



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

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# EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS FOR LOOKED- AFTER CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE





# What Works for Children's Social Care

## Acknowledgements

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## This evidence summary is based on the following systematic review

Evans, R., Brown, R., Rees, G. and Smith, P., (2017). Systematic review of educational interventions for looked-after children and young people: Recommendations for intervention development and evaluation. *British Educational Research Journal*. 43(1), 68-94.

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## About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. We generate, collate and make

accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

## About CASCADE

The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University is concerned with all aspects of community responses to social need in children and families, including family support services, children in

need services, child protection, looked after children and adoption. It is the only centre of its kind in Wales and has strong links with policy and practice.

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# EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS FOR LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## What is the intervention?

Educational interventions aimed at improving the educational outcomes of looked after children and young people. This systematic review carried out by Evans and colleagues in 2017 aimed to ascertain the effectiveness of twelve educational interventions:

- Education Specialists<sup>1</sup>
- Early Start to Emancipation Preparation<sup>2</sup>
- Fostering Individualized Assistance Programme<sup>3</sup>
- Head Start<sup>4</sup>
- Kids in Transition to School<sup>5</sup>
- Letterbox Club<sup>6</sup>
- Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care<sup>7</sup>
- Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care – Adolescents<sup>8</sup>
- On The Way Home<sup>9</sup>
- Teach Your Children Well: individual level<sup>10</sup>
- Teach Your Children Well: Group-based for 25 weeks<sup>11</sup>
- Teach Your Children Well: Group-based for 30 weeks<sup>12</sup>

Interventions varied in relation to delivery setting, delivery agent, age range of children targeted and status of children, including children in foster care and kinship care, and young people leaving out-of-home placements and youth justice systems. Such variation, as well as differences in study quality, made it difficult to synthesise results. To aid clarity, this EMMIE Summary is focused on one intervention in particular, Teach Your Children Well, as this intervention was reported on by five<sup>10,11,12</sup> of the fifteen academic papers, comprising 246 children. Teach Your Children Well includes two components; direct teaching and behaviour management. Hence, children are taught reading, language and maths skills and receive rewards to promote positive behaviour. Teach Your Children Well can be delivered individually or in groups for either 25 or 30 weeks.

In addition to presenting detailed results for Teach Your Children Well, a brief summary is provided of the remaining nine interventions. While tentative findings are presented, findings must be treated with caution due to limitations in the methodological rigour of the studies reviewed.

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<sup>1</sup>Zetlin et al 2004 <sup>2</sup>Courtney et al., 2008; Zinn and Courtney, 2014 <sup>3</sup>Clark et al, 1998 <sup>4</sup>Lipscomb et al, 2013 <sup>5</sup>Pears et al, 2013 <sup>6</sup>Mooney et al, 2016 <sup>7</sup>Leve and Chamberlain, 2007; <sup>8</sup> Green et al, 2014 <sup>9</sup>Trout et al, 2013, <sup>10</sup>Flynn et al, 2011; 2012 and Marquis, 2013 <sup>11</sup>Harper and Schmidt, 2012 <sup>12</sup>Harper, 2012.



## Which outcomes were studied?

The five papers (Flynn et al, 2011; 2012; Harper, 2012; Harper and Schmidt, 2012; Marquis, 2013) reported on three randomised controlled trials on the impact of Teach Your Children Well on the following outcomes:

- Reading
- Spelling
- Maths computation
- Sentence comprehension

These outcomes have been reviewed as a group called “Academic Skills”.

## How strong is the evidence?

While the systematic review includes randomised controlled trials, which should offer robust findings on outcomes, differences in the quality of study conduct and reporting limited the extent to which effectiveness could be determined.

Of the twelve interventions, Teach Your Children Well at the individual level (Flynn et al., 2011; 2012; Marquis, 2013) and group level at 30 weeks (Harper, 2012) were the only ones evaluated with samples large enough to detect effect and allow for power calculations. However, limitations in study reporting meant that risk of bias was unclear across several items. A further limitation is that at the individual level, two of the three papers reported on the same sample (Flynn et al, 2011; 2012), while at the group level, two studies reported on one sample (Harper, 2012; Harper and Schmidt, 2012).

## Effectiveness: how effective is the intervention examined?

### Outcome 1: Academic skills

Effect rating	1
Strength of Evidence rating	1

A randomised controlled trial of the individual-level Teach Your Children Well (reported in Flynn et al, 2011; 2012) found positive effects on sentence comprehension (Hedges  $g = 0.38$ ,  $p = 0.035$ ) and maths computation (Hedges  $g = 0.46$ ,  $p = .009$ ). No significant impact was found for word reading or spelling. The randomised controlled trial by Marquis (2013) also considered the impact on academic skills when a child was taught individually or in a sibling pair. Marquis (2013) found that children taught individually showed improvements in reading, sentence comprehension and maths computation. However, improvements in maths computation only were evident when taught as sibling pairs.

At the group level, Teach Your Children Well (Harper, 2012), found an effect on reading (E.S. = 0.40), spelling (E.S. = 0.25,  $p = 0.025$ ) and maths computation (E.S. = 0.34,  $p = 0.044$ ). No significant effect was found on sentence comprehension. When Teach Your Children Well was delivered at the shorter duration of 25 weeks at group level (Harper and Schmidt, 2012) positive effects were found on reading (E.S. = 0.42,  $p = .002$ ) and spelling (E.S. = 0.38,  $p = .004$ ) for 68 children, the majority of whom were from an Aboriginal population. No effect was found for sentence comprehension or maths computation.



## Other interventions

Positive effects for the development of 'pre-academic skills', including letter and word identification skills and early literacy were found for Kids in Transition to School (Pears et al., 2013) and Head Start (Lipscomb et al, 2013). No effects on academic skills or academic grade were found for the remaining interventions. In response, the reviewers reiterate discussion from the Early Start to Emancipation Preparation (Courtney et al., 2008; Zinn and Courtney, 2014) which questioned whether delivery agents possess the specialist skills needed to work with looked after children and young people entering care who may have a range of mental health and behavioural needs.

## Mechanisms: When, where and how does it work?

The review focused on effect and did not consider causal pathways that might lead to the differences found. The review did, however, consider the lack of theoretically driven educational interventions, noting that even where interventions are based upon theoretical approaches the results have been disappointing. It could be hypothesised that different interventions work differently for different age ranges or specific groups of looked after children and young people, but it is not possible, from this study, to comment on the exact mechanisms required for educational interventions to be effective.

## Moderators: who does it work for?

All the Teach Your Children Well studies were conducted in Canada. As child welfare and educational systems vary across nations, the extent to which interventions will be effective in the UK cannot be determined. Of the remaining nine interventions, only two interventions were carried out in the UK; no positive effects were found across any outcome (Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care, Leve and Chamberlain, 2007; Letterbox, Mooney et al, 2016).

Teach Your Children Well is aimed at boys and girls aged between 6 and 13 years. At the individual level Teach Your Children Well was delivered by foster parents to children in their care while at the group level, volunteer university students delivered the programme to groups of three or four children.

School stability emerged as a moderator; reading score was affected by high and medium levels of school stability. While the reviewers report that ADHD was a moderator, no further details are provided.

Intervention fidelity was associated with the development of academic skills. Higher levels of fidelity in delivering the reading curriculum were associated with an advantage in maths scores while exposure to the maths curriculum was associated with higher levels of maths skills. At the group level, the volunteer university student tutors encountered difficulties in delivering the maths curriculum which limited fidelity to the intervention (Harper, 2012; Harper & Schmidt, 2012).

At an individual level, Teach Your Children Well reported several barriers to engagement. These included busy caregivers, carer illness, perceptions that the child was already doing well in school, placement changes and conflict between the carer and child (Flynn et al, 2012). Further, the acceptability of the intervention to foster carers and children was associated with levels of engagement, with 93% of foster carers reporting that they would recommend Teach Your Children Well (Flynn et al., 2011; 2012; Marquis, 2013). Acceptability was not reported for children although the reviewers report that some children displayed challenging behaviours or resistance to teaching.



## Implementation: How do you do it?

Teach Your Children Well includes two components; direct teaching and behaviour management. Children are taught reading, language and maths skills and receive rewards to promote positive behaviour.

Teach Your Children Well can be delivered by foster carers to their foster child or by volunteer university students to groups of three or four children for either 25 or 30 weeks. At the individual level, children received three hours of tuition a week, including two hours of one-to-one instruction in reading, 30 minutes reading aloud and 30 minutes of self-paced instruction in maths (Flynn et al, 2011; 2012 and Marquis, 2013). At the group level children received two hours of tuition per week. Delivery agents receive two days of training on direct teaching and behaviour management strategies.

## Economics: What are the costs and benefits?

No economic analysis was included in the study. The reviewers highlight the need for cost-effectiveness to be included in future reviews of educational interventions.

## What are the strengths and limitations of the review?

This systematic review is a rigorous review of educational interventions for looked after children and young people. The review followed the recommended Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Shamseer et al, 2015) which identify what information should be included in order to ensure that results are presented to a high standard. The reviewers noted the lack of methodological rigour in some of the studies and highlighted that most studies had small samples meaning that power calculations were not possible. Hence, the results presented should be treated with caution.

The review is limited by the diversity of studies which meant that conducting a meta-analysis was not possible. Further, by conducting a systematic review, any evaluation reports published in the grey literature, including government reports or unpublished theses have not been included in the review. Hence, the review is limited to educational interventions which have been subject to a randomised controlled study.

## Summary of key points

- While the systematic review reports findings from randomised controlled trials, differences in the quality of the conduct and reporting of studies limited the extent to which effectiveness could be determined.
- Five papers reported three randomised controlled trials of Teach Your Children Well, which is an intervention that includes direct tuition on reading, language and maths skills and behaviour management techniques.
- Mixed findings were reported for Teach Your Children Well and academic skills. When children were taught individually by foster carers, improvements were reported for sentence comprehension and maths skills. At group level, variation was noted between 25- and 30-week delivery. At 25 weeks, improvements were reported on reading and spelling while at 30-weeks, improvements were reported for reading, spelling and maths skills.
- Educational interventions aimed at pre-school children appeared to have a positive effect on the development of academic skills, including early literacy skills.



- Where interventions were not associated with improvements in academic skills it was suggested that looked after children and young people may have a range of needs which require specialist trained providers.
- The review highlights the need for theoretically-driven educational interventions and evaluations looking at which interventions work for different age ranges or specific groups of children looked after and in what contexts.
- Improvements are needed in the methodological quality of study design so that conclusions can be drawn on the effectiveness and development of educational interventions.





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