

# Second Step Early Learning

Review: January 2019

**Second Step Early Learning (SSEL) is a classroom-based programme designed to increase students' school success and decrease problem behaviours by promoting social-emotional competence and self-regulation. It is a universal programme for children between the ages of 4 and 5, though it has been targeted at disadvantaged areas in its best evidenced implementation. The programme is delivered in early-years settings.**

SSEL is designed to promote young children's readiness skills for school and life. It is delivered by teachers in lessons which are interactive and developmentally appropriate.

It is delivered across 28 short weekly activities which involve either the whole classroom, or small-group activities that use posters, songs, puppets and story books.

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Evidence  
rating: 2

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Cost rating: 1

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## EIF Programme Assessment

Second Step Early Learning has **preliminary evidence** of improving a child outcome, but we cannot be confident that the programme caused the improvement.

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Evidence  
rating: **2**

### What does the evidence rating mean?

**Level 2** indicates that the programme has evidence of improving a child outcome from a study involving at least 20 participants, representing 60% of the sample, using validated instruments.

This programme does not receive a rating of 3 as its best evidence is not from a rigorously conducted RCT or QED evaluation.

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## Cost rating

A rating of 1 indicates that a programme has a low cost to set up and deliver, compared with other interventions reviewed by EIF. This is equivalent to an estimated unit cost of less than £100.

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Cost rating: **1**

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## Child outcomes

According to the best available evidence for this programme's impact, it can achieve the following positive outcomes for children:

**Enhancing school achievement & employment**

Improved executive functioning - based on **study 1**

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## Key programme characteristics

### Who is it for?

The best available evidence for this programme relates to the following age-groups:

- Preschool
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### How is it delivered?

The best available evidence for this programme relates to implementation through these delivery models:

- Group
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### Where is it delivered?

The best available evidence for this programme relates to its implementation in these settings:

- Children's centre or early-years setting
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### How is it targeted?

The best available evidence for this programme relates to its implementation as:

- Targeted selective
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### Where has it been implemented?

Australia, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States

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## UK provision

This programme has been implemented in the UK.

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## UK evaluation

This programme's best evidence does not include evaluation conducted in the UK.

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## About the programme

### What happens during delivery?

#### How is it delivered?

- Second Step Early Learning is delivered in 28 weekly sessions of 5–7 minutes duration each by a teacher to classrooms of children.

### What happens during the intervention?

- Core social-emotional and self-regulation skills are taught in 28 weekly themes divided into five units: skills for learning, empathy, emotion management, problem-solving, and transitioning to kindergarten.
- The weekly themes are presented on large photo cards that feature short five- to seven-minute daily activities designed to be integrated into the flow of the day.

### What are the implementation requirements?

#### Who can deliver it?

- The practitioner who delivers this programme is a preschool teacher with QCF-6 level qualifications.

## What are the training requirements?

- The programme comes with an online staff training toolkit to help train teachers to implement the programme with fidelity. The toolkit can be used by anyone overseeing programme implementation and was designed to be adapted to best suit users' own settings. The toolkit, which is customisable for any individual or group of teachers, includes the following components:
  - A kick-off meeting agenda guided by a PowerPoint: Staff receive an overview of the programme and prepare to deliver the first unit.
  - Four check-in meeting agendas: These meetings are held after each of the first four units is delivered. Staff reflect on successes and challenges with implementation and prepare to deliver the next unit. These check-in meetings provide valuable opportunities for timely feedback and coaching throughout programme implementation.
  - A wrap-up meeting agenda: Staff reflect on successes and plan for next year's implementation.

## How are the practitioners supervised?

- Supervision of practitioners is not required.

## What are the systems for maintaining fidelity?

Programme fidelity is maintained through the following processes:

- Training manual
- Face-to-face training
- Fidelity monitoring.

## Is there a licensing requirement?

Yes, there is a licence required to run this programme.

## How does it work? (Theory of Change)

### How does it work?

- The universal, classroom-based programme is designed to increase children's school success and decrease problem behaviours by promoting social emotional competence and self-regulation.
- It teaches skills that strengthen children's ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions and solve problems.
- In the short term, children will have improved social-emotional competence and increased self-regulation.
- In the long term, children will have increased school success, reduced aggression and improved peer relations.

### Intended outcomes

Enhancing school achievement & employment Preventing crime, violence and antisocial behaviour

### Contact details

Committee for Children [info@cfchildren.org](mailto:info@cfchildren.org)

<http://www.secondstep.org/> <http://www.cfchildren.org/>

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## About the evidence

Second Step Early Learning's most rigorous evidence comes from an RCT which was conducted in the United States.

This study identified statistically significant positive impact on a number of child outcomes.

This programme is underpinned by one study with a level 2 rating, hence the programme receives a level 2 rating overall.

### Study 1

**Citation:** Upshur et al., 2017 | **Design:** Cluster RCT

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**Country:** United States | **Study rating:** 2

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**Sample:** 492 4-year-old children recruited from classrooms in Head Start centres and community preschools which serve low-income families.

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**Timing:** Post-test

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**Child outcomes:**

Improved executive functioning

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**Other outcomes:**

None measured

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Upshur, C. C., Heyman, M., & Wenz-Gross, M. (2017). Efficacy trial of the second step early learning (SSEL) curriculum: Preliminary outcomes. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 50*, 15-25.

**Available at**

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0193397316301009>



## Study design and sample

The first study is an RCT. This study involved random assignment of children to a Second Step Early Learning group and a usual curriculum group.

This study was conducted in the USA, with a sample of 492 4-year-old children recruited from classrooms in Head Start centres and community preschools which serve low-income families. Approximately half the sample were boys and half girls. Children's mean receptive vocabulary scores indicated a somewhat below age-equivalent sample. The majority of families (60.8%) had a family income of less than \$20,000.

## Measures

- Executive functioning was measured using the Head-Toes-Knees-Shoulders Task (direct assessment).
- Executive functioning was also measured using the Backward Digit Span Task (direct assessment).
- Emotion knowledge was measured using the Emotion Matching Scale (direct assessment).
- Emotion knowledge was also measured using Challenging Situations Task (direct assessment).

## Findings

This study identified statistically significant positive impact on executive functioning.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are limited by methodological issues pertaining to unequivalent groups at baseline, and issues relating to attrition further undermining the equivalence of groups, hence why a higher rating is not achieved.

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## Guidebook

The EIF Guidebook provides information about early intervention programmes that have at least preliminary evidence of achieving positive outcomes for children. It provides information based on EIF's assessment of the strength of evidence for a programme's effectiveness, and on detail about programmes shared with us by those who design, run and deliver them.

The Guidebook serves an important starting point for commissioners to find out more about effective early interventions, and for programme providers to find out more about what good evidence of impact looks like and how it can be captured. As just one of our key resources for commissioners and practitioners, the Guidebook is an essential part of EIF's work to support the development of and investment in effective early intervention programmes.

Our assessment of the evidence for a programme's effectiveness can inform and support certain parts of a commissioning decision, but it is not a substitute for professional judgment. Evidence about what has worked in the past offers no guarantee that an approach will work in all circumstances. Crucially, the Guidebook is not a market comparison website: ratings and other information should not be interpreted as a specific recommendation, kite mark or endorsement for any programme.

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[How to read the Guidebook](#)

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[EIF evidence standards](#)

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[About the EIF Guidebook](#)

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## EIF

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity and a member of the What Works network. We support the use of effective early intervention for children, young people and their families: identifying signals of risk, and responding with effective interventions to improve outcomes, reduce hardship and save the public money in the long term.

We work by generating evidence and knowledge of what works in our field, putting this information in the hands of commissioners, practitioners and policymakers, and supporting the adoption of the evidence in local areas and relevant sectors.

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[www.EIF.org.uk](http://www.EIF.org.uk) | [@TheEIFoundation](https://twitter.com/TheEIFoundation)

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