**Swindon educational psychology service 2020**

With contributions from: Alexa Denham, Jaime Rowley and Lucy Walshe (Swindon Borough Council) Eloise De Carvalho and Ben Higgins (The University of Bristol)

An Evaluation of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) Programme

Swindon Borough Council |

**2021**

Contents

[Executive Summary 2](#_Toc65055031)

[Introduction 3](#_Toc65055032)

[*What is ELSA?* 3](#_Toc65055033)

[*Swindon’s Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) Programme* 3](#_Toc65055034)

[*What does research say about the impact of ELSA?* 4](#_Toc65055035)

[Aims of the current report 5](#_Toc65055036)

[*Background* 5](#_Toc65055037)

[*Research Aims and Questions* 5](#_Toc65055038)

[*Methodology* 5](#_Toc65055039)

[Research Findings 6](#_Toc65055040)

[**RESEARCH QUESTION 1:** How confident do ELSA’s feel about responding to emotional literacy needs following ELSA training and supervision? 6](#_Toc65055041)

[**RESEARCH QUESTION 2:** What is the impact of ELSA on pupils’ emotional wellbeing and mental health? 8](#_Toc65055042)

[*Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* 9](#_Toc65055043)

[*ELSA Research Questionnaire* 10](#_Toc65055044)

[*Case Example* 12](#_Toc65055045)

[**RESEARCH QUESTION 3:** What is the impact of ELSA on the emotional wellbeing and mental health of CLA? 14](#_Toc65055046)

[Summary and key learning points 14](#_Toc65055047)

[References 16](#_Toc65055048)

[Appendix A- Example ELSA Research Questionnaire 18](#_Toc65055049)

# Executive Summary

The ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) intervention was originally developed to support children and young people’s social, emotional and mental health needs through developing their emotional literacy (Pickering, Lambeth & Woodcock, 2019). The intervention was initiated in Swindon following discussions within a multiagency mental health group in February 2017 and was introduced by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) as a possible intervention to address specific challenges facing the council and target health and educational outcomes.

The aim of the current report were threefold, firstly to explore the impact of the ELSA training in Swindon on the confidence of ELSAs. Secondly to explore the impact of ELSA on children and young people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health and thirdly to specifically consider the impact of ELSA on the outcomes of Children who are Looked After (CLA). A mixed methods approach was adopted to explore these research questions, comprising of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), a qualitative ELSA questionnaire and a telephone interview.

The findings suggest that the ELSA programme positively affects ELSAs’ confidence to meet the emotional literacy needs of children and young people. Both ELSA training and ELSA supervision provided by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) supported feelings of confidence in this area. ELSA training provided ELSAs with increased knowledge and experience alongside useful resources and strategies. ELSA supervision provided opportunities for peer learning within a supportive and understanding environment.

The ELSA programme was also perceived by ELSAs to lead to positive outcomes for both individual pupils and school systems. At the individual pupil level, data from the SDQ indicated a reduction in a range of emotional, conduct, hyperactive and peer problems and an increase in prosocial behaviours. Data from ELSA questionnaires highlighted positive changes to pupil’s emotional literacy and regulation, social skills, engagement in learning and wellbeing. The telephone interview highlighted positive outcomes related to communication skills, relationships with peers and staff and emotional regulation. Positive outcomes relating to school systems included the establishment of dedicated emotional literacy spaces and resources, and an increase in staff awareness relating to the importance of emotional literacy. Finally, ELSAs reported a range of positive outcomes relating to the emotional wellbeing and mental health of CLA including enhanced social relationships, improvements in emotional regulation, increased resilience, confidence and improved attention and concentration.

In summary, this report explores the impact of the ELSA training and supervision programme in Swindon on the confidence of ELSAs to meet the emotional literacy needs of children and young people and to evaluate the impact of the ELSA on pupil outcomes. The findings from this evaluation, suggest that ELSA training and supervision increases ELSA confidence and that the ELSA programme has a positive impact on a range of outcomes for pupils and school systems.

# Introduction

## *What is ELSA?*

The ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) intervention was originally developed within Hampshire in 2001 by Sheila Burton (Principle Educational Psychologist) and the Southampton Educational Psychology Service (EPS) to support children and young people with their social, emotional and mental health needs through developing their emotional literacy (Pickering, Lambeth & Woodcock, 2019).

ELSA was designed to build the capacity of schools to support the emotional needs of pupils from within their own resources. This is achieved by training teaching assistants (TAs) or Learning Mentors to become ‘ELSAs’, to develop and deliver individualised support programmes to meet the emotional needs of pupils in their school. It recognises that children learn better and are happier in school if their emotional needs are also addressed. This intervention is now widely implemented by Educational Psychologists (EPs) across the UK and the relevance of the implementation of ELSA in schools has been further strengthened by the publication of the 2017 Green Paper: ‘Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health’, for example, by proposing that all schools should have a designated person to lead on mental health needs.

ELSA is an initiative developed and supported by EPs, who apply their professional knowledge of children’s social and emotional development to areas of need experienced by pupils. ELSAs typically attend five days of specific training from EPs that entail:

1. Emotional literacy in schools/ Raising emotional awareness,

2. Self-esteem/ Active listening and communication skills,

3. Anger management/ Working with puppets,

4. Social skills, Autism Spectrum Disorders and Social Stories,

5. Friendship skills/ Writing therapeutic stories.

Following initial training, ELSAs are responsible for planning and delivering individual and small group interventions within their school. Training is based on psychological principles and it is relevant to pupils from Reception to Year 13, within both mainstream and specialist provisions. Further detail about the ELSA programme can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.elsanetwork.org/>. Following training, ELSAs receive on-going professional supervision on a half-termly basis from the EPS, helping to ensure safe practice for ELSAs and pupils alike. Supervision aims to offer ELSAs casework support, information about useful resources, discussion of areas not covered in the five days of initial training, access to peer support and opportunities for shared problem solving.

## *Swindon’s Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) Programme*

The ELSA programme was introduced to Swindon schools in October 2018 as part of a Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Public Health and Virtual Schools funded initiative to train all schools in the Local Authority over a two-year period. The model detailed in the ELSA Trainer’s Manual (Burton, 2009) was adapted and instead of the initial five training days, ELSAs in Swindon complete six days of initial training and four supervision sessions within this initiative in order to become registered as an ELSA. The training started in October 2018 and finished in March 2020. As of March 2020, 57 out of 66 Primary Schools, 12 out of 14 Secondary Schools, EOTAS (Education Other Than at School provision) and one Special School have been trained.

## *What does research say about the impact of ELSA?*

A review of the literature was completed in 2020 from the ERIC, EThOS and PsycINFO databases and official ELSA website (https://www.elsanetwork.org) which generated 82 records regarding the ELSA intervention. Upon removal of duplications and papers that were concerned with other areas of the ELSA programme, 21 individual papers remained that evaluated the programme in terms of its outcomes for participating pupils. These papers included a mix of quantitative (e.g. pre- and post-questionnaires) and qualitative (e.g. interviews) methodologies and involved the participation of various stakeholders, such as ELSAs, pupils, parents, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo’s), teachers and head teachers.

These papers cite a number of positive outcomes for pupils participating in the ELSA programme, and four consistent themes can be noted throughout the literature. Firstly, improvements in managing positive and negative emotions, including their regulation and expression, and increased resilience in challenging situations (e.g. Krause, Blackwell & Claridge, 2020; Mann, 2014). Secondly, increased self-concept, demonstrated through self-esteem and confidence, including self-efficacy in their competence (e.g. Barker, 2017; Edwards, 2016). Also, better quality and increased number of friendships and relationships with family members and teaching staff (e.g. Balampanidou, 2020; Mann & Russell, 2011). Finally, more developed social and communication skills, such as conflict management (e.g. Ball, 2014; Wilding & Claridge, 2016).

Papers have also highlighted factors that facilitate these positive outcomes within the ELSA sessions. These primarily include the quality of the ELSA–child relationship (e.g. Ball, 2014; Hill, O’Hare & Weidberg, 2013), the process of talking and having the space to talk (e.g. Barker, 2017; Krause et al., 2020), and the pupil enjoying the sessions (e.g. McEwen, 2019; Miles, 2015). The most frequently identified and investigated facilitating factor of the ELSA programme in the literature is the ELSA–child relationship. ELSAs report that their role allows them to give advice to participating pupils, teach the emotional literacy skills and strategies, and boost their self-esteem (Ball, 2014; Miles, 2015). ELSA’s report that factors such as giving the pupil one-to-one attention, being flexible and dependable, and highlighting the pupil’s strengths help to facilitate this quality relationship (Ball, 2014; Miles, 2015). Much like the therapeutic alliance that a therapist experiences with their client, the relationship that a child can have with their ELSA can support them to accept praise and consider experimenting with new behaviours (McEwen, 2019). This is underpinned by attachment theory, which proposes that an attuned relationship can act as a secure base to help a child feel secure in their environment and support them to take risks (Bowlby, 1958). In school, this attuned relationship may occur with a ‘key person’, such as an ELSA, who can empower the pupil to engage in risk-taking behaviours such as attempting to build relationships with peers, or taking more challenges within their learning (Bombèr & Hughes, 2013).

However, one notable gap in the ELSA literature is its implementation for specific groups of pupils. The majority of the evaluative studies have described pupils that participate in the ELSA programme as a homogenous group. As Educational Psychologists, it is our responsibility to promote social equity and justice by advocating for children and young people who are disadvantaged by their social group (Schulze, Winter, Woods & Tyldsley, 2019). One population, considered highly vulnerable due to their increased risk of negative outcomes are children who are looked after (CLA). CLA are more likely to underperform in education, enter the criminal justice system and become NEET (not in education, employment or training) than non-CLA (Oakley, Miscampbell & Gregorian, 2018). CLA are also four times more likely than non-CLAto have a diagnosable mental health condition as well as poorer emotional literacy skills (Bazalgette, Rahilly & Trevelyan, 2015; Rees, 2013). Based on the underpinning theories of the ELSA programme, such as the facilitating role of the attuned ELSA–child relationship, CLA may particularly benefit from the ELSA programme as they can find it difficult to form such a relationship with other adults due to disrupted attachments with previous caregivers (Millward, Kennedy, Towlson & Minnis, 2006).

# Aims of the current report

## *Background*

ELSA in Swindon started from a multiagency group focused on mental health in February 2017. ELSA was introduced by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) as an intervention aimed to address specific challenges facing the council and target health and educational outcomes. These included improving placement stability and educational outcomes for children who are looked after (CLA), reducing exclusion rates, reducing referrals to specialist mental health services, improving school attendance and reducing hospital admissions for mental health conditions including incidences of self-harm. In addition, it was hoped that the ELSA programme could also address a range of locally defined outcomes including:

* Improved emotional wellbeing, mental health and resilience of children and young people.
* Earlier identification of children’s emotional wellbeing and mental health needs.
* Timely access to the right support for children with emotional wellbeing and mental health needs.
* Improved parental and professional confidence in being able to respond appropriately to children’s mental health needs and to access additional support when required.

## *Research Aims and Questions*

The findings from the literature review and outcomes outlined above were used to guide the aims of the present research. These aims are threefold; firstly to explore the impact of the ELSA training in Swindon on the confidence of ELSAs. Secondly to explore the impact of ELSA on children and young people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health and thirdly to specifically consider the impact of ELSA on the outcomes of CLA. The research questions identified are as follows:

1. How confident do ELSAs feel about responding to emotional health needs following ELSA training and supervision?
2. What is the impact of ELSA on pupils’ emotional wellbeing and mental health?
3. What is the impact of ELSA on the emotional wellbeing and mental health of CLA?

## *Methodology*

A mixed methods approach was adopted to explore these research questions, comprising of questionnaire and interview methods.

*ELSA Questionnaire*

A qualitative questionnaire (see Appendix A) was devised in order to explore all three research questions. Opportune sampling was used, whereby all fully qualified ELSAs were invited to take part (n=32) in April 2020. Nine questionnaires were returned and these were summarised into key themes.

*Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire*

The SDQ is short behavioural screening questionnaire for children aged 3 to 16. The questionnaire is used to assess children's mental health, and can be completed by children and young people themselves, by their parents or teachers. In order to explore research question two, 81 matched SDQ forms were completed by ELSAs prior to pupils attending ELSA sessions and again at the end of these sessions between September 2018 and December 2019. Data collected was analysed using comparative methods to identify the percentage change in responses prior to and following the ELSA intervention.

*Case Example Interview*

In order to further explore research question 2, all ELSAs who responded to the invitation to complete an ELSA questionnaire were asked if they would be happy to be contacted for a short interview. The first ELSA who responded was selected and a short telephone interview was conducted which explored the impact of ELSA on pupil emotional wellbeing and mental health. This data is presented in the format of a case example.

# Research Findings

This report summarises findings from the ELSA questionnaire, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and telephone interview, in relation to each of the three research questions outlined above. These research questions will be addressed in turn, before key points are summarised and recommendations are suggested.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION 1:** How confident do ELSA’s feel about responding to emotional literacy needs following ELSA training and supervision?

Eight of the nine ELSAs who responded to the ELSA questionnaire reported an increase in their confidence following ELSA training; with one ELSA reporting that, they felt equally confident responding to emotional literacy needs before and after training. Confidence was rated on a Likert scale from zero to ten (where ten was ‘extremely confident’). The mean response for confidence levels **prior to ELSA training** was 5.4 whereas the mean confidence level was 8.1 **following training**, highlighting a considerable increase in self-reported feelings of confidence responding to emotional literacy needs following ELSA training.

Key themes relating to the factors ELSAs felt supported increases in confidence related to both the impact of ELSA training and the impact of ELSA supervision. Each of these themes will be discussed, before ELSAs’ perceptions on the changes they felt could be made to promote their confidence in meeting pupils emotional literacy needs are outlined.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Sub Themes** |
| The impact of ELSA training on confidence | Knowledge and Experience* Previous experience and training
* Increased knowledge and experience

Resources and Strategies * Access to resources and strategies
* A framework for intervention
 |
| The impact of ELSA supervision on confidence | Support and UnderstandingPeer Learning* Sharing resources
* Exchanging ideas
* Joint problem solving
 |

**Theme 1-The impact of ELSA training on confidence**

ELSAs felt more confident to meet pupils emotional literacy needs following training due to developments in their knowledge and experience and access to a wealth of resources and strategies. ELSA training was described by two participants as providing a framework, within which they could apply their existing and developing skills which enabled them to *‘work at a deeper level’.* Responses relating to each subtheme can be summarised as follows:

*Subtheme 1-Knowledge and experience*

* **Previous experience and training:** Responses indicate that ELSAs levels of confidence prior to ELSA training linked to their previous understanding of emotional literacy and levels of relevant experience. Those who had less relevant training and experience scored lower levels of confidence. For example, an ELSA who provided a confidence rating of 3/10 shared: *‘I had been trained in some small ways but not specifically in wellbeing support’*. Whereas ELSAs who had experience working in similar ways previously felt more confident prior to training *‘I was fairly confident before having the ELSA training as I support many children in my role as a learning mentor. I work with children 1:1 and also in group’.* The ELSA who rated their confidence as 8/10 both pre and post training felt as though they came into training with extensive skills and experience: *‘I have been working with young people for many years and had a good amount of skills in my tool box,’*
* **Increased knowledge and experience:** ELSA training was considered to increase confidence through the acquisition of further knowledge and experience. For example, ‘*My knowledge and experience has improved since ELSA training and with increased 1:1 and group support’.* For some, the experience of applying their learning from ELSA training into practice and observing the enjoyment of pupils supported an increase in their confidence: ‘*Working and talking with pupils has given me more confidence as I have seen them enjoying having time to talk’.*

*Subtheme 2-Resources and strategies*

* **Access to resources and strategies:** ELSAs found that training provided them with a toolkit of helpful resources and strategies: *‘Having the ELSA training has given me so many other strategies and resources to help the children that I work with progress.’* One respondent shared that they felt ‘bewildered’ as to which resources to use at first, however found downloading worksheets and resources from the ELSA website supported their confidence by giving them a *‘starting point’* for intervention.
* **A framework for intervention:**These strategies and resources were also described as providing a helpful framework for intervention: ‘*Having the ELSA framework and the resources has aided me to know what I am doing in a more coherent way, which gives you confidence to work with the pupils.*’

**Theme 2-The impact of ELSA supervision on confidence**

Supervision was considered by all ELSAs to support their confidence through the supportive and understanding environment it promotes and by providing opportunities for peer learning. Responses can be summarised in terms of:

*Subtheme 1-Support and understanding*

* Supervision increased ELSAs’ confidence due to the supportive and understanding environment it provided. ELSAs felt supported by the EP leading the supervision sessions: *‘having an Educational Psychologist for help and advice helps me feel confident‘*. In addition, they felt supported by one another: *Supervision is absolutely vital for me because it provides a source of support and understanding outside of the working environment dedicated only to the issues surrounding working with children to improve their emotional wellbeing.’*

*Subtheme 2-Peer Learning*

* **Sharing resources-** ELSAs also felt that supervision provided opportunities for peer learning and found this to be a useful opportunity to share resources For example, *‘In the supervision sessions it has been good to see other people’s resources which they have found useful.’*
* **Exchanging ideas-** Coming together to connect, exchange ideas and experiences was also found to support ELSA’s confidence: *‘It is a great opportunity to see how other schools and individuals do things differently and we can help each other.’*
* **Joint problem-solving-** The solution circle aspect of supervision was also found to support ELSA’s confidence following supervision as this provided opportunities to bring ‘*tricky situations’* to the group to *‘unpick’*. For example, *‘It is also a time to work through your own solutions to issues through discussion.’*

**What could be changed in order to further promote feelings of confidence?**

ELSAs were asked what would need to change in order for them to feel more confident meeting the emotional literacy needs of children and young people. ELSAs’ views of training and supervision were broadly positive and linked to their enjoyment. Several ELSAs shared that did not feel that any changes were required *‘I do not feel that anything needs to change within the existing training or supervision structure’.* ELSAs also felt that they just needed more time to continue learning and developing skills following training in order to feel more confident: *‘Being able to use all areas that the training covered and putting all the strategies into practice.’* However, a range of suggested changes were provided, which can be summarised as follows:

* **Increased depth and detail in training**-ELSAs felt as though they would feel more confident if some of the training sections were more detailed (i.e. bereavement) so that they felt equipped with practical strategies to meet pupils’ needs.
* **Consistency and make up of supervision groups**- Some secondary school ELSAs expressed a preference for being in secondary only groups rather than being mixed with primary school ELSAs. Keeping group members consistent was also considered important in relation to trust which had been established ‘*do not keep changing the groups I feel it is important to feel safe in the ELSA group to share and receive information.’*
* **CPD-** several ELSAs felt they would benefit from opportunities for continued professional development in the form of additional training sessions or annual conferences. For example, *‘Perhaps the option to attend more one-off professional development sessions on specific subjects such as working with children on the autistic spectrum or supporting disruptive children, following completion of the initial ELSA training could be valuable ?’*
* **Online supervision**-Due to the COVID-19 crisis, several ELSAs were unable to access supervision sessions and felt that the opportunity to attend online sessions would be helpful.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION 2:** What is the impact of ELSA on pupils’ emotional wellbeing and mental health?

This section will first present findings from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), before responses from the qualitative ELSA questionnaire are explored in relation to research question 2. Finally, the impact of ELSA on pupils’ emotional wellbeing and mental health will be illustrated within a case example.

### *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire*

In total 81 matched (pre- and post-intervention) ELSA-rated questionnaires were received. The difference between pre and post intervention scores were converted into percentages to explore the direction of travel for answers relating to each individual item of the SDQ *(It is important to note that this method of analysis has low statistical power and should only be seen as an indication of direction of change)*. For example, within the first item in the table below (often complains of headaches) there was a 10% increase in ‘not true’ responses following ELSA involvement, a 10% reduction of respondents answering ‘somewhat true’ and a 2% reduction of respondents answering ‘certainly true’. Highlighted below (in green) is the category with the greatest growth in responses relating to each item.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Emotional Problems Scale** | **Percentage change** |
| Not True | Somewhat True | Certainly True |
| Often complains of headaches | 10% | -10% | -2% |
| Many worries, often seems worried  | 10% | 1% | -2% |
| Often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful  | 19% | -11% | -7% |
| Nervous or clingy in new situations  | 5% | -6% | 1% |
| Many fears easily scared  | 21% | -17% | -4% |

ELSA responses to the SDQ indicate that following ELSA involvement, pupils experienced a reduction in emotional difficulties including; complaining less of headaches, seeming less worried, appearing less unhappy, downhearted or tearful, appearing less nervous or clingy in new situations and feeling less easily scared.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Conduct Problems Scale** | **Percentage change** |
| Not True | Somewhat True | Certainly True |
| Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers  | 9% | -7% | 0% |
| Steals from home, school, or elsewhere  | 5% | -1% | -6% |
| Often fights with other children/ bullies them  | 19% | -7% | -11% |
| Generally obedient | 4% | -14% | 10% |
| Often lies or cheats  | -2% | 2% | -1% |

Following ELSA involvement, responses indicate a reduction in temper tantrums or hot tempers, stealing and fighting. Pupils were also perceived as being more obedient and usually following what adults requested, however, responses indicate that lying and cheating remained somewhat true for pupils following ELSA involvement.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Hyperactivity Scale** | **Percentage change** |
| Not True | Somewhat True | Certainly True |
| Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long | 10% | 1% | -11% |
| Constantly fidgeting or squirming  | 6% | -5% | -1% |
| Easily distracted, concentration wanders  | 6% | -4% | -1% |
| Thinks things out before acting  | -5% | 1% | 4% |
| Sees tasks through to the end, good attention span | -2% | -2% | 5% |

Outcomes relating to hyperactivity were perceived to improve following ELSA involvement. Responses from ELSAs indicate a reduction in pupil restlessness, fidgeting and distraction. Increases were reported in pupil’s ability to think things out before acting and to see tasks through to the end.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Peer Problems Scale** | **Percentage change** |
| Not True | Somewhat True | Certainly True |
| Has at least one good friend  | -7% | 0% | 7% |
| Generally liked by other children  | -2% | -9% | 11% |
| Picked on or bullied by other children  | 14% | -14% | -7% |
| Gets on better with adults than other children  | 2% | -4% | 1% |
| Rather solitary, tends to play alone  | 2% | -4% | 1% |

Outcomes relating to peer problems were perceived to improve following ELSA involvement. More pupils were considered to have at least one good friend and be generally liked by other children. In addition, pupils were considered to be picked on or bullied by other children less, tended to play alone less often and were less likely to get on better with adults than other children following ELSA involvement.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Prosocial Scale** | **Percentage change** |
| Not True | Somewhat True | Certainly True |
| Considerate of other people’s feelings | 1% | -27% | 26% |
| Shares readily with other children | -5% | -14% | 16% |
| Helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill | -6% | -4% | 22% |
| Kind to younger children | 2% | -4% | 4% |
| Often volunteers to help others | 1% | -7% | 6% |

Following ELSA involvement, positive outcomes were reported in relation to each of the prosocial behaviours captured within the SDQ. Pupils were perceived as being more considerate of other people’s feelings, sharing more readily with other children, being more helpful to those who are hurt, upset or ill, more kind to younger children, and volunteering their help to others more often.

In summary, the findings from the SDQ reflect a range of positive outcomes relating to children and young people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health from the perspective of ELSAs following ELSA involvement. These included a reduction in a range of emotional, conduct, hyperactive and peer problems and an increase in prosocial behaviours.

### *ELSA Research Questionnaire*

This next section, reports findings from the ELSA research questionnaire in relation to the impact of ELSA on children and young peoples emotional wellbeing and mental health. The majority of respondents felt as though ELSA sessions had contributed toward positive outcomes of pupils. For example, one ELSA commented: *‘The children I have worked with have all made some improvements in their own wellbeing and attitude towards learning.*’ In addition many ELSAs commented on the enjoyment pupils experienced in their sessions ‘*All of the students I have seen so far have enjoyed the sessions and gave positive feedback. They have learnt to celebrate strengths and identify emotions.’*

Positive outcomes were highlighted for individual pupils in a number of areas including:

* **Emotional literacy and regulation** – such as improved self-awareness, ability to identify emotions, communicate feelings to others, improved behaviour and the development of strategies to manage anxiety.
* **Social skills**- including improvements in social interaction, making, and keeping friends.
* **Engagement in learning**- including improved attention and concentration, improved attitudes towards learning, increases in attainment, improved school attendance and enjoyment of school.
* **Wellbeing-** including increased confidence and self-esteem.

ThreeELSAs also commented on the wider impact of ELSA in their settings, for example, ***‘****The wider implications of having ELSAs in school, have extended to the provision of a dedicated room and resources for work surrounding emotional wellbeing. There has been a marked change in broad awareness within school amongst both staff and pupils regarding the nature and value of this work which I believe further enhances the potential for the positive impact of the sessions’.*

ELSAs were asked what had worked well to support positive outcomes. Responses can be summarised in terms of:

* **Giving pupils time**- for example, *‘Being able to give the student the time they need to work or just talk through their thoughts and feeling, not sending them into class if they just need the space to work through their worries’.*
* **Availability and Consistency-** for example, *‘Consistency and continuity have been vital, regular reliable time slots which have been sustained sends the message that the work and their needs have value and that the support on offer is authentic and the ELSA to be trusted.’*
* **Designated space for ELSA sessions-**for example, *‘Having a designated and safe space for the work has also been vital in facilitating the necessary trust to develop and marked the expectations within that environment as being special and somewhat different from those in the wider school’.*
* **Specific strategies and resources-** including ‘now and next’, brain breaks, tranquillity rooms, time to talk, social skills groups, the firework anger model, and colour monsters.
* **Support and understanding of colleagues-** for example, *‘The team I work in supports me and the understanding that if a child is in an emotional state there is no point just sending them to class and letting them cope’.*
* **Systemic understanding of ELSA-** for example, ‘*I have found significantly better results with children whose class teachers and class TAs have understood and been receptive to the work. Sharing some of the guiding objectives and principles behind the ELSA work in staff meetings was useful in promoting and changing awareness.’*

ELSAs were also asked what would help them to further support the development of positive outcomes for pupils accessing ELSA sessions. Suggested changes are summarised below:

* **Increased access to resources-**ELSAs felt that increased access to resources would further support positive outcomes. Suggestions included access to a resource portal and a video of an ELSA session.
* **Role definition and support**- For those who were working as an ELSA alongside another role they felt that *‘separating the role of teacher/TA from the ELSA role’* would be beneficial. They also felt that working alongside another trained ELSA would support positive pupil outcomes as they could work together to balance these multiple demands and priorities.
* **Systemic Working-**ELSAs felt that having opportunities to apply the ELSA principles and interventions systemically in schools would support positive outcomes more broadly. For example, ‘*whole class activities give feelings a visible place and importance in school which I feel supports effective learning.’*
* **Creating systemic understanding-** ELSAs also felt that increasing the understanding of other school staff regarding the importance of emotional literacy would lead to increased positive pupil outcomes. Suggestions included for the EPS to visit schools to provide an overview of ELSA or deliver training to staff.

### *Case Example*

The impact of ELSA on pupils’ emotional wellbeing and mental health is further illustrated by this case example:

Case Example

1. **When did you do the ELSA training?**

*January 2019*

1. **What was your experience of supporting children with SEMH needs before the ELSA training?**

*I seem to have always worked with children who were having difficulties at school. I have a passion for working with young people. I have now started a Diploma in Counselling.*

1. **What were the needs of the pupil who you have chosen for the case example?**

*The pupil was a boy in Year 4. He had violent outbursts, usually in the playground. He had difficulties with concentration and focus and would be disruptive and disturb other children in the class. This led to him having difficulty building relationships with peers.*

1. **How did you choose this pupil? Did you use any of the ELSA resources for this?**

*‘He chose me!’ He was due to be sent home for hitting a girl at playtime and I just sat with him and started to talk. He then wanted to talk at another time and so the sessions started out like that. My Head Teacher has always been very supportive of me and my role so agreed for me to work with him.*

1. **How many sessions did you plan for this pupil?**

*To start with, we had 6 sessions which were planned. However, this became a very long piece of work and I was with him for 1 year.*

1. **Did you discuss the pupil during your supervision sessions? If so, did you find this helpful?**

*Yes I discussed him and got some lovely ideas to work with him. We hypothesised that he likes being creative and he loved going into the outside space at school and the garden. The other ELSAs offered suggestions as to how to use art to support him. I found the supervision sessions very validating and felt more confident to let him take the lead on some of the sessions.*

1. **Please give a description of the sessions**

*The initial goal was to build a safe and trusting relationship with him which took time. He loves drawing and art so this was the basis for building our relationship. We would talk as we drew. He wanted to appear quite confident at school but our sessions indicated that he was very sensitive and quite anxious. We spent a lot of time talking about emotions and how to keep calm and/or ask for help if he felt that he was getting anxious or angry. We spent time debriefing about things that had happened during the week and tried different strategies for dealing with different issues.*

1. **What was/were the outcome/s of the ELSA intervention for the pupil?**

*There were many positive outcomes which came about through the ELSA intervention. His communication skills improved and he was able to say how he felt to adults at school. His relationships with staff and peers also improved. One relationship that had been very negative became much more positive so there were less incidents of having difficulties at playtime. As he became more calm, his ability to focus and work independently improved. He also started to notice himself if he was beginning to feel anxious or angry and he was able to use strategies to help him to stay calm*.

1. **Who noticed these outcomes?**

Staff members and class teacher. His behaviour improved which was a very positive outcome for his teacher and the class. His mum also noticed and was able to see that this intervention was having a positive effect on him.

1. **Were there any unexpected outcomes for this pupil?**

His mum became more relaxed and trusting of our relationship and started to come into school in a relaxed way. She had previously had a negative relationship with school and staff and was like a ‘coiled spring’. She started to engage with staff members and this then impacted positively on him and made him more happy and settled.

1. **How would you rate the success of the ELSA sessions?**

Absolutely transformational! I loved doing this work and it felt so rewarding to see the positive changes that were occurring in this young man. I believe that the ELSA sessions made a significant difference to him and to his mum also. He has now joined an art club and so is socialising with peers in a very different way.

1. **Would you have done anything differently?**

I may have been more confident from the start that my approach was going to be positive. I knew that I wanted to build a rapport and relationship with him but the ELSA training gave me the ‘permission’ to trust myself and my instincts, safe in the knowledge that I had the support of EPs if things became tricky.

1. **In your opinion, how much of this success can be attributed to the ELSA training?**

Most of this success can be attributed to the ELSA training. Although I had an interest in supporting young people with SEMH, the ELSA training helped to put it in a psychological context and allowed me to work in a structured and professional way and to really understand the background theories relating to how important it is to support emotional literacy.

1. **Any other comments?**

It would be good to have a parents ELSA training so that they can benefit from how fantastic the training was and to learn about their children and how important emotional literacy is.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION 3:** What is the impact of ELSA on the emotional wellbeing and mental health of CLA?

Four of the nine ELSAs who completed the ELSA questionnaires had worked with a child who is looked after (CLA) and shared their perceptions of the impact of ELSA on the emotional wellbeing and mental health of the pupils they had worked with. A brief summary of this information is provided below:

Positive outcomes were highlighted in a number of areas including:

* **Social relationships** (i.e. the development of trust between ELSA and pupil).
* **Emotional regulation** (i.e. appearing calmer).
* **Increased wellbeing** (i.e. including increased resilience and confidence).
* **Educational outcomes** (i.e. improved attention and concentration).

Aspects of the ELSA programme that were perceived as contributing toward these positive outcomes included; the individualised nature of ELSA interventions, the frequency of sessions providing time for pupils to feel comfortable sharing information and the provision of ELSA supervision. Changes which ELSAs felt could be made to further support the development of positive outcomes for CLA included, improving information sharing between schools and providing further training for wider school staff so that the importance of ELSA is understood systemically.

# Summary and key learning points

This report aimed to explore the impact of the ELSA programme in Swindon. Three key areas were identified, firstly to explore the impact of the ELSA training in Swindon on the confidence of ELSAs. Secondly, to explore the impact of ELSA on children and young peoples emotional wellbeing and mental health. Finally, to specifically consider the impact of ELSA on the outcomes of CLA. Questionnaires and an interview methods were used to explore three research questions. Summaries of key findings relating to each research question are summarised below:

Summary of RQ1-***How confident do ELSAs feel about responding to emotional health needs following ELSA training and supervision?***

The information gathered suggests that the ELSA programme positively affects ELSAs confidence to meet the emotional literacy needs of children and young people. Both ELSA training and ELSA supervision provided by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) were considered to support feelings of confidence in this area. ELSA training was felt to provide ELSAs with increased knowledge and experience alongside useful resources and strategies. ELSA supervision provided opportunities for peer learning within a supportive and understanding environment.

Summary of RQ2-***What is the impact of ELSA on pupils’ emotional wellbeing and mental health?***

The ELSA programme was considered to lead to positive outcomes for both individual pupils and school systems more broadly. At the individual pupil level, data from the SDQ indicate a range of positive outcomes relating to children and young people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health following ELSA involvement. This included a reduction in a range of emotional, conduct, hyperactive and peer problems and an increase in prosocial behaviours. Data from ELSA questionnaires highlights positive changes to pupil’s emotional literacy and regulation, social skills, engagement in learning and wellbeing. The impact of the ELSA programme in Swindon on children and young people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health was further illustrated within the case example, which highlights positive outcomes related to communication skills, relationships with peers and staff and emotional regulation.

Positive outcomes relating to school systems more broadly included the establishment of dedicated emotional literacy spaces and resources, and an increase in staff awareness relating to the importance of emotional literacy. Such changes have the potential to create cultural shifts within schools toward promoting wellbeing and mental health systemically, reaching more pupils than those seen within dedicated ELSA sessions.

Summary of RQ3-***What is the impact of ELSA on the emotional wellbeing and mental health of CLA?***

ELSAs reported a range of positive outcomes relating to the emotional wellbeing and mental health of CLA including enhanced social relationships, improvements in emotional regulation, increased resilience, confidence and improved attention and concentration.

*Recommendations*

Based upon the above, the following recommendations are suggested:

* ELSA training was positively received by ELSAs suggesting that few amendments are required to training delivery.
* Supervision is also viewed overwhelmingly positively received by ELSAs suggesting that this should continue to be provided by the EPS in its current format. ELSAs proposed that holding secondary-specific supervision groups would be preferable and this practice has now been established in Swindon. Where possible ELSA supervision groups should remain consistent for the course of each year to provide opportunities for relationships between group members to be established. If required, virtual supervision sessions should be available during circumstances whereby face-to-face sessions are not possible. Virtual supervision sessions have now been established in Swindon and are being delivered through Microsoft Teams.
* It may be beneficial for the EPS to offer ELSAs further information regarding strategies to support specific areas of need and greater opportunities to share resources with other ELSAs. One format in which this could be offered is by the EPS providing ‘top-up’ training to trained ELSAs relating to key themes such as ‘loss and bereavement’. Top up training is currently being established within Swindon.
* The EPS may consider facilitating an online area in which ELSAs can share resources with each other. Consideration will need to be paid to the EPS role in maintaining such an area.
* It is also considered important to seek the views of children and young people accessing ELSA intervention.

# References

Balampanidou, K. (2019). *Emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme: Child-centred approach, building trust, listening and valuing children’s voices: A grounded theory analysis* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Essex & Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. <https://repository.essex.ac.uk/26204/1/ThesisFINALKB.pdf>

Ball, L. (2014). *How does the ELSA–child relationship support children’s emotional wellbeing and academic progress?* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University College London.

Barker, H. (2017). *The emotional literacy support assistant intervention: An exploration from the perspectives of pupils and parents* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Newcastle University. [https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/bitstream/10443/3923/1/Barker,%20H%202017.pdf](https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/bitstream/10443/3923/1/Barker%2C%20H%202017.pdf)

Bazalgette, L., Rahilly, T., & Trevelyan, G. (2015). *Achieving emotional wellbeing for looked after children*. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/Blog_reports/achieving-emotional-wellbeing-for-looked-after-children.pdf>

Bombèr, L., & Hughes, D. (2013). *Settling troubled pupils to learn: Why relationships matter.* Worth Publishing Ltd.

Bowlby, J. (1958). The nature of the child’s tie to his mother. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 39*, 350–371.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Edwards, L. (2016). *The emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme evaluation report.*<https://www.elsanetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Cheshire-West-Chester-Evaluation-Report-Sept-2016.pdf>

Hill, T., O’Hare, D., & Weidberg, F. (2013). *“He’s always there when I need him”: Exploring the perceived positive impact of the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme.*<https://www.elsanetwork.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/11/FinalElsaReport_Wiltshire.pdf>

Kazdin, A. (2007). Mediators and mechanisms of change in psychotherapy research. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, *3*(1), 1–27. doi: 10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.3.022806.091432

Krause, N., Blackwell, L., & Claridge, S. (2020). An exploration of the impact of the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme on wellbeing from the perspective of pupils. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 36*(1), 17–31. doi: 10.1080/02667363.2019.1657801

Mann, D. (2014). *A mixed methods evaluation of the emotional literacy support assistants (ELSA) project*[Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Nottingham. <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/14245/4/Research_Thesis_Final_1.5%20%282%29.pdf>

Mann, F., & Russell, C. (2011). *The impact of ELSA interventions on children and young people.* <https://www.elsanetwork.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/11/ELSAInterventionsImpact_Dorset.pdf>

McEwen, S. (2019). The emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme: ELSAs’ and children’s experiences. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 35*(3), 289–306. doi: 10.1080/02667363.2019.1585332

Miles, N. (2015). *An exploration of the perceptions of emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs) of the ELSA–pupil relationship* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Cardiff University. <https://orca.cf.ac.uk/75614/16/NMiles.pdf>

Millward, R., Kennedy, E., Towlson, K., & Minnis, H. (2006). Reactive attachment disorder in looked‐after children. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *11*(4), 273–279. doi: 10.1080/13632750601022212

Miles, N. (2015). *An exploration of the perceptions of emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs) of the ELSA–pupil relationship* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Cardiff University. <https://orca.cf.ac.uk/75614/16/NMiles.pdf>

Oakley, M., Miscampell, G., & Gregorian, R. (2018). *Looked-after children: The silent risis.* The Social Market Foundation. <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Silent-Crisis-PDF.pdf>

Pickering, L., Lambeth, J., & Woodcock, C. (2019). The emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme: Can you develop an evidence base for an adaptive intervention? *DECP Debate 170*, 17–22.

Rees, P. (2012). The mental health, emotional literacy, cognitive ability, literacy attainment and ‘resilience’ of ‘looked after children’: A multidimensional, multiple-rater population based study. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *52*(2), 183–198. doi: 10.1111/bjc.12008

Schulze, J., Winter, L., Woods, K., & Tyldsley, K. (2018). An international social justice agenda in school psychology? Exploring educational psychologists’ social justice interest and practice in England. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, *29*(4), 377–400. doi: 10.1080/10474412.2018.1531765

Wilding, L., & Claridge, S. (2016). The emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme: Parental perceptions of its impact in school and at home. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 32*(2), 180–196. doi: 10.1080/02667363.2016.1146573

# Appendix A- Example ELSA Research Questionnaire



**ELSA Research Questionnaire**

Name: School:

Date:

**Section A- Confidence**

1. On a scale of 0-10 where ‘0’ is ‘not at all confident’ and ‘10’ is ‘extremely confident’, how would you rate your confidence supporting pupil’s emotional wellbeing before ELSA training?

 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please provide some details below to help us understand your score:

1. On the same scale, how would you rate your confidence supporting pupil’s emotional wellbeing since you completed ELSA training?

 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please provide some details to help us understand your score:

1. What do you feel would need to change in order for your score to move higher up the scale? Or what would help you to feel more confident supporting pupil’s emotional wellbeing?
2. In what ways (if any) does ELSA supervision impact upon your confidence supporting pupil’s emotional wellbeing?
3. Are there any ways you feel the ELSA training or supervision sessions could be improved in order to increase your confidence supporting pupil’s emotional wellbeing?

**Section B- Pupil Outcomes**

1. Do you feel that working as an ELSA helped to support improved outcomes for pupils accessing ELSA sessions?

Yes No

Please describe further:

1. If Yes-Thinking about pupils who have accessed ELSA sessions, please provide some specific examples of changes you have observed (i.e. in pupils emotional regulation, emotional well-being, resilience, social skills and relationships, behaviour, engagement in learning) following ELSA sessions:

Example outcomes:

What worked well?

What would/could have made this better?

What supported your work with this pupil?

1. Thinking about pupils who have accessed ELSA sessions have you observed any changes to pupil’s educational outcomes (i.e. attendance, school placement stability, improved attainment)?

Yes No

Please describe further

1. What (if anything) do you feel would help you to further support the development of positive outcomes for pupils accessing ELSA sessions?
2. Since becoming an ELSA have you supported a Child Looked After (CLA)?

Yes No

1. If yes- Thinking about CLA pupils who have accessed ELSA sessions, please provide some specific examples of changes you have observed (i.e. in pupils emotional regulation, emotional well-being, resilience, social skills and relationships, behaviour, engagement in learning) following ELSA sessions:

Example outcomes:

What worked well?

What would/cold have made this better?

What supported your work with this pupil?

1. Thinking about CLA pupils who have accessed ELSA sessions have you observed any changes to pupil’s educational outcomes (i.e. attendance, school placement stability, improved attainment)?

Yes No

Please describe further

1. What (if anything) do you feel would help you to further support the development of positive outcomes for CLA accessing ELSA sessions?
2. Is there anything you would like to add?

**Thank you for your time!**