those from the cross-sectional analysis. However, small numbers mean that we cannot comment with any certainty whether the same pattern of findings would be found using longitudinal change.

time could be attributed to other differences in the profile of the parent/carers completing each wave.

The modest sample sizes per wave mean that the analysis is exploratory. We have tested changes for statistical significance – change between Waves 1 and 2, and Waves 1 and 3 – with p-values reported in Table 1 of Appendix B.¹² In Chapter 6, changes are reported as statistically significant if they have a p-value of 0.05 or less (that is, we can be 95 per cent confident that the finding is not simply down to chance), and these percentages in the Charts are shown in red, with p-values reported in the text. However, we do not restrict reporting only to statistically significant change, but also include discussion of patterns in the data suggesting evidence of where Our Skills may be more or less effective.

Because of the small sample sizes, no attempt has been made to disaggregate the results by different sub-groups of parent/carers (e.g. by child's year group).

Enrolment and register data were analysed descriptively in Excel and used to describe the circumstances and characteristics of participating parents/carers, and to examine differences between those enrolling and those attending at least one session.

¹² The tests assume the two waves are independent samples and do not account for some records being longitudinal. There are, as a consequence, somewhat conservative.

FINDINGS - EVIDENCE OF FEASIBILITY

DID THE PROGRAMME REACH THE INTENDED AUDIENCE AND WHAT IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES WERE USED?

Overall the number of schools and families engaged in Our Skills was much lower than had been anticipated. It had been envisaged that reach is monitored through programme administrative data. However, this became impossible because of the multiple strategies used to reach schools and the extended timelines for recruitment, and few schools provided the information requested. These data would in any event have been of limited applicability outside the context of the pandemic. It is clear that only a very small proportion of schools approached to take part in Our Skills did so. However, from the barriers described below, it seems likely that higher rates of participation by both schools and families could reasonably be expected outside the context of COVID-19.

How were schools approached to take part in Our Skills?

Schools were recruited using a multi-part strategy led by the programme developers, although the developers had initially expected that most of the recruitment would be led by WWCS and undertaken through Virtual Schools. The initial strategy was a call for expressions of interest from local authorities and schools to take part in Our Skills, issued by WWCS which generated little response. A small number of Virtual Schools identified schools to be approached, either all schools in the local authority or those with larger numbers of current looked after children in Reception and Year 1.

The developers disseminated information about Our Skills very widely through their own networks and social media, sending emails to thousands of schools. Delivery partner organisations approached schools, either all those in the local area, those with whom they had existing relationships, or targeting higher deprivation areas or schools. The developers said that most of the schools that took part had been identified by delivery partner organisations, and the data highlight the importance of drawing on existing networks and connections to reach, and motivate, schools to take part.

Why did schools choose to take part in Our Skills?

The main reason for schools choosing to participate was seeing a clear fit between Our Skills and their own priorities, particularly supporting children's literacy, phonics and learning (a key priority); supporting parental engagement in children's learning, and supporting vulnerable families and those with EAL to narrow the attainment gap. The COVID-19 pandemic had provided added incentive to strengthen support in these areas.

"The more we can help children and parents work together the better the outcomes will be for children. In terms of right then, in COVID-19, we knew we had some parents really struggling ." (School)

In addition, features of Our Skills that facilitated schools' engagement were:

- The focus on play, stories and using multiple approaches to make family literacy fun and engaging: a good fit with schools' approaches to literacy and parent engagement
- Features that reduced the onus on schools: Our Skills was free, and schools did not need to lead delivery or arrange premises or time during the school day
- The credibility of the programme being developed externally and previous positive experience of Family Skills
- Existing relationships with delivery partner organisation.

How were families approached to take part in Our Skills?

How were eligible families identified?

Schools approached parents/carers to invite them to participate in Our Skills through letters or programme leaflets sent home with children, emails, Facebook messages, texts, phone calls and, occasionally, direct contact with parents/carers whilst on school premises. All but one of the parents took part only after direct personal contact with a member of school staff, which schools and tutors saw as particularly necessary to reach more marginalised and vulnerable families.

Interested families were then telephoned by tutors, who handled enrolment. Most tutors also personally delivered resource kits (containing stationery and programme handouts) and saw this as a helpful way to encourage participation, get a sense of family circumstances and start to build a relationship. Families also valued this.

Schools presented the programme to parents/carers as an opportunity for extra, free, support for their children's literacy skills. The programme developers had emphasised the need for sensitive approaches and for direct conversations rather than school-wide publicity about the focus of the programme. Most schools interviewed did not specify to parents/carers that they were eligible because of social care involvement.

Parents/carers appeared to have slightly different motivations for participating. Some were already supporting children's reading and learning but wanted additional support, for example to make up for lost teaching during COVID-19 or, for one parent, because they felt the school was not pushing her children sufficiently. Two parents/carers had approached the school to ask for help for their child, and were offered the programme at this point. Others described a more general reactive openness when offered support. Some parents/carers also saw the programme as an opportunity for meeting other parents/carers.

"I was interested in learning about the phonics because I didn't have a clue about it, and it's a totally different way of learning to read compared to what we did when we were at school, so I had to learn it really to be able to help my daughter to learn." (Parent/carer)

"If somebody says, 'Would you like to know more about how to teach your child at home, how to help your child at home with homework or schoolwork?', of course I am going to say yes, because even if I was to be a native speaker who has gone to school in this country ... the way they were taught in those days it's not the same ... so there is always room for learning something new." (Parent/carer)

Barriers to recruiting schools and families

Despite these perceived benefits, participation by schools was much lower than expected or experienced in previous programmes. Interest fell away from many schools that had initially been responsive, and of the 63 MoUs initially received, only 33 schools went on to participate. Schools also engaged fewer families than they had anticipated. In the MoUs, schools identified an average of just over 7 eligible children each (range 1-25, median: 7), but fewer parents/carers and children per school actually took part. These challenges are in part related to COVID-19, but also other difficulties.

COVID-19-related barriers impacting on school and family recruitment

The pressures arising from COVID-19 meant that it was harder for Virtual Schools, delivery partner managers and tutors to engage schools in discussion of Our Skills and schools had less capacity to engage with or take part in the programme, or to recruit parents.

“[The delivery partners] could not work with as many schools because the schools were not working with them. Schools were closing their doors to live family learning and weren't communicating with them. They were actually saying 'Don't contact us unless it's an emergency'.” (Our Skills Developer)

Delivery partners and Virtual Schools thought that, although COVID-19 *increased* the relevance of Our Skills (as noted above), it may also have shifted school priorities to focusing either more directly on school-led support for children's learning, or on wider wellbeing issues.

“I think [schools'] priorities have really changed. With COVID-19, I think their priorities really are about the children at the moment. It's not about the parents at all. I think, for them, this was just, 'Oh no. This is an extra piece of work that we have to do.' Schools are trying desperately hard to support their children” (Tutor)

The context of COVID-19 also made it more challenging for schools to recruit families. They had less staff capacity, and the strategies available to schools were more limited, due to less contact with parents/carers. Children were not attending school and the scope for personal contact during drop-off was limited, schools were not running meetings and events where they could have spoken to parents/carers, and it was not possible to run Our Skills recruitment events, all of which would have been an opportunity to engage with parents/carers.

Finally, the stress of isolation, social distancing, having to home school children and then adapt to schools re-opening was thought to have reduced parent/carer willingness or ability to take part.

“I phoned the parents obviously saying, 'Your child has received a place.' Obviously, I did big it up and I tried my hardest, but they were just like, 'I've got too much going on.'” (School)

Other barriers impacting on school and family recruitment

Challenges arising from the eligibility criteria

The eligibility criteria raised several challenges. First, not all eligible children were identified and information about who had ever (as opposed to currently) had a social worker was

incomplete. Virtual Schools did not have ready access to information to identify children who were not looked after. Two Virtual Schools teams had liaised with children's social care and schools to identify all CWSW and the school they were in, but others focused only on looked after children. Schools identified eligible children either from existing information or by reaching out to staff to identify eligible children, so some schools are likely to have had incomplete information.

"We obviously have a vulnerable list, and we have lists of children that are in care, Child in Need, CP or Early Help." (School)

"Being part of my role as the deputy safeguarding lead, I was already aware of those children who had had or have a social worker. So we just worked off a document that we had already." (School)

"We messaged all the teachers within the appropriate age range and said, have you got any children who meet this criteria you think should be involved? They messaged us back, and then we phoned the parents." (School)

Second, from the interviews with tutors and schools it appeared that (despite what was set out background information) schools had not always initially understood that the programme was for CWSW and assumed it was for all families. Once they became aware of this, some schools' interest fell away.

In further misunderstanding of the eligibility criteria, and despite the information provided to schools, from interviews with tutors and schools, it seems that there was fairly widespread misunderstanding about the eligibility criteria, with many schools (and some tutors) apparently understanding that only children who *currently* had a social worker were eligible, rather than those who had had one in the last six years. Schools generally did not hold this information systematically.

Finally, some schools chose not to approach eligible parents/carers who they felt did not need additional support, and some had an adverse reaction from parents/carers who felt that their child having a social worker was not indicative of the family needing more support.

"The families were horrified that it was down to some social care inclusion criteria and they were always very, again knowledgeable parents and they said 'we can read, we know how to do phonics, why would you select us?' " (Tutor)

Overall, the eligibility criteria did not fit well with data held by schools and Virtual School Heads teams, nor was it seen as a coherent grouping of families with shared characteristics and needs differentiated from other families. There was a very widespread view among schools and delivery partner organisations, supported by the developers, that the criteria should be widened and the programme made available to families who would benefit from additional family literacy support whether or not the child had ever had a social worker. In particular it was felt that the criteria should include at risk families who had been referred for social work support but not offered it, and families receiving other interventions e.g. from a Family Support Worker. This was seen as an approach that would aid recruitment and group dynamics, as well as reaching a wider population of families.

Two schools did recruit families (two and three families respectively) that were outside of the criteria, but identified extra funding for this and did not include their data in the register or evaluation.

Challenges in engaging parents/carers

Schools and tutors noted that it is always hard to engage parents, particularly vulnerable and marginalised families who may have less close relationships with the school, be more reluctant to have another professional interference in their family, and perceive the approach as being a criticism of their parenting. In addition, literacy and English language difficulties were thought to lead to the decision not to participate.

"It would have been another thing that they felt they were being judged that they weren't parenting well enough, or another hoop they had to jump through to prove they were good enough parents." (School)

Features of the course

The fact that the course was online was also thought to make it unattractive to some parents/carers (those without digital devices, unconfident about online participation or otherwise unable to take part in an online course). The difficulties participating families experiences with online participation are discussed in the next chapter. There was also a concern that the course duration and the duration of sessions was too long for some families to want to take part.

Time pressures

The challenges in recruiting schools and families meant that recruitment timelines were extended, and some schools were approached only a few weeks before delivery was due to begin. Virtual Schools representatives said that, if COVID-19 had not increased the pressures on their teams and on schools and disrupted some of the ways in which they usually engaged and worked together, they would have had more potential to encourage and support schools to take part, making use of connections and networks with schools and working in partnership with the delivery partners and developers.

The complexity of taking part in an RCT

The additional complexity of taking part in a trial, at a time when resources were stretched, was thought to have reduced interest among schools.

"I think what put schools off is...once you sent out the MOU. I think that was a big, 'Oh gosh, what does this mean? Have I really got the time to read this and understand it, and pass it through the SMT team for them to understand it?' Suddenly, I think there were a lot of barriers that came up." (Tutor)

Characteristics of the participating families

The survey data (provided by 68 parent/carers) and register data (collected by tutors about *all* participating families) suggest that schools were successful in recruiting families facing significant disadvantage. The enrolment and register data show no statistically significant

differences in the profiles of those enrolling and those participating, which suggests that parent/carers' drop off between enrolment and participation was not related to demographic or family circumstances.

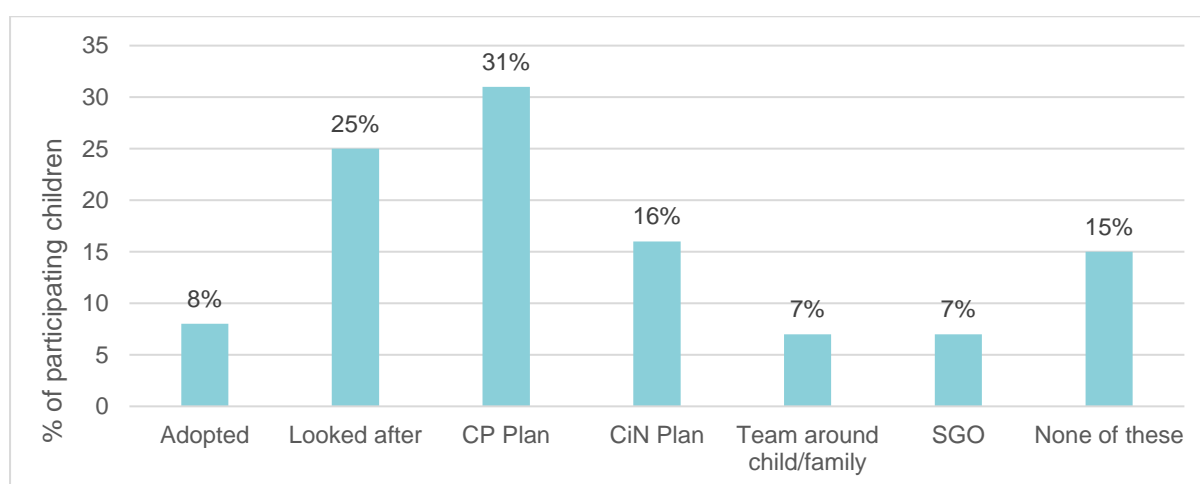
Overall, the data point to significant aspects of disadvantage among participating families in terms of language, disability or support needs, lone parenting and children's social care status. The survey data shows that 85 per cent of participants identified as White or White British, with the remainder Black or Black British (7 per cent), Mixed or Mixed British (5 per cent), and Asian or Asian British (3 per cent) or other (2 per cent). Register data show that a third of parents/carers were born outside the UK (34 per cent), and that a fifth (20 per cent) said that they spoke a language other than English at home.

Based on register and enrolment data, 15 per cent of parents/carers said they had a disability or support needs. Twenty-three per cent of participating parents/carers said at enrolment that the child had a disability or support needs, in line with the survey in which 24 per cent of parents/carers said their child has special education needs or a disability (half of these having an Education, Health and Care Plan and half not).

Based on the survey, equal proportions of parents/carers lived on their own and with a partner or spouse, a higher proportion of lone parenting than within the population as a whole.

As chart 2 shows, a quarter (25 per cent) of children were or had been a looked after child, 31 per cent had at some point had a Child Protection Plan, and 16 per cent had at some point had a Child in Need Plan¹³. In line with this, the survey found that 62 per cent of children had been attending school every or most days in January and February 2021¹⁴, and a further 13 per cent had attended some days each week.

Chart 2 Children's social care status now or in the past



¹³ The groups shown in the charts overlap. It is surprising that as many as 16 per cent of parents/carers said that none of the categories applied to their child. Some may have had support from a Disabled Children's Social Work Team, but it may indicate that some children not meeting the criteria were included, or inaccuracies in parent/carer reporting, or both.

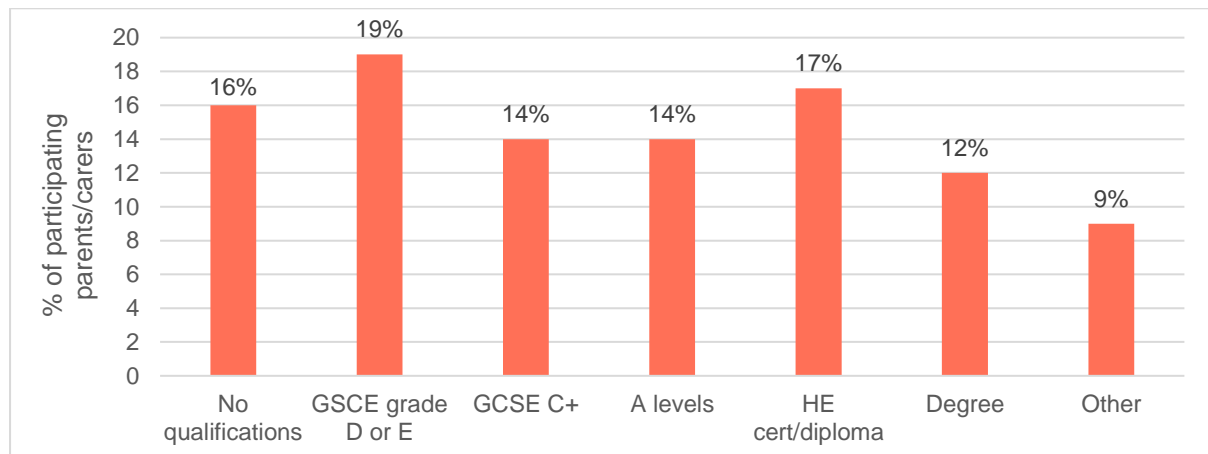
¹⁴ When schools were open only to vulnerable children and children of key workers.

Source: Survey

Base: Parents/carers responding at start (n=61).

However, as Chart 3 shows, there was quite striking diversity in education attainment of parents/carers. Around a third of parents/carers (35 per cent) had no educational qualifications or GCSE grade D or E or equivalent, but 29 per cent had a degree or higher education certificate/diploma or higher.

Chart 3 Educational qualifications of parents/carers



Source: Survey

Base: Parents/carers responding at start (n=58).

Overall COVID-19 raised clear challenges to the recruitment of schools of families, which put further pressure on timelines for recruitment. Networks and connections were particularly valuable, but COVID-19 meant that they could not be fully exploited. Engaging parents who are not yet fully supporting their children's learning is always challenging (Axford et al., 2019; Lord et al., 2021) and requires tailored and intensive recruitment strategies, which COVID-19 made difficult. As a result, delivery partner organisations and schools felt that some of the most disadvantaged families, who were most likely to need additional support, were missed. However, other challenges were not connected with COVID-19, particularly those relating to the eligibility criteria, incomplete information about families meeting them and difficulties operationalising them in practice.

WAS OUR SKILLS DELIVERED AS INTENDED AND WHAT ADAPTATIONS WERE MADE?

What is the expected delivery and how was it assessed in the evaluation?

Tutors are expected to deliver the structure and content of Our Skills as set out in the Toolkit, with parent/carer sessions expected to last 90 minutes and joint sessions (i.e. including children) lasting 30-40 minutes followed by a 10 minute recap for parents/carers. Schools are expected to deliver part of Session 4 (reading with children), Session 7 (learning through play) and Session 9 (short talk about the school and introduction to school website and participate in Session 10 (celebration and review). There are also three additional components which are intended to be arranged outside the weekly sessions: a talk by a school representative on phonics and how it is taught in the school; a tour of the school, and a visit to a local library.

In delivering the content, tutors are expected to adjust activities, resources and support provided to learner needs, and to personalise to children's interests, drawing on their own resources in addition to or in place of those provided in the Toolkit.

The Toolkit does not include a section explicitly setting out the theory and principles underpinning Our Skills, although some are described in the Toolkit in the background information for specific sessions, and the Toolkit emphasises the importance of approaches such as differentiation, personalisation, strengths-based learning, learning through play, reading together and working with schools. The developers, in the formulation of the logic model and in interviews, described Our Skills as based on:

- supporting a tri-lateral relationship between parent/carer, child and school in which schools recognise parents/carers as equal partners in children's learning
- meta-cognition, growth mindset and the importance of learning to learn
- play as a fundamental learning process
- the value of bilingualism

They emphasised the importance of the following features of delivery:

- being strengths-based and learner-centred, with differentiation by learner needs and personalisation of resources to parent/carer and child interests and needs
- uncovering, sharing and building on what parents/carers already know
- encouraging parents/carers to work together, encourage each other, and share ideas and experiences
- coaching and supporting parents/carers to support their children, rather than prioritising tutor-child interaction

Adherence to intended delivery was monitored in the evaluation through analysis of register data; the Delivery Record; interviews with tutors, managers and parents/carers, and observation of six sessions.

Preparation for delivery

Tutor training

All tutors were required to attend two online training sessions prior to delivery, of 2.5 hours duration. These were generally well received, although some tutors would have welcomed more coverage of the session content, how to adapt content for online delivery, and how to adapt content to different learning levels.

"It was interesting for my team because I sent a brand new tutor on the training and a more experienced tutor and the more experienced tutor said, 'Yes, it's like we do, it's family learning.' The new tutor said, 'It's amazing, I learnt so much.' I think the training was good, was very clear. It's quite reassuring actually to know that what we deliver is along the same lines." (Delivery Partner)

Tutors were also invited to drop-in sessions during delivery although these were not well attended, and there was reportedly little sharing of resources or learning between tutors (a shared folder was set up by the developers for this purpose). Some delivery partner organisations also provided internal training and support from a manager or another tutor.

Preparatory work with parents/carers

The key preparatory work involved creating an extensive set of Our Skills and creative learning and play resources for each family, using the materials provided by the programme developers. Tutors found the preparation of family packs very time-consuming although they found the resources provided very helpful and, as the next section describes, they were very well received by families.

"Preparing the resources was a two-man job and a three-day job. It was really quite incredible the amount of prep...It took three days of laminating, cutting, getting things ready, putting things in packs, and I'm quite quick with resources. I'm very used to doing it, you know, so I was really surprised at how long it took." (Tutor)

Tutors either delivered these personally to parents (and found this engagement helpful preparation and relationship-building) or left them at schools for parents to collect. Some tutors also visited parents/carers to provide support to use the intended online platform, and one school had arranged for the tutor to meet parents/carers at the school to go through this.

Preparatory work with schools

Tutors also contacted schools for information about reading or phonics schemes and reading levels, mainly by email. The response of schools was very varied, some described as very supportive and providing helpful background on families' circumstances, and others not responding. It is likely that this reflected the context of COVID-19 since courses launched just as schools were preparing for or actually re-opening, and were focusing on logistics and children's wellbeing. In addition, teachers would have had more limited opportunities to re-assess children following lockdowns. As Table 5 shows, most tutors completing the Delivery

Record (n=10) were able to access the information needed. Where tutors delivered courses combining more than one school, they needed to access this information from each school.

Table 5 Access to information from schools

Were you able to find out	Yes	No	Not answered
Which reading scheme is used in the school?	7	2	1
Which phonics scheme is used in the school?	8	2	-
Were you able to find out	Yes, for all children	Yes, for some children	No
The phonics level of the children taking part?	4	2	4
The information you needed about the family circumstances of the children taking part?	8	2	-

Source: Delivery Record (n=10)

Was the intended course structure delivered?

Number and duration of sessions

Of the 23 courses where information was available in the register¹⁵ (chart 4):

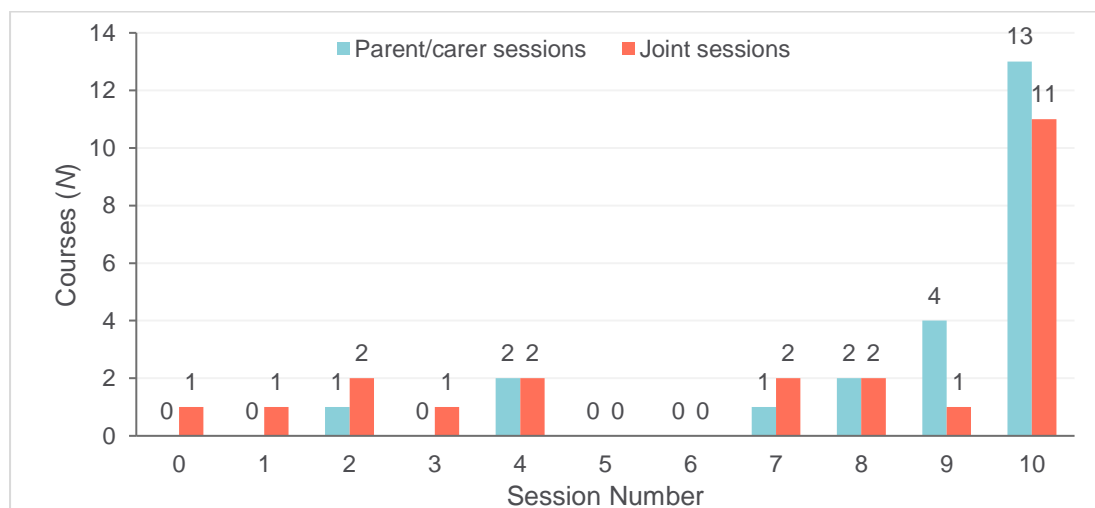
- 13 delivered all 10 parent/carer sessions. Seven delivered 7-9 parent/carer sessions, and three delivered six or fewer
- 11 delivered all 10 joint sessions. Five delivered 7-9 joint sessions, and seven delivered six or fewer

There were also some further adaptations to the intended structure:

- One tutor delivered the whole course face-to-face at a school, working separately one-to-one with two parent/carers, because of language difficulties and sensitivities about social care experience
- One tutor delivering several courses to parents/carers from the same school agreed with parents/carers that they could vary the group they joined across the 10 sessions, depending on which time slot was most convenient to them
- At least one course was delivered by two tutors alternating lead of session

¹⁵ Parents/carers' attendance could not be linked with specific courses in the case of 5 courses

Chart 4 Number of sessions delivered



Source: Register

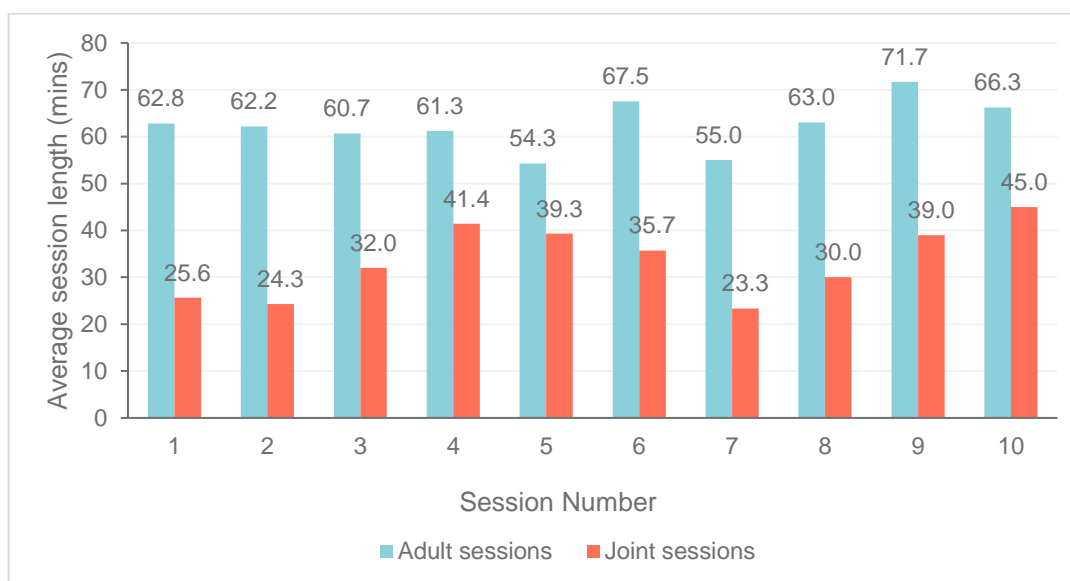
Base: n=23 courses for which number of sessions is available

Sessions were missed for a number of reasons:

- Some tutors merged joint and parent/carer sessions, in discussion with course participants
- Sessions were missed when no parents attended (see next session)
- It had been agreed that all courses should complete by Summer half term (31 May 2021). If courses had been among the later starters and had missed weeks (e.g. because of sessions missed by all parents, or taking a break during the Easter holidays) there was not enough time for them to complete delivery and sessions were dropped or combined.

Based on the Delivery Record data for 10 courses, session duration was a little shorter than intended, as tutors adjusted for online concentration and engagement. There were occasional views among the tutors interviewed that the material did not take as long as indicated to get through. It may also have reflected smaller than expected group size (requiring less discussion or parallel group time), challenges in stimulating discussion online, parents/carers having to manage other distractions at home, and they and children finding long online sessions tiring. The average duration of parent/carer sessions was 62.5 minutes (range 20-90 minutes) and of joint sessions was 33.6 minutes (range 15-90 minutes) compared with intended duration of 90 minutes and 30-40 minutes respectively. One course had particular short parent/carer session duration (30 minutes) and another particularly long joint sessions (90 minutes). Overall, only four of the 10 courses consistently delivered parent/carer sessions lasting an hour or longer.

Chart 5 Duration of sessions



Source: Delivery Record, n=10

Note: Average calculation excludes any sessions that did not go ahead, for which the time is not specified, or where families completed the activities in their own time. Where a range of times was given by a tutor, the upper bracket was used for calculations.

Involvement of schools and additional components

The developers viewed the involvement of schools as an important part of the programme. Tutors reported very varied involvement of school representatives in course delivery, although all those interviewed had reached out to schools. Based on the Delivery Record completed by 10 tutors, five were able to engage school staff in some session delivery. Tutors generally welcomed school involvement where it had happened and regretted its absence, and the small number of parents interviewed who experienced school involvement welcomed it.

"I enjoyed it because there was a lot that I didn't know happened in school, which I think only the school could have delivered to us, because obviously the person that delivered this course to us, she didn't know that that's how the teachers taught."
(Parent/carer)

It was also challenging to incorporate the additional components. Based on the Delivery Record (n=10):

- School talk: three courses had an additional school talk, three included it in a session, and four did not include it
- School tour: two courses incorporated a video and one photographs in a session. Four courses did not include a tour (one of which had a video planned but school staff did not have the time) and three courses provided no information
- Library visit: two courses included a video tour of a library, and one a video tour of the school library. Two further courses had planned a visit no parents/carers attended. Two courses did not include it and three provided no information

All the tutors interviewed attempted to involve schools in ongoing contact during the course or to provide post-course feedback, although the engagement of schools was very limited. One tutor had several meetings with the SENCO including contact after each session, with the SENCO following up with parent/carers to support or encourage attendance and others described some contact during or after the course, but more often there was no interaction despite tutors' efforts and a widespread view that school engagement was important. One parent was particularly disgruntled at the lack of follow-up by the school.

"[The school] were just unhelpful, and even now... do you know, they haven't even asked me how the sessions are going? They don't even know it's finished. I don't know if they even know that. Once they gave us the things, it was that was the end of that. It's your lots' business, kind of thing." (Non-completer Parent/Carer)

Key barriers to school engagement were the pressures of the pandemic on schools and the fact that the course was not taking place in the school, which meant that it had relatively low visibility. In this evaluation this arose because of online delivery, although it would have been the case for grouped courses if delivery was face-to-face at another school. It is also worth noting that engaging schools in parental engagement and support is often challenging outside the context of COVID-19 (Axford et al., 2019).

"One teacher just didn't reply after she'd passed over the learner information, the parent's information, she didn't reply to anything I sent out" (Tutor)

"The programme depended on the school teachers being able to tell the delivery partner tutors where each child was up to in relation to phonics for the differentiating phonics content. A lot of teachers weren't in a position to be able to share that information, which in normal times they would be, they'd have a very good, up-to-date understanding of where each individual child is at." (Our Skills Developer)

Did tutors deliver the course as intended?

Content

The Delivery Record data indicate high levels of adherence to the intended content. The Delivery Record asked tutors to record whether each intended specific activity in the Our Skills Toolkit was delivered, whether Our Skills resources were used, and any adaptations made. Parent/carer sessions involved 5-8 itemised activities and joint sessions involved two or three. Only five of the 65 parent/carer itemised activities, and six of the 23 joint session itemised activities, were missed by more than a third of courses, indicative of a high level of adherence particularly in parent/carer sessions. This is supported by the observation data, where again the majority of activities were delivered in the observed sessions.

The key area of challenge for tutors was how to cover material where all or some parents/carers had missed a session. The adaptations made by tutors related to ways of covering intended content more than dropping or replacing content, and reflected decisions about how best to differentiate the intended learning to parents/carers, for example:

- replacing Our Skills resources or activities with others viewed as more appropriate to learner levels and to online and interactive delivery

- replacing Our Skills Powerpoint slides with the tutors' own, or with talk: one tutor wrote points on cards and held them up in place of Powerpoint slides so that she could still see and be seen by parents/carers
- introducing a different opening: for example one tutor's group rated and discussed the week
- varying the closing activity: for example one tutor read a short story to close each session
- reducing the learning activities that involved art or craft work activities because parents/carers did not find them enjoyable or useful, or asking parents/carers to do them between sessions
- varying the relative duration of activities, or 'padding out' where the Toolkit activity was covered in less time
- there was also variation in whether and how much tutors sent additional resources for parents/carers to use outside sessions

Style of delivery

It was harder to assess adherence to the intended style of delivery (especially as it is not clearly specified). Tutors described, and the observations noted, behaviours that were in line with the developers' intentions:

- learner-centred learning: tutors differentiated and personalised to different learner needs and interests
- strengths-based working and building on what parents/carers already know: tutors used call-out of views, experiences and suggestions; quizzes; lots of encouragement and positive reinforcement; and encouraged parents to work together and share ideas. Some tutors asked one parent/carer to model to or support others and there was some use of breakout groups, but technical challenges and the small number of parents/carers in sessions made this difficult
- supporting parents/carers to support children in the joint sessions: there was less evidence of this. Working online made it difficult for tutors to monitor and support parents individually or in small groups, to coach or encourage parents/carers, or to direct their talk to parents/carers without including children.

Barriers and enablers

The key barriers and enablers to delivering the course as intended related to Our Skills as an online course, other features of the programme, families' circumstances, and the contexts of delivery partner organisations and schools. These are discussed below.

Our Skills as an online course

Online delivery had both advantages and disadvantages, but overall was a significant barrier to delivering, and experiencing, Our Skills as intended, despite the efforts made by tutors.

As Table 6 shows, most of the parents who took part in Our Skills had access to Wifi at home (90 per cent), and most had previously used Zoom or another online platform (76 per cent), but only a minority - 15 per cent - had laptops or tablets at home. Schools and delivery partner organisations offered equipment (funding to cover this was provided by WWCS) as well as initial support with using online platforms, and help with technical issues that arose. These proportions are slightly lower for participating than enrolled parents/carers, suggesting that the lack of connectivity was not in itself a reason for fall-off between enrolment and the start of the course.

Table 6 Parent/carer access to online resources

	% yes	% no
Wifi at home	90	10
Laptop/tablet at home	15	85
Used Zoom/online platform before	76	24

Source: Enrolment and register data

Bases: Parents/carers providing information who attended at least one session (n=99-101)

There were some advantages in Our Skills being online for parents/carers including making it easier for parents/carers attend the course around other commitments, and as one parent/carer noted, avoiding transporting the programme and learning resources to and fro. There were also lower demands for schools than a school-based course, and schools were discouraging other adults from being on-site as part of their management of Covid.

"I prefer this way, just because it's easier than carrying everything to and from school ... So it would just be, it's just handier, and more convenient at home for this ... It was easier than rushing out somewhere to do the meetings and then come back, because it was all stuff that I do at home with [child] anyway, so I found it easier to do at home." (Parent/carer)

"I think for schools, it being online takes away an awful lot of pressure for them because they don't have to facilitate us, they don't have to monitor us, they don't have to find a room for us " (Tutor)

Parents/carers were very positive about the course - see the next section - but there were significant difficulties associated with the course being online described by parents/carers and tutors, and also noted by the evaluation team in observed sessions:

- **Technical challenges:** Accessing the course by phone would have made it very difficult for parents/carers to have full sight of other participants and of Powerpoint slides and other resources used by tutors. Parents/carers and tutors experienced repeat technical challenges during Our Skills sessions, with parents/carers not able to get on to Zoom or other links, dropping off, audio problems, and cameras not working or not being switched on. It was also harder to manage distractions in the home than if the course was held elsewhere.

"I find everything online difficult, to be honest. I'm not very computer literate I really don't like all this tablet online business. I don't like it. I prefer face to face or the phone ... I just find it - it's too much for my brain to get it, honestly Even on my phone, to be honest, I haven't got any of those things, I've just got texts, WhatsApp and phone calls; I'm not trying to have anything else." (Non-completer Parent/carer)

"It were just the fact that we were struggling. Every so often, one of us were just struggling to get on to the link. Like I said, when I had the tablet, we just couldn't get on to - just every so often, the link wasn't working and [tutor] would have to send another link while she's still talking to the group what's already on to try and help the other person try and get on." (Parent/carer)

- Inhibiting group engagement: Tutors and parents/carers described working online as inhibiting engagement and relationship building. Parents/carers felt it made it difficult to interact with other group participants, and meant they experienced the course as one-to-one interactions with tutors rather than as group participation. For tutors, not being able to hear overlapping speech made for stilted interaction. Some had tried to use breakout rooms but this was difficult either because of parents/carers facing technical challenges or because the group size was too small for breakout groups.

"It's more of a one-to-one type of thing. I think if it was more in a group, it would have been easier, but I think with it being over Zoom, it was more of a one-to-one even though we were in a group." (Parent/carer)

- Constraining coaching opportunities: Parents/carers felt they were not able to get as much personal support as they would have wanted from tutors. Tutors found it difficult to gauge how parents/carers were engaging and how to support them better with literacy and creative learning activities. It was harder for tutors to support individual parent/carer interactions with children through modelling and coaching, where in a physical space they would have iterated between working with the whole group and with individual parents/carers.
- Distractions: parents/carers found it hard to manage distractions in the home or to create personal focused space, and tutors also noted that the lack of privacy inhibited some engagement. Some parents/carers attempted to participate while doing other things.

"[Parent/carer had] gone to the park for a walk with a friend. Then another one, a couple of weeks later, that used her phone quite a lot, told me how brilliant it was being able to use your phone because it meant you'd clean your bathroom at the same time. So I did have words." (Tutor)

- Less enjoyable for children: tutors and parents felt working online might be more challenging and less social for children.
- Finally, tutors and developers also noted that although school-based delivery might have been more challenging for schools, it would also have opened more opportunities for stronger school engagement.

"I think it would've probably worked better if it was in person, because it would've

been much easier just to pop down to the hall, say, if we were doing it in school, and introduce ourselves and do it like that, rather than through Zoom.” (School)

The developers were also clear that the changing COVID-19 context and requirements meant that Our Skills had not been fully developed as an online course, and that work is needed to optimise it for online delivery. This was echoed by tutors, who felt that some resources and activities would need to be adapted to be appropriate for online delivery.

“It was supposed to be delivered as an online programme, but the reality is, the back-office work to get this set up as an online programme wasn't there. So it was delivered like an in-person programme. The only difference was that you were delivering it on Zoom, it seems. I think that was the difficulty, because we're used to delivering online programmes, but this wasn't an online programme.” (Tutor)

Overall, being online facilitated delivery in some respects, and online delivery of family learning programmes was seen by tutors and schools as likely to continue. However, the clear preference of parents/carers and tutors interviewed was for face-to-face delivery, or for an approach that blends online and physical participation, with further development of Our Skills for either full online or blended delivery.

Other aspects of Our Skills

Apart from its suitability for online delivery, and individual views about some particular activities or resources, the Our Skills Toolkit was generally positively viewed by tutors and seen as easy to use.

“The content I thought was really good, and everything that was laid out - everything was fine, it wasn't a problem” (Tutor)

There were mixed views about whether the number and duration of sessions hindered delivery and participation. Tutors did not point to any sessions being unnecessary, but they and school representatives felt a 10-session course would have been off-putting or over-demanding for some parents and contributed to both low enrolment and low completion rates.

Finally, it was also challenging for tutors where the participating children were from different schools which used different reading or phonics schemes.

Families' circumstances

Some tutors found the level of heterogeneity in parent/carer learning needs within each course to be challenging to accommodate in sessions and more varied than in other programmes. As noted earlier, parents/carers had a wide range of levels of educational qualifications. Some groups combined parents/carers who were seen as highly educated and had a good understanding of literacy and phonics and already did a lot of reading and learning support with children, with parents/carers with little or no understanding of phonics or reading to children, and low levels of literacy themselves. The course, even with the scope for personalisation and materials to support this, was too demanding for some and not sufficiently new or stretching for others. They suggested having more diverse resources in the Our Skills Toolkit to aid personalisation and differentiation. In a larger study it would be

possible to look at the extent to which varying group profiles, and the circumstances of individual families, affected changes in outcomes.

Tutors also described some parents/carers as having limited literacy or English language. For example one of the observed sessions was with a father who spoke some English but could not read and a mother who could read but had no understanding of English. Tutors dealt with this by talking with course participants in a shared language, asking another parent/carer to act as a translator and bridge, or drawing on other resources.

“The two [families] that did come on didn't have any English, so I was struggling. One of them didn't have any English at all, but luckily, I could speak her language, so that helped, and the other lady, she was Polish She couldn't understand me, and I couldn't really understand her that well, but we managed in the end to have a good level of communication with each other.” (Tutor)

Finally, tutors and developers noted the challenges of meeting children's additional needs (e.g. behavioural problems, ADHD, dyslexia and communication difficulties), which were more significant than had been experienced in relation to other courses.

Delivery partner organisations

The experiences and expertise in delivery partner organisations were generally seen as supporting implementation and the programme was seen as well aligned with the expertise of the organisation and its tutors. The programme aims, content and approaches were very familiar, and well within the scope of their usual work. Although none had specifically targeted CWSW in other work, the circumstances of the participating families were familiar.

“It fits really well with what we want to do and what we do do” (Tutor)

Schools and the pressures of COVID-19

As noted in the previous chapter, schools faced considerable pressure from COVID-19 which impacted on their ability to support preparation for and delivery of Our Skills, although there were some exceptions where schools were more involved.

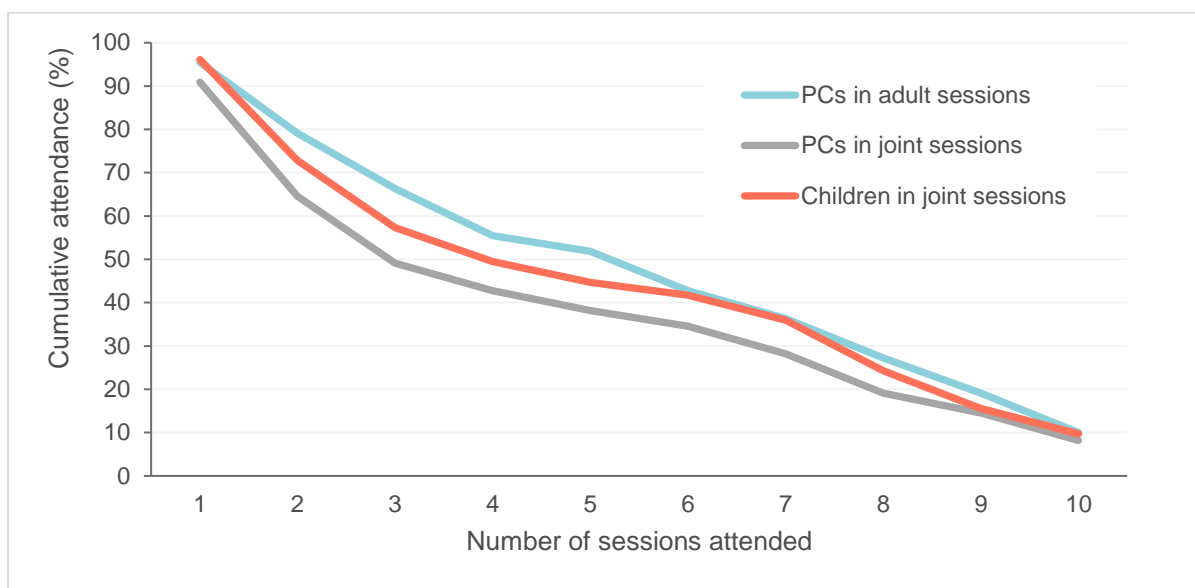
Overall, there were significant challenges to delivering the number of sessions intended including because of low attendance by parents/carers (see next section), and sessions were often of shorter duration than designed, but there was generally high adherence to the intended content. Delivering online compromised features that are important aspects of Our Skills, particularly being able to fully gauge and respond to learners' needs; coaching parents/carers in real time in supporting children; supporting peer engagement including outside sessions, and school engagement in sessions. Families' circumstances were challenging to delivery, and schools engaged much less than had been intended.

WAS THE PROGRAMME ACCEPTABLE AND APPROPRIATE?

Family attendance and participation

Family attendance at Our Skills sessions was much lower than intended. Only 10 per cent of parents attended all 10 sessions, 36 per cent attended seven or more, and 50 per cent attended five or more, with a very similar trend for attendance at joint sessions.

Chart 6 Cumulative number of sessions attended by parents/carers

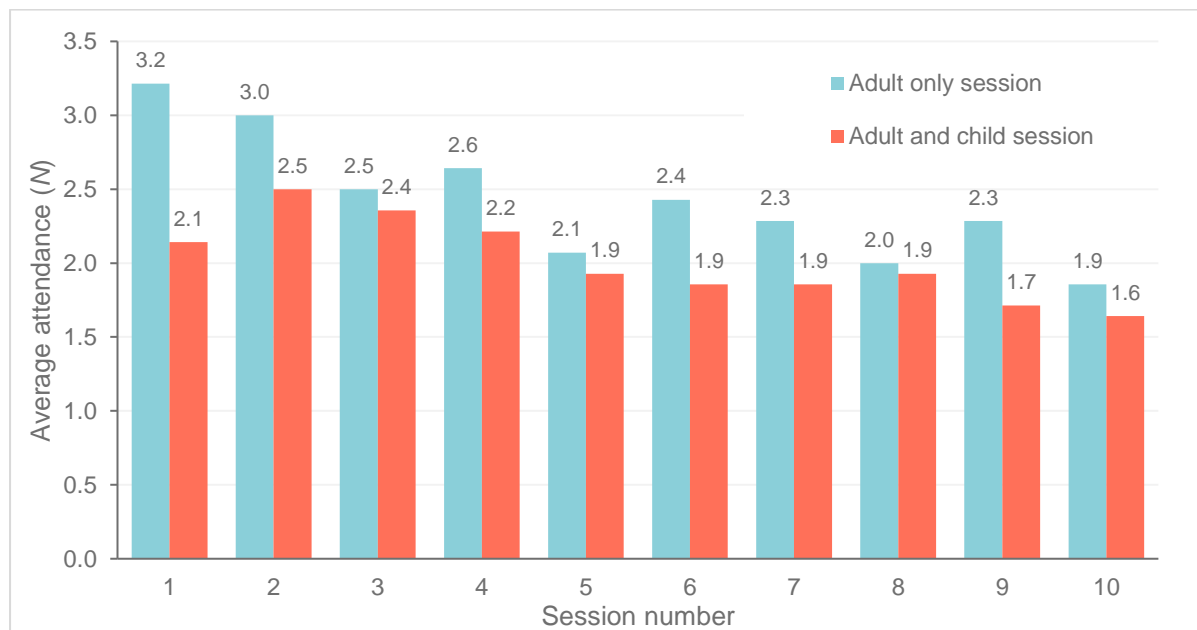


Source: Register

Base: n = 110 parents/carers and 101 children who attended at least one session

Looking only at courses delivering all 10 sessions, Session 1 was the best attended session by parents/carers, and thereafter attendance fell fairly steadily, with no obvious point at which it fell away. Tutors similarly described attendance as patchy but with no obvious patterns. Tutors, and some schools, reminded parents/carers in advance and followed up if they had missed sessions.

Chart 7 Attendance at each session



Source: Register

Base: Courses that ran for 10 sessions with attendance data (n=14)

Despite low attendance levels and difficulties with online engagement (see previous chapter), parents' and carers' descriptions of sessions suggest they were generally well engaged during them. This is supported by tutors' view that the quality of participation during sessions was good, and by the observations. Parents/carers involved in the qualitative interviews also consistently described using the strategies and resources between sessions.

The main barriers to attending described by parents/carers, and by tutors, were:

- Family circumstances: bereavement, ill-health, mental health problems, family stress, work commitments, having a new baby, being re-housed, other appointments, forgetting to join because of other pressures

“One lady said, 'I'm so sorry I can't attend, my mental health has suffered greatly, I have been hospitalised.' Every single reason coming was ridiculously genuine, and extreme, I would say.” (Delivery Partner)

- IT challenges: not being able to access a session via the link given, having other IT problems, or not enjoying the online aspect of the course
- Features of the programme: some found the course too challenging, others not challenging enough, and some found the duration or number of sessions off-putting (see further below).

Children mainly missed sessions because their parent/carer did not attend, although for some there were clashes with other competing activities.

Was Our Skills acceptable and appropriate to parents/carers?

Acceptability

The interviews with parents and carers suggest a high level of acceptability of Our Skills (although our sample is biased to those who attended more sessions). They indicated that they thoroughly enjoyed taking part, found the course very useful, and had fun. They expressed appreciation to the school for running the course and felt grateful to have additional support with their child's learning. Feedback from the schools and developers was similarly positive.

"I enjoyed every minute of it" (Parent/carer)

"Well, enjoyable for both me and my daughter, very enjoyable because it wasn't just boring read/write, it was implementing fun and games into learning as well, so it made it more interesting for you as well as the child." (Parent/carer)

"We spoke; we laughed; we made a lot of noises through the phonics! We learnt about each other's children, all children are different; how schools teach. There's a lot, a lot of things, more than I expected." (Parent/carer)

A very positive aspect of the feedback was about the tutors. No parents/carers had negative comments about the tutors, and all noted how friendly, helpful and thorough they were. Tutors were well prepared, and explained the content well, whilst also engaging children and being very understanding of the families' personal situations.

"She just explains everything in detail to us, so we understand first, and I think that really helped" (Parent/carer)

"She was a lovely lady. She's chatty. There was time to talk, you know.... What we were saying, when we were one-to-one with her, we could express ourselves more. We could talk about ourselves more. She can listen - she listens to you." (Parent/carer)

Parents/carers valued the opportunities that Our Skills provided to spend time with their children. They enjoyed making things and having fun together during the sessions. They also valued the chance to meet other parents and carers, and the small group sizes and the discussions during the course meant that some parents felt they got to know one another better.

Another significant part of the positive parent/carer feedback was the resources provided. Parent/carers were impressed by how extensive the resources were, and said children really enjoyed using them, and continued to do so after the course ended. From parent/carer descriptions, the resources had facilitated children's creativity and provided practical learning experiences at home.

"We got stationery, a laminator, paper, cards, scissors, craft bits. I'm trying to think what else, all sorts. It was really good, to be fair, much more than what I expected" (Parent/carer)

*"The skills and the equipment, materials and everything were just amazing."
(Parent/carer)*

Parents and carers also described their children as having thoroughly enjoyed the course.

There were some criticisms, but they were rare, and mainly related to the level of the course not being right for individual parents (see next section). Some parents/carers did not respond as well to learning activities based on art or activities where they had to use their imagination (e.g. literacy box and gathering items), although children enjoyed them. However, despite some criticisms, many parents/carers reported that they would recommend the course to others in their situation.

Some caution is needed in interpreting this very positive feedback, given that it is a small group of parents and skewed to those who attended more sessions. It is in line with feedback from the end-of-course survey which had a slightly larger sample, although that too was skewed towards those completing the course. Thirty three parents/carers answered questions as part of the end of course survey about what they had felt about the course. All of these parents/carers said that they had enjoyed the Our Skills sessions. Using a four-point scale from 'I enjoyed them a lot' to 'I did not enjoy them at all', 88 per cent, said that they had enjoyed them 'a lot', with the remaining 12 per cent enjoying them 'a little'. Likewise, 79 per cent of parents/carers whose children had attended the sessions said their child had enjoyed Our Skills a lot and 21 per cent said they had enjoyed them 'a little'. All but one of these parents/carers said that they would recommend Our Skills to other parents.

Appropriateness and fit

There were more mixed views among parents/carers about how well the course was aligned with their needs, reflecting the heterogeneity of the eligible group as noted in the previous section. Working online made it more difficult for tutors to group learners and support differentiated activity. Some parents/carers already knew, or quickly picked up, a lot of the content and found the course too basic, whereas others found the course too challenging. Similarly, some parents found it useful to have links to additional resources or information, but others did not, and needed these to be covered in the sessions.

"It [was] just mainly the ones where she were explaining how to say it and I was sat there like, you've said that loads of times but the other parents were still struggling to understand it. So I understood why she were doing it but at the same time I'm like, can we move on a little bit because I've got so much to do! My head just switched off after a while but again, that's not [tutor's] fault." (Parent/carer)

The developers, tutors and schools also noted a wide variation in how well the content fit with parents/carers' skill levels, and that this range was wider than in other programmes they delivered.

"One family has said she found the course basic, especially when I did the sounds, obviously there are families who are not familiar with the sounds." (Tutor)

"Some of the phonics, as well, it didn't really work with parents who are low-level language. Yes, especially things like graphemes and things like that, phonemes. These are parents who are struggling with language full stop" (Tutor)

Similarly, some parents/carers felt the course was too advanced for their child, whereas others said it was the right level or too basic. Several parents/carers thought that the course seemed to be aimed more at children at Reception level than Year One. They were however positive about the efforts by tutors to adapt materials and activities, or to provide resources for different stages.

"I'd say a little bit too young for [child] because he'd already done it. Him being in Year 1, he'd already done a lot of those things" (Parent/carer)

"In our packs, there is stages. Stage one, two, three, four and [tutor] said [child] to do one and if she can, try two and then with the Year 1s, it was stage three and if they can, try four. She always gave us their level and an extra one up, just if we wanted to go, if that was too easy for them." (Parent/carer)

Opinions about the length and timing of the course were varied. For the group of parents/carers interviewed, which over-represents those who completed more sessions, the number of sessions was generally viewed as appropriate, and indeed some would have welcomed a longer course. A larger survey sample would have allowed us to look at how the number of sessions attended affected change. Tutors reported that Our Skills was longer than other family literacy and numeracy courses that they carry out, and one tutor noted that normally they would build up to longer courses through workshops in order to build relationships with the families first.

There was very little feedback from parents/carers about the fit of the course with their family context and culture, and no negative feedback on this. Tutors occasionally pointed to some aspects of the course that they felt were not quite in tune with family cultures, including the American styling of the 'Power of Yet' video, stories which were unfamiliar to families from some cultures, and some activities that focused on parent/carer childhoods or family life which some tutors felt not well attuned to the disruption and trauma some families had experienced.

Was Our Skills acceptable and appropriate to schools?

Feedback from schools and tutors showed that Our Skills was well aligned with schools' approaches to literacy and early learning, and school representatives were positive about the fact that tutors worked with the reading and phonics used in the school. They also saw fun, multisensory and accessible learning style, the emphasis on building parents' confidence and the focus on play as aligned with how they encourage parents/carers to support children's learning, and with their parental engagement approaches.

"I was very impressed with how much it was adapted to suit the needs of our school. So it wasn't like you're going to do something completely different and then have to apply it to what we do. It was very in line with what we do as a school." (School)

Schools also valued the low demands the course placed on them once delivery began. Overall, the feedback from schools was positive and most noted that they would be interested in taking part in Our Skills if it were offered again, and that they would recommend it to other schools.

“Yes, I would definitely [recommend Our Skills to other schools]. In terms of the workload and everything else, it’s been not really any extra workload for me. It’s just the organisation of it initially and then they take the lead with it and just go ahead. Yes, no, I definitely would recommend it.” (School)

Finally, we also explored whether schools used any other literacy or phonics interventions, or parental engagement interventions. Several of the schools interviewed had not recently used any additional interventions. None described programmes that appeared to be similar to Our Skills, or suggested that involvement in Our Skills had replaced or duplicated other in-school interventions.

Literacy and phonics interventions described were: literacy and phonics software aimed at children (e.g. Phonics Play, Nessie, Literacy Planet); in-school literacy programmes (e.g. Read Write inc); general phonics sessions for children; wider learning interventions (e.g. the Nuffield Early Language Intervention, speech and language support). Parental engagement approaches described were sessions on phonics, how to read with children or support reading and writing (including when COVID disrupted attendance), and pastoral support and activities (e.g. cooking).

Overall, the data point to very positive experiences of Our Skills among parents/carers, and very positive regard for the course among schools, although as noted our data is likely to over-represent the views of parents who attended more sessions and who, by implication, had more positive experiences of the course.

FINDINGS - EVIDENCE OF PROMISE

WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE OF POSITIVE IMPACTS ON FAMILY LITERACY ENVIRONMENTS AND ATTAINMENT?

The first part of this chapter draws on data from the parent/carer survey, with the findings complemented in second part of the chapter using evidence from qualitative interviews with parent/carers, tutors, the course developers and schools. The findings show strong evidence of promise among good attenders of the course, particularly in relation to parent/carers' confidence in helping their children to learn to read, and their understanding of the learning process, which were also reflected in the perceptions of the parent/carers themselves as well as tutors, developers and schools.

Distinguishing evidence of change from evidence of impact

It is important to stress that while observing *changes* over time provides evidence of *promise*, they do not provide evidence of *impact*. Several other factors will have developed children's literacy skills, and resulting confidence, over the same period, as well as parent/carers' skills in home learning. Reception and Year 1 are periods when children's literacy skills develop rapidly, and parent/carers are receiving sources of information and guidance about supporting their children's learning from schools and elsewhere.¹⁶ The effectiveness, or impact, of Our Skills can only be measured with an experimental or quasi-experiment design, where counterfactual data from parent/carers and children who have not attended Our Skills allow for the extraction of the effect of these other factors (see Section 7 for recommendations for future evaluation).

What is more, it is also important to note that the parent/carer survey provides a measure of the level of change over time among parent/carers *who attended all or most of the Our Skills sessions*. Although the intention was to invite all parent/carers to complete the end of course survey, regardless of whether they attended the final session, six in 10 (61 per cent) of those who completed the survey had attended all of the sessions, with the remaining four in 10 (39 per cent) reporting attending most of them.¹⁷ As such, the evidence from this pilot evaluation is the level of change experienced by families if Our Skills is *experienced as intended*.

Is there measurable change in parent/carers' confidence and attitudes?

Parent/carers were confident about helping their children learn to read, and were more likely to enjoy the process, after the Our Skills course. They were asked to rate how confident they were in relation to the following statements, using a five-point scale from 'very confident' to 'very unconfident':

¹⁶ Indeed, the period of home schooling as a result of the pandemic means that parent/carers will arguably have received more information and guidance about home learning than in a normal year.

¹⁷ The Wave 3 survey did not include a question on how many sessions the parent/carers had intended.

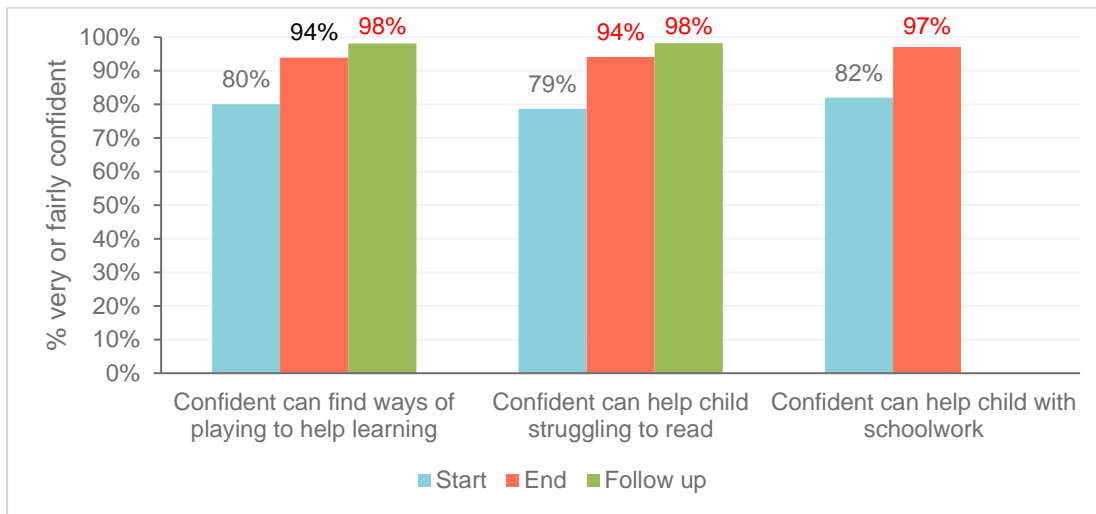
“You can find ways of playing with your child that will help them learn.”

“You are able to help your child when they are struggling to read.”

“You can help your child with the work they bring home from school.”

Chart 8 shows the percentage of parents/carers who reported being ‘very confident’ or ‘fairly confident’ about each statement (only the first two were included in the follow-up survey). Around eight in 10 parents already felt very or fairly confident about each aspect of home learning before the course. However, this increased to more than nine in 10 by the end of the course and, again, at the follow-up. Percentages in red show statistically significant changes (p-values of 0.001; 0.019; 0.001; and 0.014 running from left to right on Chart 10).

Chart 8 Percentage of parent/carers confident about helping their children to learn to read



Source: Survey

Bases: Parent/carers responding at start (n=61-63); end (n=33-34); and follow up stage (n=52-57)

Notes: Percentages in orange denote that the change is statistically significant from Wave 1.

Similarly, in Chart 9, parent/carers were asked to say how far they agreed or disagreed with the statements, using a five-point scale from ‘agree strongly’ to ‘disagree strongly’:

“I enjoy reading with my child”

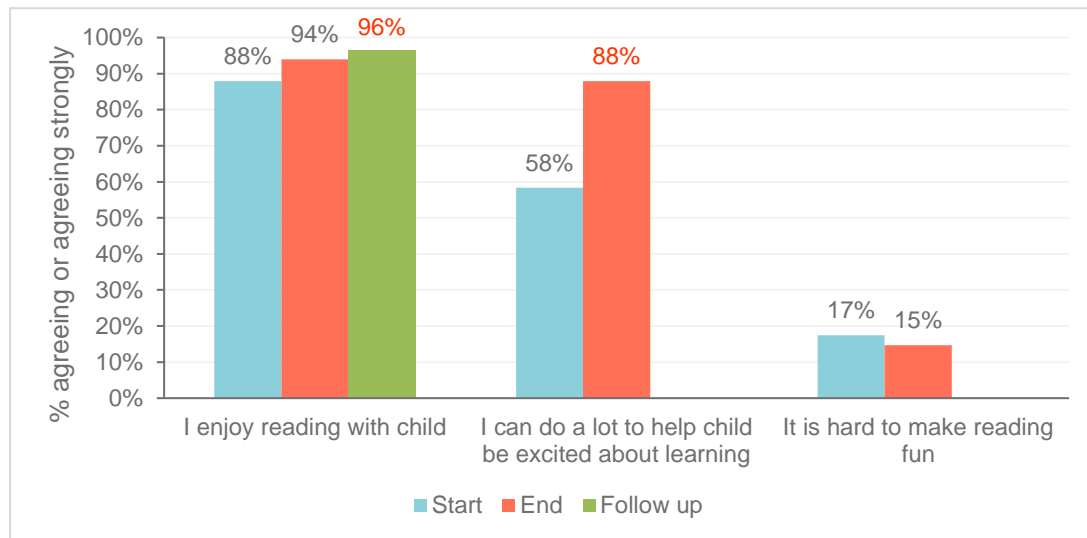
“I can do a lot to help my child be excited about learning”

“It is hard to make reading fun for my child”

Chart 9 shows the percentage of parent/carers who ‘agreed strongly’ or ‘agreed’ to each statement, with the positive change regarding the first two. The vast majority (88 per cent) of parent/carers reported enjoying reading with their child at the start of the course. Nonetheless, the percentage increased to 96 per cent by the follow up (p-value=0.048). Far fewer parents (58 per cent) agreed at the start of the course that they thought they could do a lot to help their child be excited about learning, with a large increase (88 per cent) by the end of the course (p-value: 0.004).

The percentage of parents who agreed it was hard to make reading fun was relatively low at the start of the course (17 per cent) and did not change significantly by the end (15 per cent).¹⁸

Chart 9 Percentage of parent/carers agreeing with statements about how far they enjoy or are confident helping their children to learn to read



Source: Survey

Bases: Parent/carers responding at start (n=58-63); end (n=32-34); and follow up stage (n=57)

Notes: Percentages in orange denote that the change is statistically significant from Wave 1.

Is there measurable change in parent/carers' understanding of how schools teach reading, and their role alongside school

By the end of the course, many more parent/carers were confident that they understood how the school was teaching reading and phonics. Parent/carers were asked to rate how confident they were in relation to the following statements, using a five-point scale from 'very confident' to 'very unconfident':

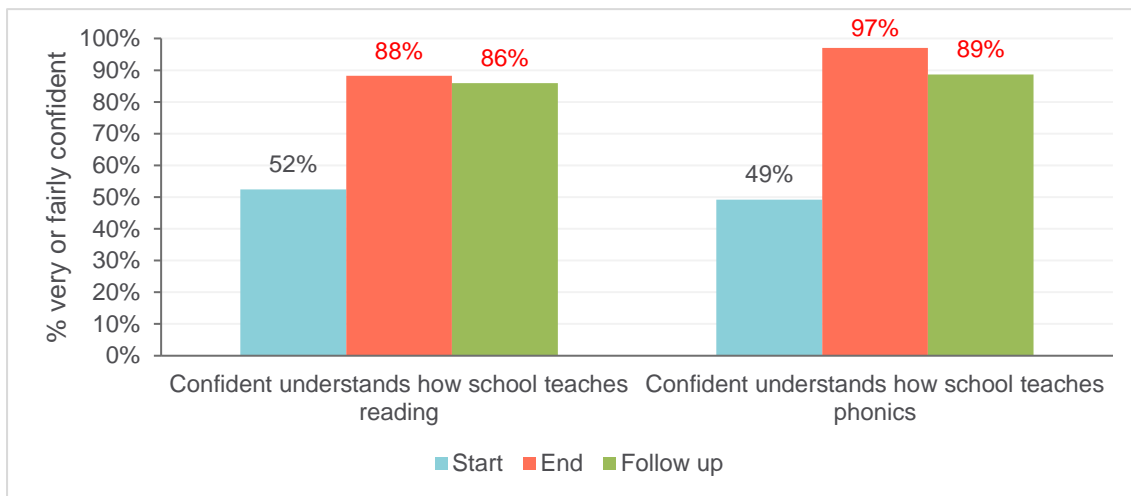
"You understand how your child is taught reading at school"

"You understand how your child is taught phonics at school"

At the start of the course, half of parent/carers reported being 'very' or 'fairly confident' about their understanding of either how reading (52 per cent) or phonics (49 per cent) was taught (Chart 10). By the end of the course, the vast majority were confident: 88 per cent were confident they understood how reading was taught (p-value=0.001) and 97 per cent were confident about phonics (p-value=0.000). The percentages of parent/carers reporting being confident had fallen a bit by the follow-up (to 86 per cent and 89 per cent respectively), but remained high and statistically significantly greater than at the start of Our Skills (p-values of 0.000 for each outcome).

¹⁸ This is an outcome where a statistically significant impact was observed across the full scale, because of a decrease in the proportion of parent/carers saying 'neither/nor' towards and increase in those disagreeing with the statement.

Chart 10 Percentage of parent/carers confident about their understanding of how the school teaches reading and phonics



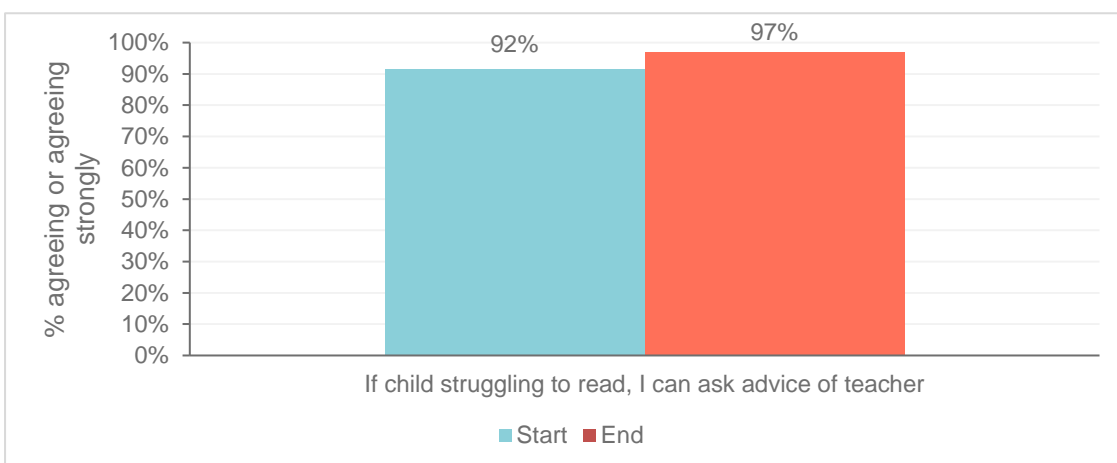
Source: Survey

Bases: Parent/carers responding at start (n=63); end (n=34); and follow up stage (n=53-57)

Notes: Percentages in orange denote that the change is statistically significant from Wave 1.

There is less evidence of Our Skills affecting parent/carers’ relationships with the school or of their perception about who is responsible for teaching their child to read and write. This is likely to reflect online delivery and the fact that the pandemic had meant less physical presence of parents in schools. In addition, most parent/carers (92 per cent) already agreed or agreed strongly at the start of the course that “If my child was struggling with their reading, I would be happy to ask their teacher for advice” (Chart 11). While this increased to 97 per cent by the end of the course, the change was not statistically significant.

Chart 11 Percentage of parent/carers agreeing they can ask the advice of the child’s teacher if their child is struggling to read



Source: Survey

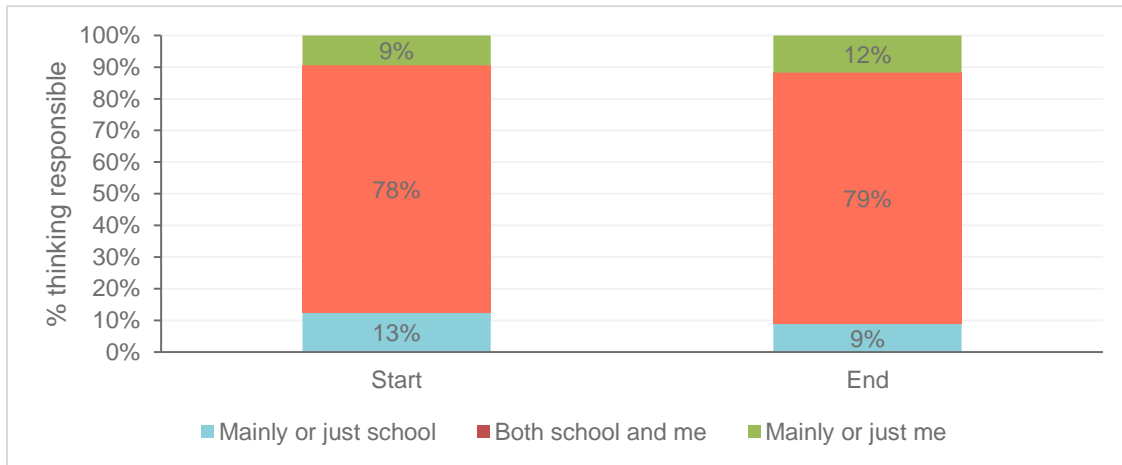
Bases: Parent/carers responding at start (n=59); and end (n=32)

Notes: This is not a statistically significant change.

Likewise, parents/carers’ perceptions on who was responsible for helping their children to learn to read and write did not change much from the start to the end of the course. They were asked who they thought was responsible for developing their child’s reading and writing skills, with the responses being ‘just the school’, ‘more the school than me’, ‘both the school and me’, ‘more me than the school’ and ‘just me’. Chart 12 collapses the categories into

three, and highlights that around eight in 10 parent/carers saw it as a joint responsibility both prior to and after the Our Skills course.

Chart 12 Percentage of parent/carers thinking that they versus the school are responsible for developing their child’s reading and writing



Source: Survey

Bases: Parent/carers responding at start (n=64); and end (n=33)

Notes: This is not a statistically significant change.

Is there measurable change in parent/carer perceptions of children’s enjoyment of reading?

In line with the changes in confidence observed among parent/carers, more parent/carers reported that their children were confident and enjoyed learning to read after the course.

Parent/carers were asked to say how far they agreed or disagreed with the statements, using a five-point scale from ‘agree strongly’ to ‘disagree strongly’:

“My child likes it when we read together”

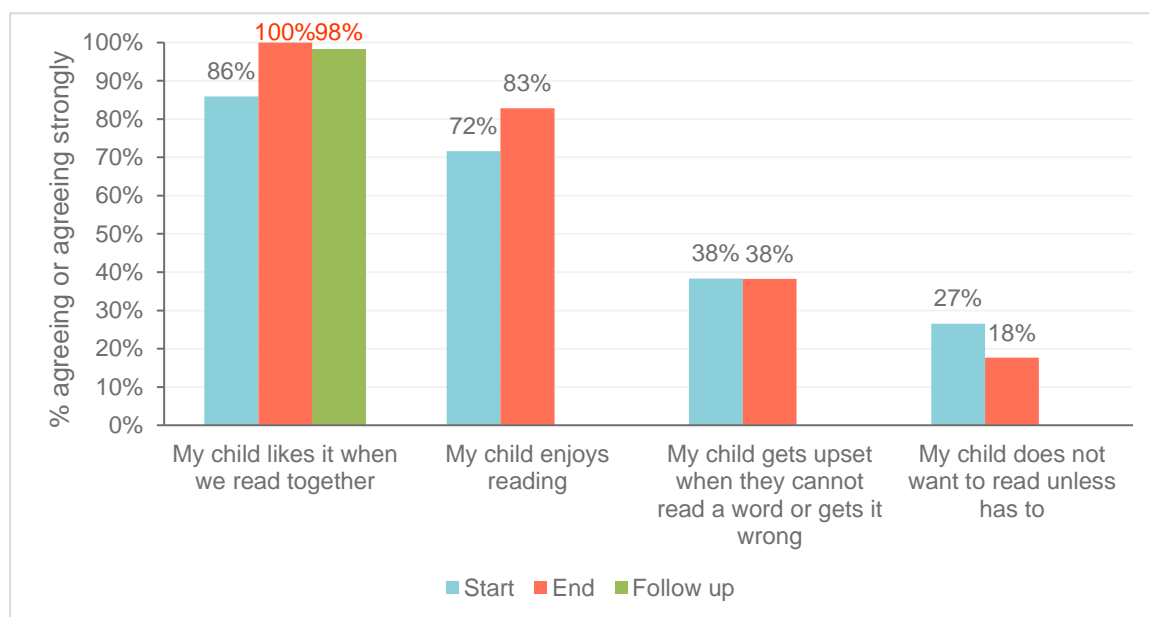
“My child enjoys learning to read”

“My child gets upset if they can’t read a word in a book or they get something wrong”

“My child doesn’t want to read unless they have to for their schoolwork”

Chart 13 shows the percentage of parents/carers who ‘agreed strongly’ or ‘agreed’ to each statement. At the start of the course, the vast majority (86 per cent) of parents/carers reported that their child already liked it when they read together. However, at the end of the course, all parents/carers agreed with this statement (p-value=0.023) and 98 per cent did so (p-value: 0.007) at the follow-up. By the end of the course, more parent/carers also reported that their child enjoyed learning to read than at the start (72 per cent to 83 per cent, not statistically significant), and fewer parent/carers agreed that their child did not want to read unless they had to for school (27 per cent to 18 per cent, not statistically significant).

Chart 13 Percentage of parent/carers agreeing with statements about how far their child is confident or enjoys learning to read



Source: Survey

Bases: Parent/carers responding at start (n=60-67); end (n=34-35); and follow up stage (n=56)

Notes: Percentages in orange denote that the change is statistically significant from Wave 1.

Is there measurable change in parents/carers' literacy behaviours?

Earlier sections show the positive, often statistically significant, changes that parent/carers reported in relation to their knowledge and confidence about helping their children's reading, and in relation to their children's enjoyment and confidence. However, how this translated into changes in practice is more varied.

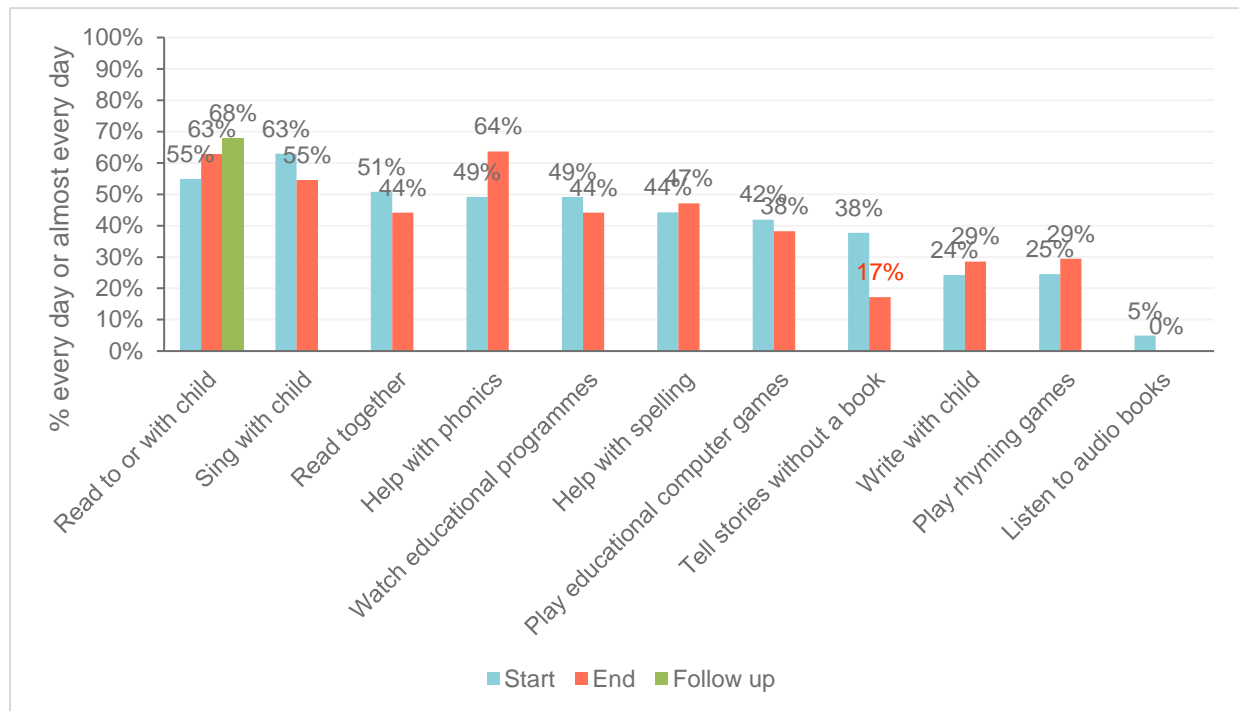
Parent carers were asked how often they did a range of activities associated with supporting children with literacy learning at home. Using a scale from 'hardly ever or never', to 'once or twice a month', 'once or twice a week' to 'every day or almost every day', Chart 14 shows the percentage of parent/carers reporting doing each activity 'every day or almost every day'. In order to get a measure of what parent/carers did when they were not home schooling, they were asked in the first survey about what they had done in December 2020 (a point when all children were in school).

Two key foci of the Our Skills course are reading with your children and help with phonics, and parent/carers reported the largest levels of change for these two activities, although they did not reach statistical significance. By the end of the course, and again three or four months later, more parent/carers reported reading to or with their child than they had done at the start (from 55 per cent at the start to 63 per cent at the end and 68 per cent at follow-up). Similarly, the percentage helping with phonics rose from 49 per cent to 64 per cent at the end of the course.

Changes in other activities were less marked or, in some cases (perhaps where activities were displaced with others), parent/carers reported a drop in frequency. Of particular note is the statistically significant drop from 38 per cent to 17 per cent of parents/carers reporting

telling stories without a book every day or almost every day (p-value=0.042). This activity was certainly encouraged in Session 2 of the Our Skills course, but appears not to have been taken on board by parents/carers. It may have been diluted by the later focus on reading and phonics.

Chart 14 Frequency of parent/carers doing literacy activities with children at home



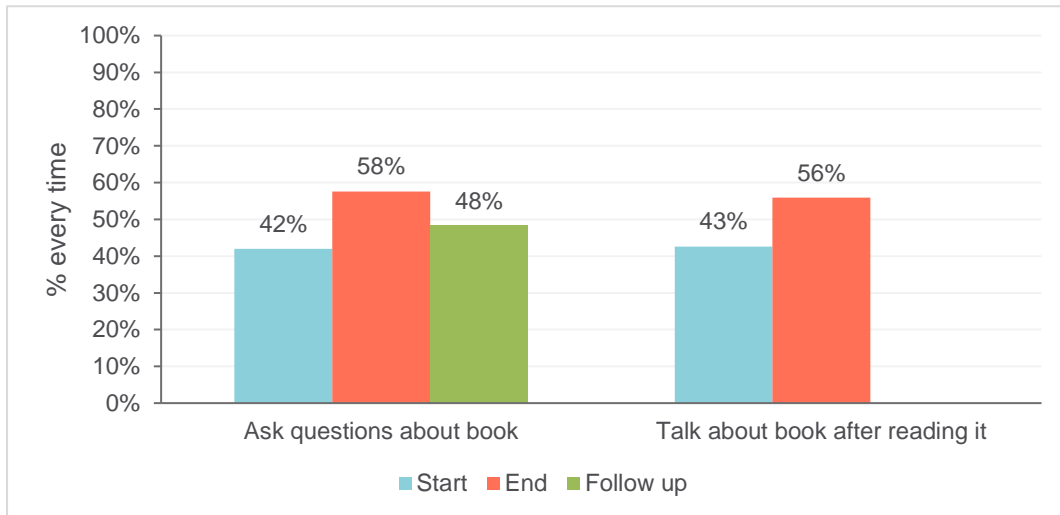
Source: Survey

Bases: Parent/carers responding at start (n=61-62); end (n=33-35); and follow up stage (n=56)

Notes: Percentages in orange denote that the change is statistically significant from Wave 1.

Parents/carers were also asked about a number of more specific activities that they may do whilst reading with their child (e.g. asking questions, taking turns reading aloud), and asked to say whether they did this 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes' or 'every time'. For the two activities which parent/carers might feasibly do each time they were reading with their child, Chart 15 shows the percentage of parent/carers who reported doing so 'every time'. For other activities, Chart 16 shows the percentage of parents/carers who reported doing so 'every time' or 'sometimes'. Across all the measures, more parents/carers reported doing each reading activity with their child at the end of the course, compared to at the start (although none of the changes were statistically significant). Whilst the follow-up survey saw a drop in the percentage of parent/carers asking questions about the book they were reading (the only measure asked in this wave), the percentage of parent/carers reporting doing this was still higher than at the start.

Chart 15 Frequency of parent/carers doing learning activities when reading with children at home

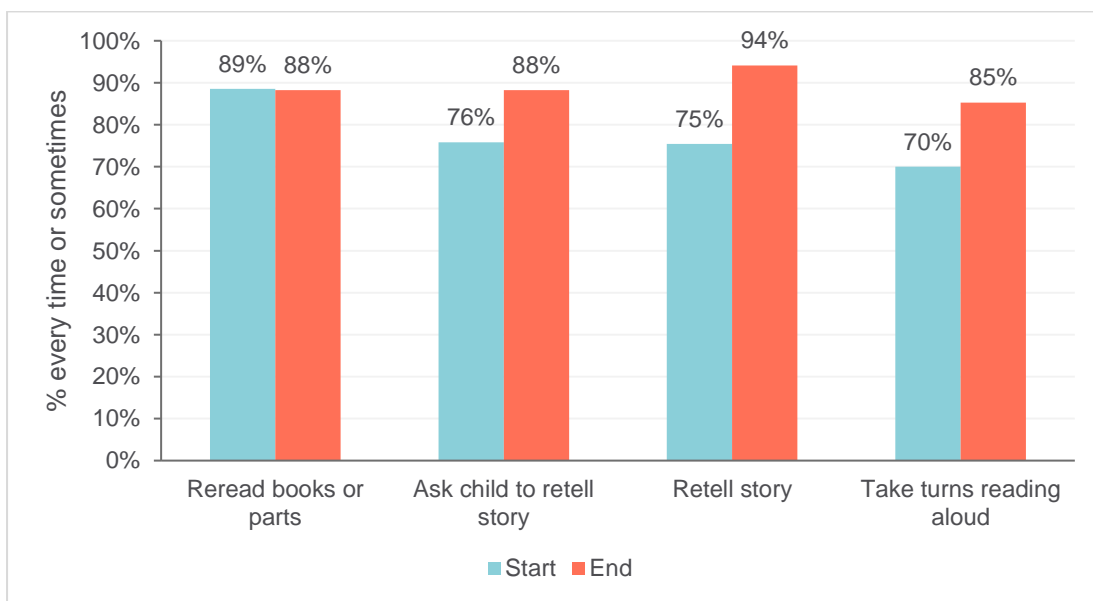


Source: Survey

Bases: Parent/carers responding at start (n=61-62); end (n=33-34); and follow up stage (n=58)

Notes: Neither changes are statistically significant.

Chart 16 Frequency of parent/carers doing learning activities when reading with children at home



Source: Survey

Bases: Parent/carers responding at start (n=60-62); and end (n=34)

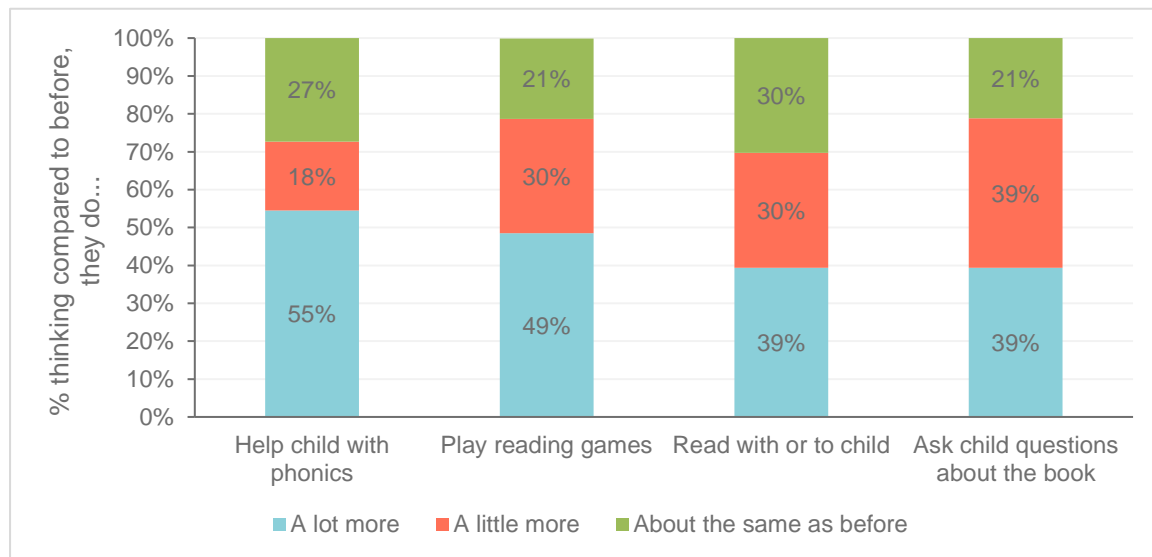
Notes: Changes are not statistically significant.

What is the range of perceived impacts identified by parent/carers?

Parent/carers were asked at the end of the course – in the Wave 2 survey – about the extent to which they *thought* that Our Skills had changed their knowledge, confidence and behaviours. Their perceptions matched the changes observed across the survey waves, with parents/carers often reporting improvements in the ways they could help their children learn to read.

Chart 17 shows the extent to which parents/carers report doing more, less or about the same as before the Our Skills course in relation to helping their children with their literacy learning. Using a five-point scale from ‘a lot more’ to ‘a lot less’, the majority of parents/carers reported doing a lot or a little more of each activity. No parent/carers reported doing less.

Chart 17 Percentage of parent/carers reporting doing more, less or the same as before the Our Skills course

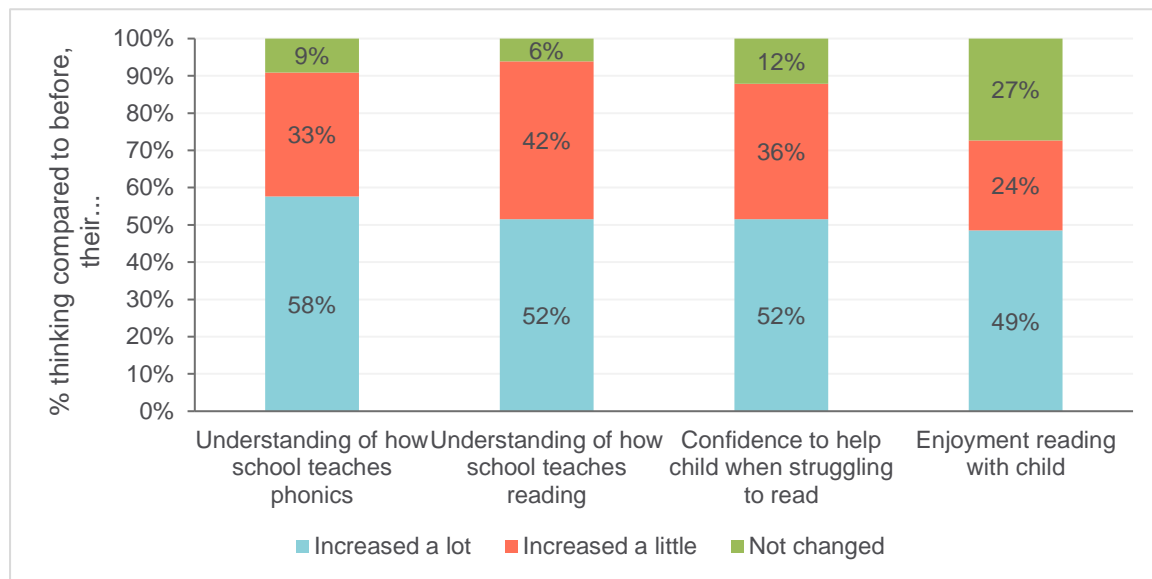


Source: Survey

Bases: Parent/carers responding at end (n=33)

The pattern is the same when parent/carers were asked whether, after the course, they had a different understanding, level of confidence or enjoyment in helping their children learn to read. Chart 18 shows parent/carer responses using a five-point scale from ‘increased a lot’ to ‘decreased a lot’. The vast majority – even higher than for the behaviour questions above – reported an increase in each aspect. Again, no parent/carers reported a decrease.

Chart 18 Percentage of parent/carers reporting a change in their understanding, confidence or enjoyment compared to before the Our Skills course



Source: Survey
Bases: Parent/carers responding at end (n=33)

Perceived changes in the qualitative research interviews

The qualitative interviews with parents/carers (who, as noted, over-represent those completing more sessions), and with tutors, schools and the developers, were very much aligned with the survey findings and showed many positive interwoven and reinforcing changes.

Confidence and enjoyment helping children learn to read

Parents/carers widely reported changes here, which came about through having ideas about how to make reading fun, and a much better understanding of phonics and how schools teach reading. Several parent/carers said they had dyslexia or otherwise struggled with reading, and the course had improved their own reading ability too, which increased their confidence and enjoyment.

"I didn't have a clue about how to teach my child the way the school teaches them, so it's given me so much knowledge for me to be able to help her without struggling myself as well." (Parent/carer)

"Yes. I actually enjoy reading with her now. It has changed a lot reading with her; the reading, the writing, all of it." (Parent/carer)

Understanding how schools teach reading and parent/school roles

Parents/carers described having a much better understanding of phonics. They felt better equipped to understand what their children are doing at school and help with homework.

"It's definitely helped me because I didn't know phonics. If [child] was to come home with phonics and gone, 'Mum, what the hell's this?' I would have gone, 'Erm, I have no idea', where now I can get my pack out and go, 'Right, I remember now', help her through it." (Parent/carer)

In line with findings from the survey, interviews with parents/carers highlighted that many already knew they had a role in helping their children alongside the schools. However, for some, even if they had been aware of their role, it reminded them of the importance of reading with their child.

"Well, it certainly reminded me that I can't sit on my laurels now just because I've done the work before she went to school, I have to keep doing it" (Parent/carer)

"I'd say it's encouraged me more, yes, not just with [child], with the other two as well. I take a bit of time out to realise that they do need the help at home as well as in school." (Parent/carer)

Children's confidence and enjoyment learning to read

Parents/carers reported during interviews that their children's enjoyment in learning to read increased during the course. Parents/carers had learnt new techniques to make reading more interactive and less passive, and reading together had become more fun and engaging for them and for children.

"It used to be a quick two minutes. She'd read a few pages, and then she'd be done, but now she enjoys reading. It's almost every night now, whenever we got a chance, but she'll read the full thing now." (Parent/carer)

Supporting children's literacy learning at home

Most of the parents/carers interviewed said they continued to use the resources and approaches they had learnt on the course, and were now reading with children more often. Some were also changing how they did this - pointing to the words as they read, asking questions, checking whether the child understands and talking about the book. They also described being more patient and supportive when children found things difficult, in part because their own confidence had grown.

"Instead of just sitting and reading with a kid, it's about making it more fun and interesting so they're not as worked up about it I've learnt instead of telling [child] that she's said a word wrong, instead of just correcting her, to turn round and actually say, 'Try it this way,' or, 'Try and spell it out again'." (Parent/carer)

"It's made a big difference in me understanding how she's reading and learning, and how she's reading it, because we know already, but she doesn't I have learnt patience! Breaking it down, explaining the simple things, the words, the noises, all that." (Parent/carer)

Perceptions of change among schools and tutors

The developers and tutors generally described seeing clear progress being made by parents/carers and by children across all these areas of change. Schools, too, noticed children's reading progressing at a faster rate than before Our Skills, and they also observed children being calmer, more confident and having developed their social skills. Although they acknowledged that children might have progressed anyway, they also thought the course had made a difference and that parents/carers were doing more at home with the child.

"The children have benefited from having that phonics skill time... with their parents as well. It's developed that area of the parent's knowledge in a way, which has been fantastic. We've seen some of the children move up a set in phonics, which has been great." (School)

Other perceived impacts

Parent/carer relationships with each other

The feedback from parents/carers about whether the course helped them to feel part of a community with other parents was mixed. For some this had not arisen: because of the small group sizes and online delivery, they had mainly engaged with the tutor. However, other parents/carers had found the course a very helpful way to meet others, felt closer to the other parents/carers on the course, and for example talked to them at the school gates or connected on line. These changes came about through being together, sharing ideas and difficulties, and helping each other.

"I'm a lone parent, I am a very lonely parent, so it was good. The social side of it was very good" (Parent/carer)

Parent/carer-school relationships

There was mixed evidence about the impact on parent/carer views of and relationship with schools. Some already felt they had a good relationship, especially if the school had assisted with social welfare issues. Others did point to impacts. They felt they knew school staff better, were more confident about asking for help or resources for their child, and had more respect for the school for having run the course and having been involved in sessions. Schools generally saw little change, although they recognised that being more knowledgeable about phonics and the school's approaches might make parents/carers more able to seek help.

"I think the [parents/carers] in the group that were comfortable with school were still comfortable with school, and the ones that weren't are still the same." (School)

"The parent that I'm thinking about, she would be more open to ask questions and feel a little bit more knowledgeable about the reading programme. I do think, sometimes, because some of the parents don't have that understanding, they feel like it might be a daft question So yes, I do think that has helped" (School)

Parent/carer-school relationships are a two-way process, and there was very little evidence of changes within schools in their perceptions of parents/carers or approaches to working in partnership with parents. There were occasional references to having picked up ways of

making sessions with parents/carers more engaging, and some tutors described schools wanting to use Our Skills approaches or resources in their teaching with children. One parent/carer said that the school now keeps her up to date on her child's progress and are in touch at least weekly, where previously they had not done this.

But generally schools said that because it was online and few parents/carers participated, Our Skills had had limited visibility in the school and no real impact. Often their comments suggested they had not expected any change for the school, beyond improvement in children's progress.

Impacts on delivery partner organisations

Some tutors felt they now had an increased awareness and sensitivity to families in these situations, awareness of the issues that families might be facing, and the need for flexibility to reach vulnerable families. But others did not, already being experienced in working with vulnerable families.

Is there evidence to support the outcomes and mechanisms of change in the theory of change?

Table 7 below reviews the findings against the mechanisms of change set out in the programme logic model, considering which are supported.

Overall, this analysis suggests that the initial changes sought in confidence and understanding relating to phonics and reading were achieved, and that these increased enjoyment of reading together, and an increase in intended behaviours relating directly to reading.

We found little or no evidence to support other mechanisms such as changes in parent/carer role construction, changes in parent/carer relationships with schools, building a community among parents/carers, increased awareness among schools of family needs and confidence in meeting them, nor increased awareness and expertise among delivery partners in meeting the needs of families of CWSW.

Table 7 Evidence to support mechanisms of change

Logic model mechanisms	Findings
Do delivery partners report increased awareness of family needs and expertise in meeting them?	Occasional references but no evidence of substantial change.
Do parents/carers report increased understanding of phonics and how it is taught, and increased communication with schools?	Survey shows increased understanding of phonics and how it is taught. Little evidence of increased communication with schools.
Do parents/carers report increased knowledge and confidence in supporting children's literacy and changes in behaviours?	Survey shows clear evidence of increased knowledge and confidence. enjoyment of reading together. Indicative evidence of some behaviour changes.

Do parents/carers report feeling part of a community with other parents?	Little evidence.
Do parents/carers use the programme activities outside sessions and have positive family literacy experiences?	Evidence of families using the activities and of positive literacy experiences.
Do school staff describe increased awareness of family needs and confidence in meeting them?	No evidence.
Do schools report increased communication with parents/carers?	Some references to parents/carers being more communicative, but not an area of substantial change.

Is there any evidence of unintended consequences or negative effects?

Finally, there was very little evidence of unintended consequences. The survey data suggest there may have been displacement of story telling for reading activity. One parent/carer described their confidence initially dropping before increasing overall, and it is possible - although we have no evidence either way - that parents/carers who dropped out of the course *may* also have experienced this.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

Table 8 below summarises the findings against the first two sets of research questions (concerning evidence of feasibility and evidence of promise). The conclusions drawn by the evaluation team in relation to the third research question, concerning readiness for trial, are also shown in the table.

Table 8 Summary of study findings

Evidence of feasibility	Findings
<p>Was it feasible to implement Our Skills as an online programme for the parents/carers of CWSW?</p>	<p>Due to the changing circumstances in schools as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision to deliver Our Skills entirely online was made late on in the process of its adaptation from Family Skills, and it was not fully developed as an online programme. There were challenges in implementation, some relating to COVID-19 and others not. There are strategies (discussed below) which would increase feasibility of online delivery but there remain questions about whether an online programme is feasible for the intended content and population.</p>
<p>Did the programme reach the intended audience and what implementation strategies were used?</p>	<p>Take-up of Our Skills by schools and families was very low. Recruitment of disadvantaged families, always challenging, was made more difficult by COVID-19, issues in identifying eligible families, online delivery, and programme duration. The most effective strategies for recruiting schools used existing connections, and in recruiting parents/carers, direct contact was particularly important</p>
<p>Was the programme delivered as intended, what adaptations were made and why?</p>	<p>The programme was largely delivered as intended. A significant number of courses did not deliver all 10 parent/carer and joint sessions. There was good adherence to the intended content. Adherence to some intended teaching strategies was inhibited by delivering online. Engagement of schools was low, in part because of COVID-19. Adaptations made were generally to resources and approaches to conveying the content, to better align with learning levels and needs, and with delivery online.</p>
<p>Was the programme acceptable to and appropriate for parents/carers and schools?</p>	<p>The evidence here is mixed. Parents/carers interviewed (biased towards more complete attenders), were very positive about the programme. However only 36 per cent of parents/carers attended 7+ parent/carer sessions and 50 per cent attended 5+ sessions. The evidence suggests that varied learning levels and online delivery made the programme less acceptable. The programme was very well accepted by participating schools, particularly for its use of their</p>

reading and phonics schemes and alignment with teaching approaches, although take-up was low.

Evidence of promise

Findings

What evidence is there that Our Skills can have a positive impact on family literacy environments and children's attainment?

There is clear evidence of promise.

What perceived impacts were identified by parents/carers and by schools, and how far did parent/carer report change over time?

The evaluation shows evidence of promise where the programme is delivered at the intended dosage. There were statistically significant changes in parent/carer reports over time in confidence about helping children to read and learn, enjoyment of reading with children, and understanding how schools teach phonics and reading. There was little evidence of change in parent/carer role construction or relationships with schools. There were positive changes in children's enjoyment of reading. There was indicative (but not statistically significant) evidence of changes in parent/carer behaviours to support children's learning and reading. Schools reported improvements in children's learning and reading. There was no evidence of changes in schools' approaches to supporting children or engaging with parents/carers.

Is there evidence to support the outcomes and mechanisms of change in the draft theory of change?

There is evidence to support changes relating to confidence, understanding and enjoyment, and indicative evidence that these may support changes in behaviour and in children's reading attainment.

Was there any evidence of potential unintended consequences or negative effects

There was no evidence of unintended or negative consequences apart from a statistically significant reduction in story telling, which may indicate displacement by reading.

Readiness for trial

Findings

What if any further work is required for Our Skills to be ready for trial?

Further work would be needed to optimise Our Skills fully whether for online, face-to-face or hybrid delivery.

Can Our Skills be delivered consistently across delivery partners and schools?

The evidence suggests that Our Skills can be delivered consistently. The most significant risks relate to the heterogeneity of groups and to parent/carer attendance, which in turn creates risk to delivery of all intended sessions. These risks may be mitigated by a hybrid delivery

model involving both online and face-to-face sessions. There was good consistency in delivery of content.

Are any changes needed to the programme materials, resources and implementation strategies including training?

To deliver Our Skills online or as a hybrid programme, changes would be needed to:

- recruitment strategies: increased involvement of Virtual Schools teams to identify eligible families (or changes in eligibility criteria - see further below), more direct outreach to families by schools, greater engagement of schools to secure their involvement in delivery
- programme resources: fully optimising the programme for online or hybrid delivery (and, less substantially, to support differentiation by learner level)

What aspects of the programme delivery should be addressed in fidelity criteria?

There is limited direct evidence about this, but key areas would be:

- tutor requirements: to include experience of family literacy, phonics, and working with disadvantaged families and online.
- adherence to the programme structure (number and duration of sessions)
- levels of attendance by parents/carers and children
- engagement of schools in providing prior information and co-delivery of designated sessions
- adherence to content (coverage of designated activities and topics)
- adherence to teaching strategies consistent with the programme principles.

Discussion and interpretation

Overall, Our Skills shows promise as a programme to support parents/carers of CWSW to support their children's reading and learning. However the study raises a number of issues about its optimal form and delivery.

Online or face-to-face delivery

A key issue is whether Our Skills should be delivered online, face-to-face, or in a hybrid form involving both of these¹⁹. This study has only tested online delivery for which the programme had not been fully adapted. Online delivery has some advantages and schools and delivery partner organisations envisage that some online learning will be part of the landscape of family literacy at least for the near-future.

¹⁹ This would involve some sessions or activities being delivered online, and some face-to-face, to all participants. We are not proposing a format where some participants join the session virtually and others join the same session in person.

However the clear preference of parents/carers who had participated more fully in Our Skills online was that face-to-face delivery would have been better, and feedback from schools and tutors suggests that online delivery was a significant issue reducing take-up. Online delivery also undermined the scope for some teaching methods, most significantly, for coaching parents/carers, particularly given that most families appear to have joined by mobile phone. It also appears to have contributed to more limited school involvement.

It is a real testament to the commitment of families and tutors, in the light of these challenges, that the programme produced promising changes, and that attendance was not lower.

These challenges could be mitigated to some extent, by optimising Our Skills fully for online delivery, and providing hardware and tech support to parents/carers (e.g. a pre-course session at the school). However it is not clear that this could mitigate the challenges sufficiently to make Our Skills feasible as an online course for families of CWSW.

Online delivery is more convenient for some parents, and there are logistical challenges for in-person delivery if schools are combined in a group, since some children would need to be taken away from the school for the course. So there is possible value in testing a hybrid format, with some sessions delivered online and others (some parent/carer sessions and all or most joint sessions) delivered face-to-face. However the weight of opinion of tutors and parents/carers was in favour of in-person participation and the cost savings from online delivery are minimal, so it might be an unnecessary complication to develop the course for hybrid delivery.

Defining the eligible population

Families of CWSW are a key population of interest for WWCS. However, social care and school information systems do not currently facilitate the identification of all such families in a local area or school, and there is a risk that a programme targeting this population will miss eligible families. This risk may reduce over time since the remit of Virtual Schools teams has widened, although early anecdotal evidence suggests problems are persisting. Identifying and reaching the population more systematically would require closer collaboration between Virtual Schools, social care teams and local schools working across datasets to identify eligible families.

However, even if the eligible families in each school could be identified, there remains a concern about the potential stigma of a programme targeting families in this way, which may undermine acceptability to schools and families. The heterogeneity of the group and their learning needs is also challenging, although some diversity is probably tolerable and may even be helpful to the programme's aims of mutual support and building a community between parents/carers. The challenge could also be mitigated to some extent by grouping parents/carers with more similar needs (although this may not be feasible or acceptable to schools), or by an approach involving pre-course workshops for parents/carers starting with greater learning needs.

An alternative approach would be to designate Our Skills as a universal targeted programme, aimed at parents/carers of children in Reception and Year 1 who would benefit from additional support for family literacy, with schools encouraged to target recruitment to

families facing greatest disadvantage or obstacles to family literacy, including parents/carers of CWSW. Further testing of the programme would be needed with this wider population.

Improving take-up by schools and families

The context of COVID-19 created very significant barriers to the recruitment of schools and families. As a result, it remains unproven whether it is feasible to reach the intended population with Our Skills to an extent that makes the programme viable. Based on wider evidence (e.g. Axford et al., 2019; Lord et al., 2021) as well as findings from this study, recruitment may be supported by:

- widening the eligible population, as noted above
- embedding Our Skills in local strategies for improving learning outcomes for CWSW, leveraging the strategic influence and reach of Virtual School teams to support school engagement as well as to identify all eligible families
- engaging school leadership in the decision to take up Our Skills, and leveraging whole-school strategic support for family recruitment
- encouraging schools to maximise personal outreach to families through direct contact, and considering in-school events to socialise the programme and introduce Our Skill's engaging activities and resources
- strategies to address family barriers to an online (or hybrid) programme, e.g. providing hardware and tech support

Improving school engagement

Schools appreciated the low burden that Our Skills placed on them. However, many did not engage in the programme as intended, and it may be that their involvement, both during and after the programme, is necessary for Our Skills to achieve the intended outcomes. In addition, creating and leveraging effective parent/carer-school partnerships in support of children's learning requires change from schools as well as from parents and carers. It is possible that the programme would have more impact if:

- schools consistently provide the information sought by tutors about reading/phonics schemes and children's learning levels before the course begins
- schools are involved in its delivery as intended
- tutors and schools liaise between sessions and after the end of Our Skills so that the school can provide support and reinforcement to parents/carers and children
- schools are open to using some Our Skills strategies and resources in classroom teaching and in parent engagement work
- the experience of Our Skills led to a better appreciation among school staff of the challenges faced by parents/carers of CWSC and their willingness and ability to support children's learning if they are engaged and supported appropriately.

This may require making the expectations and intentions of Our Skills more explicit to schools from the start, without making the programme burdensome or unattractive. There

may also be scope for using local school clusters or other school-to-school support infrastructure to maximise effective involvement and impacts.

Duration of the programme

A final issue is whether a 10-session programme is a viable offer to families of CWSW. The evidence from this study is mixed. On the one hand, schools and tutors suspected that a 10-session programme was off-putting to many families, and only 10 per cent of participating parents/carers attended 10 sessions. There were undoubtedly barriers to delivery for this study that would not necessarily apply in future, arising both from COVID-19 and from the project timelines agreed with WWCS for completion of programme delivery, but it seems likely that 10 sessions would still be challenging. On the other hand, the families interviewed (biased strongly to more complete attenders) did not generally find 10 sessions too demanding, and indeed some would have liked more. Tutors also did not point to topics or issues that could be dropped, although some felt the content could be covered in less time than the Toolkit indicated and that 10 sessions was too many.

Overall the evidence suggests that some modification to the duration would be desirable. One option would be a modular approach, where families initially commit to, say, four or five sessions, providing an initial level of coverage across the course topics, and are then offered a further module of additional, and more advanced, content. Tutors and schools also suggested one or more initial short workshops as a taster before families were expected to commit to the course. There would be value in testing different formulations and numbers of sessions.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to the study:

- The absence of a control group or other counterfactual means that we cannot securely attribute parent/carer changes to Our Skills. Over the same period as the Our Skills course, parents/carers are likely to have received information and advice from schools and elsewhere on how to develop a home literacy environment.
- We undertook fewer qualitative interviews than intended due to challenges in recruitment of schools and programmes to the programme and for participation in the evaluation
- Participation in the survey and parent/carer qualitative interviews is heavily biased to fuller attendance. We know very little about the experiences and views of parents/carers who dropped out during the programme.
- Parents/carers were reached, for the survey and for qualitative interviews, via tutors rather than directly by the evaluation team, with a risk of bias and complicating the longitudinal survey analysis
- Register data was collected by the developers, which similarly raises a risk of bias
- It was not possible to collect systematic data about the number of schools, and families, offered the programme and to measure take-up

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, it is a remarkable testament to the commitment of the developers, delivery partner organisations and parents/carers of CWSW that Our Skills was delivered to over 100 participating families and to over 100 children, and that, with all the necessary caveats placed on the findings, it shows evidence of promise.

There are a number of key decisions to be made prior to further future development and testing of Our Skills, including:

- Whether to continue to limit eligibility to parents/carers of CWSW or to assess the feasibility of Our Skills as a universal targeted programme which includes but is not limited to parents/carers of CWSW
- The most appropriate mode for delivery going forward, whether online, face-to-face or hybrid
- Whether to retain the 10-session course or to test whether increased take-up and promising impacts can be achieved with a shorter programme or a modular approach

Then, taking the broad model of delivery decided upon, we recommend that the programme is tested further, including the development of:

Recruitment

- Greater engagement of Virtual Schools
- More engagement of school leadership and whole-school approaches to support recruitment

Course content and delivery

- Optimising the programme resources and materials for the intended mode of delivery, whether online, face-to-face or hybrid
- Enhancing programme resources to provide more support to tutors for differentiation by learner level
- Reinforcing the value of storytelling in later course sessions, in case the early coverage becomes buried by the later focus on phonics and reading
- Developing and testing fidelity measures so that consistent high quality implementation and delivery can be supported
- More explicit references in programme materials and tutor training to the underpinning theories and assumptions, to support high quality implementation
- More engagement of school leadership and whole-school approaches to support school involvement in delivery and reinforcement of impacts
- Strategies for tutors to share additional resources and tips

Directions for Future Research

This small-scale pilot study of Our Skills provides good evidence of promise. However, it also highlights a number of key aspects which require adaptation or further development. Therefore, the optimal next step is to amend the programme in light of this learning and to test the revised model as a Pilot RCT. The number of modifications mean that the programme is not ready for a full Efficacy RCT. Moreover, the fact that the testing of Our Skills to date has been within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic means that there is benefit in further piloting within more normal circumstances.

The Pilot RCT would best test the revised model as a Cluster RCT, with randomisation at the level of the course (with each course consisting of eligible parents/carers within a single school or group of schools depending on number of eligible families per school²⁰). With evidence of promise (in terms of change over time) currently measured in relation to the confidence, understanding and behaviours of the parent/carer, a Pilot RCT should measure the impact of the revised Our Skills on the same or similar measures collected via longitudinal surveys of eligible parent/carers in the intervention and control arms. The RCT should also measure the impact on eligible children's literacy outcomes, with the Early Years Foundation Stage literacy measures and Year 1 Phonics Screening scores a likely data source.

An Implementation and Process Evaluation would also be needed, with key issues to assess including:

- measurement of take-up among schools and families
- development of an agreed set of criteria against which fidelity can be measured, including adherence to the intended styles of delivery
- how schools approach identifying suitable families and, outside the constraints of COVID-19, effective recruitment strategies
- implications of any widening of the eligibility criteria for family recruitment and heterogeneity of groups
- feasibility of managing cross-school groups with all or some in-person delivery
- acceptability of the programme to parents/carers and schools, including implications of the delivery mode

²⁰ If a decision was made to move towards a universal targeted programme, then randomisation would likely be at the school level.

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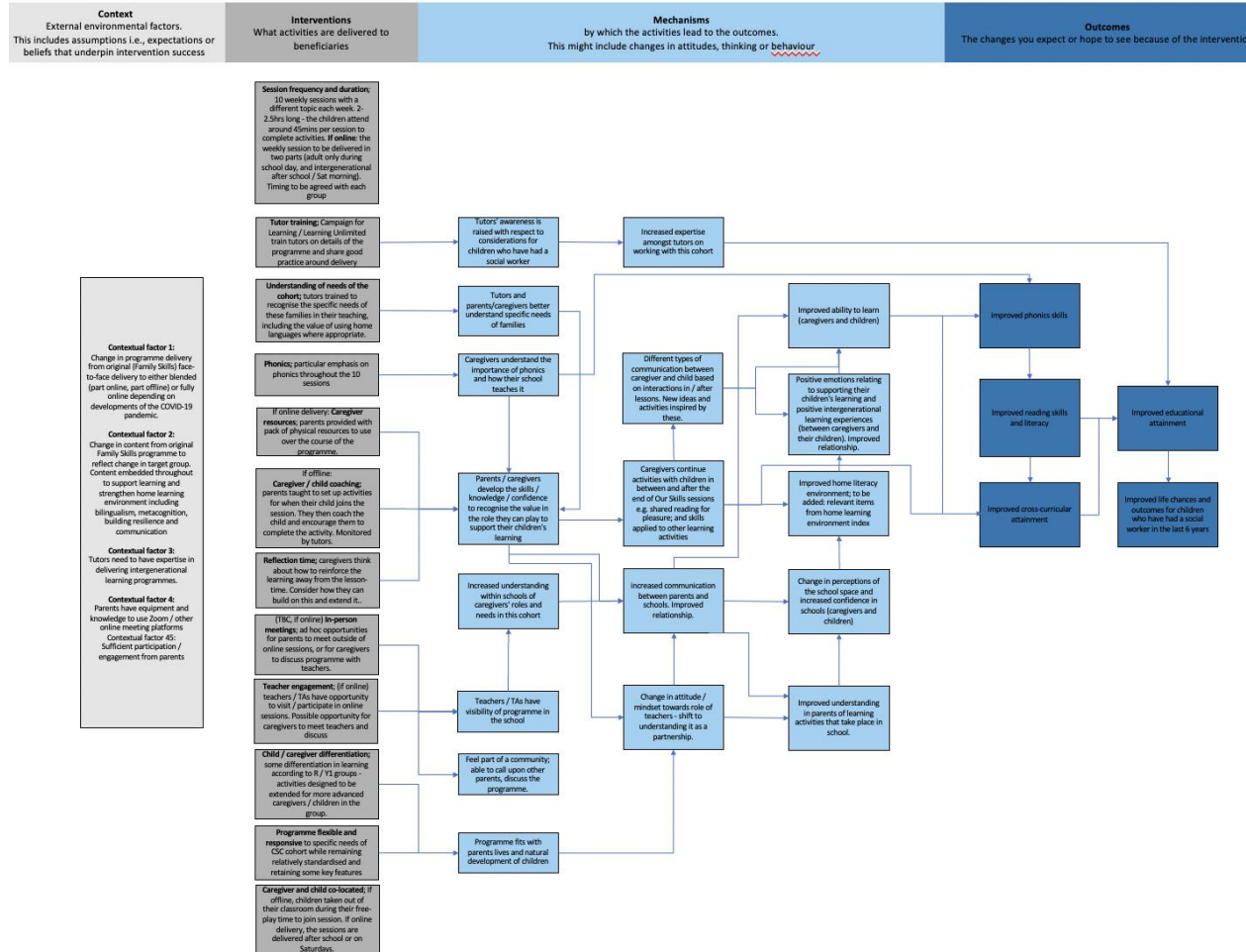
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Logic Model

Logic Model Template



Appendix B: Additional Tables

Table 1 P-values

Outcome variable	Change from start (Wave 1) to end (Wave 2) of course	Change from start of course (Wave 1) to follow up (Wave 3)
Very or fairly confident can find ways of playing to help child learn	0.069	0.001*
Very or fairly confident can help child when struggling to read	0.019*	0.001*
Very or fairly confident can help child with schoolwork	0.014*	
Agree or agree strongly that enjoy reading with child	0.219	0.048*
Agree or agree strongly that can do a lot to excite child about learning	0.004*	
Agree or agree strongly that it is hard to make reading fun	0.817	
Very or fairly confident understand how school teaches reading	0.001*	0.000*
Very or fairly confident understand how school teaches phonics	0.000*	0.000*
Agree or agree strongly that can ask teacher for advice if child struggling with reading	0.210	
Whether parent/carer or school responsible for teaching reading and writing	0.822	
Agree or agree strongly that my child likes it when we read together	0.023*	0.007*
Agree or agree strongly that my child enjoys learning to read	0.175	
Agree or agree strongly that my child gets upset if they cannot read a word or get something wrong	0.986	
Agree or agree strongly that my child does not want to read unless they have to for schoolwork	0.385	
Read to or with child every day or almost every day	0.414	0.181
Sing with child every day or almost every day	0.386	
Read together every day or almost every day	0.574	
Help child with phonics every day or almost every day	0.187	
Watch educational programmes together every day or almost every day	0.596	
Help with spellings every day or almost every day	0.792	
Play educational computer games every day or almost every day	0.728	
Tell stories with child every day or almost every day	0.042*	
Write with child every day or almost every day	0.603	
Play rhyming games every day or almost every day	0.623	

Listen to audio books every day or almost every day	0.193	0.487
Ask child questions every time read books with child	0.124	
Talk about book every time read with child	0.198	
Reread book or parts of book sometimes or every time read books with child	0.960	
Ask child to retell story sometimes or every time read books with child	0.174	
Retell story sometimes or every time read books with child	0.043	
Take turns to read aloud sometimes or every time read books with child	0.120	

Bases (maximum): Parent/carers responding to Wave 1 (n=67); Wave 2 (n=35); Wave 3 (n=58).



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