SPOKES

Key Conclusions

1. There is no evidence that SPOKES had an effect on the standardised reading outcomes or the social and emotional outcomes of the participating children, overall.

2. However, the follow up results for attainment suggest that SPOKES had a positive impact on some aspects of reading for boys over the longer term, equivalent to between three and seven months of additional progress.

3. Parents who participated in the SPOKES programme were very positive about it and believed that their children’s literacy was enhanced from their participation.

4. Factors that may have contributed to the lack of overall impact include a low attendance rate and a sample that included children of higher ability than the programme was designed for.

5. In addition to the pre-agreed analysis, the evaluation team also assessed the impact of SPOKES on Key Stage 1 scores for the subgroup of pupils who had reached KS1. This analysis is promising and the positive results warrant future research and further analysis of all the participants at the end KS1.

What is the impact?

In this efficacy trial there was no evidence, for the intervention group as a whole, that SPOKES had an impact on the outcomes specified in the trial protocol at post-test or at six- and twelve-month follow-up. A positive effect for SPOKES was found on KS1 teacher-based literacy measures; these, however, were not pre-specified as outcome measures.

Analysis of the results for boys only shows that, compared to other boys, those whose parents took part in SPOKES experienced about three months of additional progress on word identification and phonetic awareness at the six-month follow-up, and about seven months of additional progress on phonetic awareness at the twelve-month follow-up. In each case, the positive result would be unlikely to have occurred by chance. The positive results are not conclusive because follow-up results were not available for all boys in the trial, and because positive results were not found for all of the three outcome measures. However, given that SPOKES is intended to have an impact on pupil attainment by changing parental behaviour, some positive results at both follow-up points suggests that SPOKES may have improved aspects of reading for boys over the longer term. For children eligible for free school meals there was no evidence that SPOKES had an impact on literacy or social and emotional outcomes.

The average attendance rate indicated that only 57% of the parents participated in five or more of the ten sessions, which was judged by the development team to be the level of attendance required to be considered a ‘completer’ of the SPOKES programme. This low attendance rate might have contributed to the fact that there was no evidence of impact on the overall group.

The process evaluation indicated that most of the intervention parents who were interviewed reported liking and benefiting from their participation in the SPOKES programme. At both immediate post-test and subsequent follow-ups they believed that it improved their children’s reading. The table below gives the average effect size and estimated months’ progress at post-test across the three primary outcome measures compared to the control group.

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How secure is the finding?

These findings have moderate security. The study was a large, well-designed, two-armed randomised controlled trial with randomisation at the pupil level. The trial was classified as an efficacy trial, meaning that it sought to test whether the intervention can work under ideal or developer-led conditions. For the pupils included in the analysis, those whose parents were allocated to receive the intervention were observed to be similar to the pupils in the comparison group. However, 22% of the pupils were not included in the final analysis because they did not complete all the tests at the beginning and end of the trial. This is considered to be a relatively high level of attrition and reduces our ability to be sure that the testing is an accurate reflection of all the pupils in the sample.

How much does it cost?

The cost for the programme implementation in this study was approximately £804 per place, which could be considered per child, per parent, or per family. These costs are predominantly staff costs to implement the weekly SPOKES sessions.

EEF commentary

The EEF tested SPOKES, a programme designed to provide parents with specific skills which can help to support their children’s learning. We funded this because although we know parental involvement is associated with improved children’s learning, there is very little good evidence about exactly what type of parental engagement schools should do.

Our evaluation of SPOKES did not show any overall improvement in the short to medium term for children whose parents attended the programme.

While the report was being written, the older children from the trial reached the end of Key Stage 1 (KS1) and sat national tests. The evaluators examined whether, among these children, KS1 test scores were better for those whose parents had participated in SPOKES, and they found a sizable positive impact. Because this result is only for a subgroup of the children involved, it is not conclusive. However, it might indicate that SPOKES has an impact on wider literacy measures, such as KS1 scores, which is only seen in the medium to longer term, because the programme works with parents rather than directly with children. The current study also reveals some positive but not conclusive results for boys.

For these reasons we think the programme is promising and we will repeat the KS1 test for all the children in the trial, once they have sat the national test. Results should be available by 2017 and will show whether the positive Key Stage 1 finding holds for all children in the trial. In the meantime, a number of other EEF studies will be reporting which look at parental involvement.