



Evidence-Based Intervention: Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA)

Introduction

The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme was developed by Sheila Burton. It was designed to build the capacity of schools to support the emotional needs of their pupils, from within their own settings and with their own resources.

Purpose of Intervention

ELSAs are trained to provide emotional literacy support and interventions to children and young people in schools. This includes support in the following areas:

- Understanding emotions in themselves and others.
- Communicating emotions.
- Regulating emotions and coping strategies.
- Self-esteem.
- Interaction and friendship skills.
- Bereavement and loss.

Target Audience

ELSA is appropriate for children and young people who have emotional literacy needs, and who require targeted intervention in this area. Children and young people with more significant emotional wellbeing needs may be more suited to specialist or intensive input from external professionals, for example Mental Health services.

Who Can Deliver the Intervention

ELSAs are usually teaching assistants or learning support assistants. They need to have high levels of empathy and also be interested in building supportive relationships with children and young people experiencing emotional difficulties. To deliver ELSA interventions, staff must have attended 6 days of ELSA training, run by an Educational Psychology service. ELSAs must also attend ongoing group supervision with an Educational Psychologist (EP) at least 4 times per year.

Session Structure

Sessions should be based around outcomes identified from observation and assessment, provided as part of the referral for ELSA involvement. The structure of ELSA sessions will vary depending on the age and needs of the child or young person, and the skills being developed.

Sessions may involve:

- Games to build positive relationships and practice skills.
- Creative activities such as drawing or crafts.
- Small group activities.
- Worksheets.
- Reading or creating therapeutic stories.

Frequency and Duration

This will vary between contexts. Typically sessions will be weekly, for at least 30 minutes. ELSA is usually delivered for around 6-12 weeks, with progress and impact on outcomes reviewed at this point.



Key Principles

The key principles of ELSA include:

- Recognising that children learn more effectively when they are happier in school, and if their emotional needs are also addressed.
- Being grounded in psychological theory and research.
- Being built on positive and trusting relationships between the ELSA and the pupil.
- Encouraging children and young people to develop coping strategies and problem-solving skills.
- Complementing the broader pastoral care system within schools.
- Being time-limited and outcome-oriented.

Training and Implementation

ELSA training consists of 6 days. The topics covered on each day are as follows:

Day 1 – Raising Emotional Literacy Awareness; Emotional Literacy in Schools.

Day 2 – Building Resilience 1: Borba's Model – Security and Affiliation.

Day 3 – Building Resilience 2: Borba's Model – Selfhood, Competence and Mission.

Day 4 – Emotional Regulation; Social and Friendship Skills.

Day 5 – Loss, Bereavement and Family Break-Up; Therapeutic Stories and Social Stories.

Day 6 – Active Listening and Reflective Conversations; Using Puppets in ELSA Work; Supervision.

Support and commitment from the ELSA's line manager (usually the school SENDCo) is key to successful implementation of ELSA. Support needed includes having a designated space to deliver ELSA, and protected time for planning, delivering sessions and supervision.

Evidence and Outcomes

A [research project completed in Suffolk](#) suggested that implementing ELSA in schools can have the following impacts:

- ELSA can support children and young people in developing their identity, feeling valued, and learning a range of emotional literacy skills. Some benefits were also noted for transitions and school attendance.
- Many ELSAs spoke very positively about being valued in their role and enjoying being an ELSA. It provided continuous learning opportunities, although time and other pressures of the role could make it more challenging.
- Findings suggested that ELSAs could work as part of a wider school team, which supported the emotional literacy understanding of other school members. Some ELSAs were able to contribute to a positive whole school approach to emotional literacy, which was felt to further improve the outcomes of ELSA.

Grahamslaw (2010) completed a research study which suggested that ELSA can positively influence children's emotional self-efficacy (belief in their own ability to recognise, understand, express and manage their emotions).

Wong et al. (2010) suggests that children who experienced ELSA valued having a positive therapeutic relationship with the ELSA and being taught individualised coping strategies. There was found to be a positive impact of ELSA from the child perspective.

Robertson (2021) suggests that developing emotional literacy can support the social and emotional development of children and young people, including wellbeing, mental health, positive self-view, academic outcomes and learning capacity. More specifically, it was found that ELSA can support positive change in the wider school, and that school readiness, the community of ELSAs and development of relationships were important factors in this change.



Feedback from ELSAs

"The ELSA training equipped me with the confidence to support children and young people in acknowledging their feelings, which has developed my skills when planning and delivering effective interventions."

"I have seen particular impact in areas such as anxiety, emotional regulation and attendance."

"ELSA has impacted on staff knowledge, for example when I feedback information and ideas to support the child out of ELSA time."

Further Information and Resources

- Emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) training - Suffolk County Council
- Resources for Emotional Literacy Support Assistants - ELSA Support
- ELSA Network – Emotional Literacy Support Assistants
- Emotional Wellbeing: An Introductory Handbook for ELSAs and Pastoral Support Staff by Gillian Shotton and Sheila Burton
- Excellent ELSAs: Top Tips for Emotional Literacy Support Assistants by Sheila Burton
- Grahamslaw, L. (2010). An evaluation of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) project: what is the impact of an ELSA project on support assistants' and children's self-efficacy beliefs (Doctoral dissertation, Newcastle University).
- Robertson, H. E. (2021). Can Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) interventions support positive change in the wider school? (Doctoral dissertation, Newcastle University).
- Wong, B., Cripps, D., White, H., Young, L., Kovshoff, H., Pinkard, H., & Woodcock, C. (2020). Primary school children's perspectives and experiences of Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) support. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 36(3), 313–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2020.1781064>