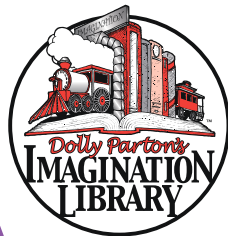


The Great Eight: Delivering literacy programmes from birth to eight years in Tallaght and beyond



Any citation of this report should use the following reference:

Scott, T., Reilly, E., and Shumba, J. (2021). *The Great Eight: Delivering literacy programmes from birth to eight years in Tallaght and beyond*. Dublin: Childhood Development Initiative

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Childhood Development Initiative Literacy Interventions	6
1 From Birth to Five Years...Dolly Parton's Imagination Library	7
Outcomes	8
Number of books in the home	8
Number of days per week a child is read to	9
Early Home Learning Environment	10
Number of books in the home and HLE in 2021	10
Parents' Education and HLE score	11
Key learning	12
2 From Five to Six Years...Doodle Den	13
Outcomes	15
Phonemic Awareness	15
Sight Vocabulary	15
Social Skills	15
Writing Skills	16
Key learning	16
3 From Seven to Eight Years...Doodle Families	19
Outcomes	20
Evaluation Findings	21
Key learning	22
Conclusion	23
References	25

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Number of books in the home in 2020 vs 2021.....	9
Figure 2: Number of days a child is read to in a week.....	9
Figure 3: Number of days children are read to at home.....	10
Figure 4: Number of books in the home in 2021.....	11
Figure 5: Number of books at home and HLE score.....	11
Figure 6: Parents’ education and HLE score.....	12
Figure 7: Changes in writing skills before and after the programme.....	15
Figure 8: Changes in literacy skills after the Doodle Den programme.....	16
Figure 9: Writing skills before and after the Doodle Den programme.....	16
Figure 10: Reading attitude scores by age.....	21
Figure 11: Elementary reading attitude scores by types of books.....	21





Introduction

The Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) delivers a suite of evidence-based literacy programmes designed to promote positive outcomes for children and families both in Tallaght West and beyond.

CDI works in partnership with communities to design and deliver programmes that reflect the importance of the home learning environment (HLE) and the central role parents play in supporting their children’s early literacy experiences and subsequent formal school experience. Collectively, these programmes – Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, Doodle Den, and Doodle Families – support children from birth to eight years old.

This document celebrates the success of our literacy programmes and shares our experience of implementing and monitoring high-quality services. Educational disadvantage is a persistent cause for concern locally, nationally, and internationally, and addressing this continues to be cited as a major priority within education policy in Ireland. We believe that our literacy model can be replicated in any community in Ireland and has the potential to address educational disadvantage and improve outcomes for families and children everywhere.

Childhood Development Initiative Literacy Interventions

CDI is largely funded by Tusla under the government’s Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, which builds on the learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP), for which CDI was one of three demonstration sites. The ABC Programme aims to break the cycle of child poverty in areas where it is most deeply established and to improve outcomes for children where these are currently significantly poorer than in other parts of Ireland.

Since 2007, CDI has been working in Tallaght, responding to locally identified concerns, developing and sourcing solutions, and supporting our partners to deliver, monitor, and evaluate interventions. Increasingly, we work beyond Tallaght, utilising the expertise developed over the last number of years to enable other communities to also improve outcomes.



1

From Birth to Five Years...
Dolly Parton's Imagination
Library



CDI brought Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) to Ireland in 2019. This global book-gifting project encourages children's love and enjoyment of reading. It was chosen as an evidence-informed mechanism to encourage and support local children's love of reading while also enabling CDI to engage with more young families in the Dublin 24 area.

Several characteristics make DPIL, as delivered by CDI, unique among children's reading programmes:

- The focus is on preschool-age children, from birth to five years.
- It is available to every child, regardless of socio-economic status, helping families create home libraries.
- It promotes parental and caregiver engagement by communicating with them regularly with value-added activities such as top tips on raising readers as well as informing them of other initiatives and services within the community.
- We draw on local community stakeholders to support engagement in the Imagination Library.

'My daughter loves her books. She even knows when there is a new month! She looks at the calendar.'

'This wonderful initiative is making a massive difference in our children's lives; it fuels their imaginations and brings the family together in a fun and engaging way. Every month there is great excitement in the house when the new books arrive. Thank you! Thank you!! Thank you!!!'

In May 2021, just into the third year of DPIL delivery, 72% of all 0- to 5-year-olds in Dublin 24 – an area where just under half of children live in disadvantaged or very disadvantaged areas (Haase & Pratschke, 2016) – had been enrolled in the programme and received over 137,000 books.

As an Irish affiliate of the Imagination Library, CDI drives enrolment and coordinates literacy and family activities that add value to having books in the home, through regular contact with parents, providing tips and supports relating to child development, and supporting the home learning environment (HLE). CDI also connects parents to other resources within the community, such as events in the library, with participation in DPIL becoming the starting point of further positive engagement for families with CDI and the local services (CDI, 2020).

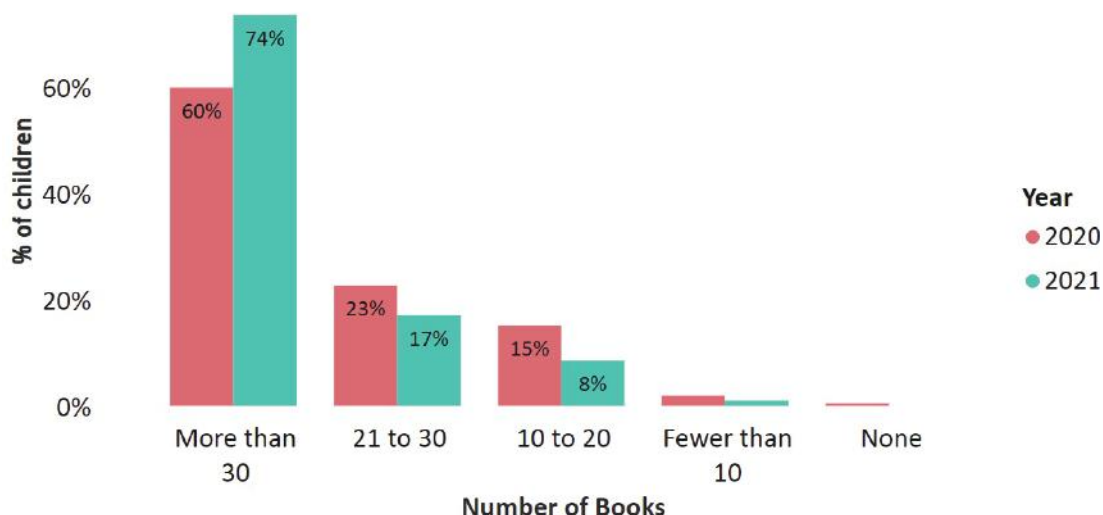
Outcomes

As a part of our monitoring and evaluation process, CDI collects information from parents who have enrolled their children in the Imagination Library. Monitoring allows us to track and record our work, whilst evaluating it tells us how well it is working. To date we have collected information at three time points (2019, 2020 and 2021) through online surveys. A summary of these findings is reported below.

Number of books in the home

There were 297 responses to the parent survey in 2019, 686 responses in 2020 and 1057 responses in 2021. We followed 212 children in both the 2020 and 2021 surveys. More than 74% of children had more than 30 books in 2021, compared to just over 60% the previous year. The proportion of children with at least 30 books in the home for children signed up for DPIL is higher compared to the national norm in Ireland. The Growing Up in Ireland report (2019) established that 62% of 9-year-old children have at least 30 books in the home. The figure below compares the number of books at home between 2020 and 2021 for children registered for DPIL.

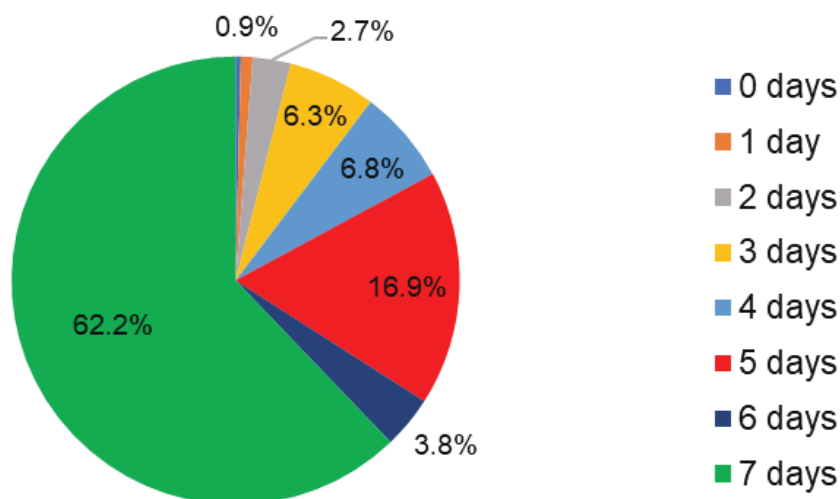
Fig 1: Number of books in the home in 2020 vs 2021



Number of days per week a child is read to

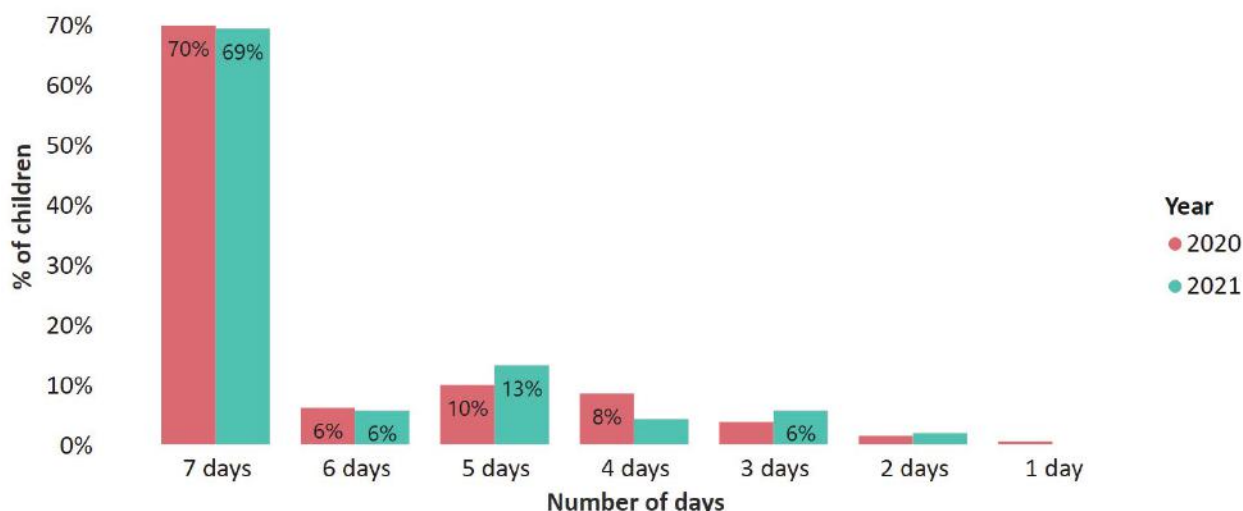
In 2021, 62% of the 1057 respondents reported reading seven days a week to their child, 21% reported reading five to six days, 13% reported reading between three and four days per week, and the remaining 4% read fewer than three days per week to their child.

Fig 2: Number of days a child is read to in a week



The parents of 212 children surveyed in both 2020 and 2021 report a consistently high frequency of reading at both time points. The figure below illustrates that approximately 88% of the children were being read to between 5 and 7 days per week.

Fig 3: Number of days children are read to at home: annual comparison



Early Home Learning Environment

The Home Learning Environment Index (HLEI) is used to assess the quality of the home learning environment for young children, in terms of the activities that take place in the child’s home environment that are known to support and promote their learning. The HLE is an important predictor of children’s academic and social development. The HLEI measures the frequency with which children engage in each of the following activities: (1) being read to, (2) painting and drawing, (3) going to the library, (4) playing with letters or numbers, (5) learning activities with the alphabet, (6) learning activities with numbers or shapes, and (7) playing with songs, poems, or nursery rhymes (CES, 2021) By measuring the quality of the HLE, we can improve our understanding of learning activities in the home which can support children’s development. This data can evidence the impact of the programme and help target value-added activities such as tips and resources to support parents appropriately.

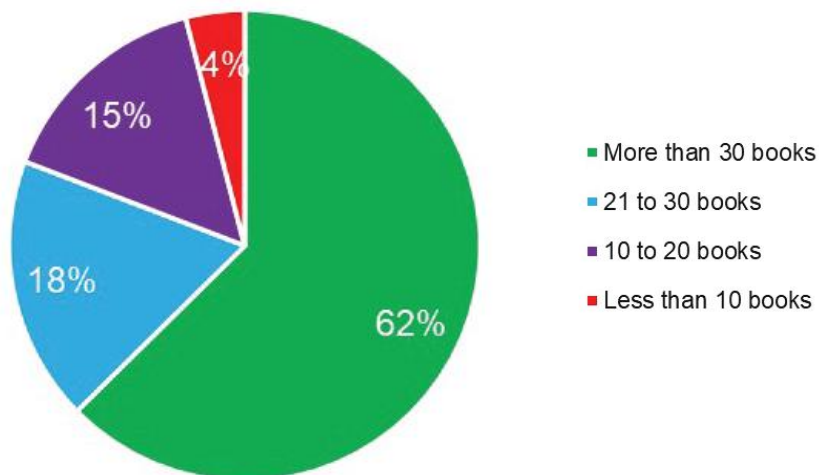
CDI uses an adapted HLEI as a questionnaire to assess the reading and learning activities a child engages in at home in a week. The minimum HLEI score is 0.0 and the maximum score is 49.0. The 2021 annual survey of DPIL parents indicated that the average HLEI score was 39.82. In the sample for the 2020 annual survey of DPIL parents, the average HLEI was 34.00, while in the 2019 sample the average HLEI was 33.50, indicating year-on-year improvements.

We further examined the HLEI for the 212 children who had data in both the 2020 and 2021 surveys to see if their HLE had improved. The HLEI score was 39.20 in 2020 and for the same children it had improved to 41.02 in 2021. This implies that Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library contributed to the improvement of the home learning environment for the cohort of 212 children with whom we followed up.

Number of books in the home and HLE in 2021

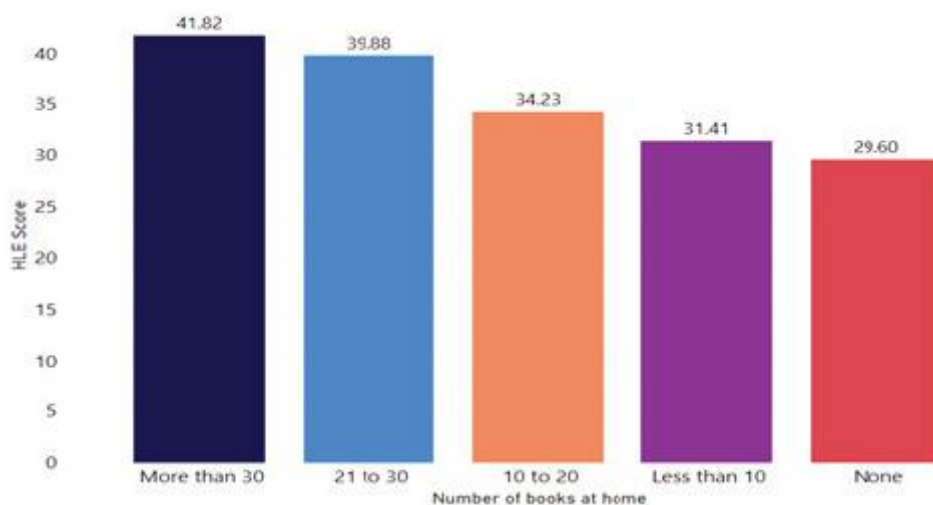
In the 2021 survey, most children had at least 30 books at home, accounting for 62% of the 1057 children. Not many children in 2021 had fewer than 10 reading books at home, and this low number may be reflective of how long they had been part of the library.

Fig 4: Number of books in the home in 2021



We explored how the number of books a child has is related to the HLEI score using the data from 1057 children in the 2021 survey. The HLEI score differed significantly depending on the number of books a child had at home. Children with more than 30 books had a significantly higher HLEI score compared to children who had 21 to 30 books. Therefore, children with more books at home are likely to have a higher HLEI score, with significant differences being experienced when a child has at least 20 books at home. The figure below shows the HLE scores related to the number of books children had at home.

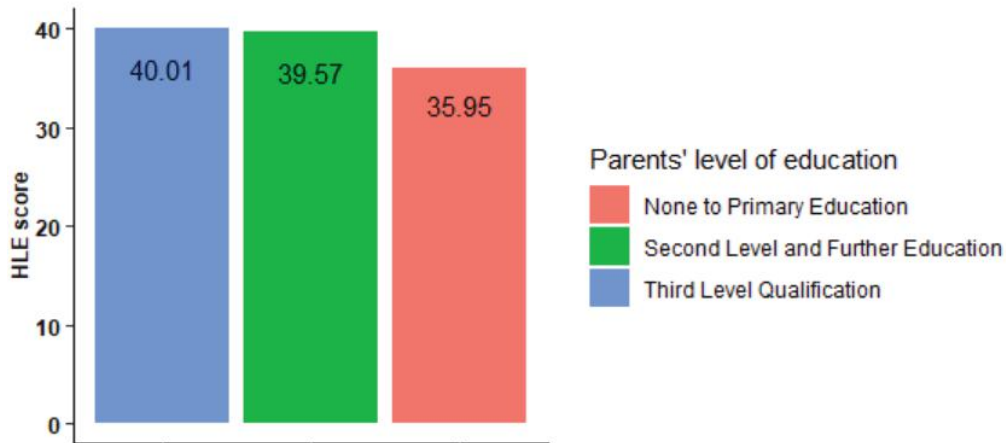
Fig 5: Number of books at home and HLE score



Parents' Education and HLE score

In the sample of 1057 children in the 2021 survey, we observed that parents' education did not significantly affect the HLEI score. Although children of parents who had attained third level education appeared to have a higher HLEI and children of parents who had 'None to Primary' education appeared to have the lowest HLEI, these differences were not statistically significant. This suggests that the HLE was not significantly related to parents' education in this sample.

Fig 6: Parents' education and HLE score



Key learning:

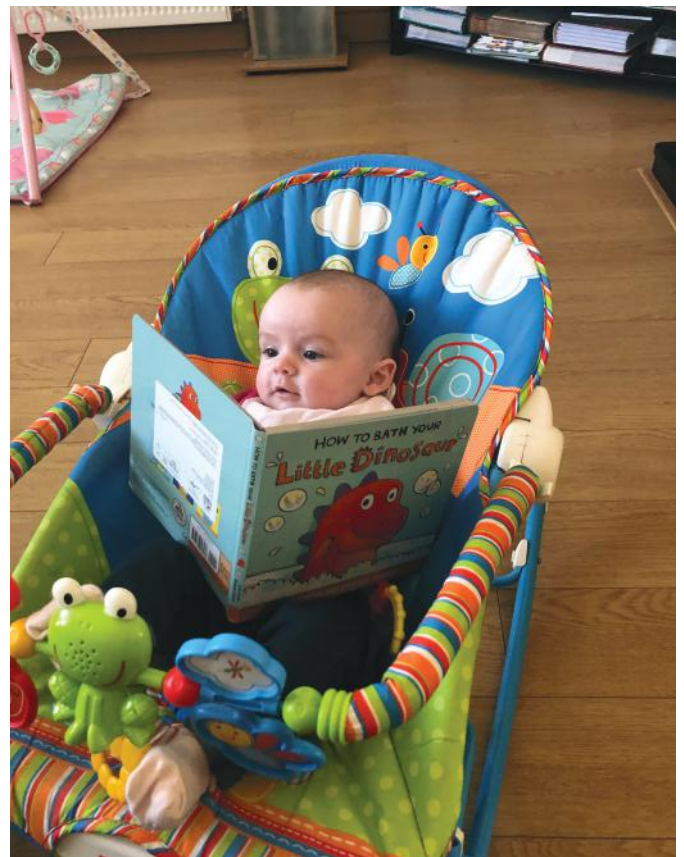
Providing a universal programme reduces the barriers to families engaging with literacy in their homes.

Having more books in the home positively impacts on the HLE score.

Ongoing participation in DPIL correlated with more books in the home.

Having more books in the home correlates with a high incidence of days spent reading to children.

Parental education had little impact on the HLE score.





**From Five to Six Years...
Doodle Den**



Doodle Den is an after-school literacy programme for children in Senior Infants classes. The programme started in 2008 in response to an extensive consultation process in which the community of Tallaght West identified the need to support children's literacy as part of a wider strategy to improve the health, safety, and learning of children and to increase their sense of belonging to their community. Doodle Den has been highly rated internationally and is now listed in the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) Guidebook, <https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/>. In so doing, it became only the second Irish developed intervention to achieve this accreditation!

The programme continues to be delivered to groups of children in Tallaght and Dublin's inner city and has also been delivered in Limerick, Carlow, and Wexford. Doodle Den is distinctive in that it focuses on improving children's literacy through a wide range of activities in an after-school setting. The programme offers a manualised curriculum that is fun and activity-based, incorporating literacy learning opportunities through games, art, drama, and PE activities as well as more traditional approaches to teaching literacy. Children are also served a healthy snack at the start of the sessions.

Participating children attend two after-school sessions per week, each lasting 1.5 hours, throughout the academic year, and children are generally referred by their class teacher. Groups of up to 15 children participate, and each session is facilitated by two staff. One is a primary school teacher and the other has a third-level qualification in social care, youth work, or early childhood care and education.

The programme facilitators participate in training and ongoing support with CDI to enable the effective delivery of the Doodle Den Programme. Meetings are also held with service managers to monitor quality and support.

The programme is delivered in a dedicated Doodle Den space that is located on or near the school campus. The environment should be as different from a school classroom as possible, with bean bags, cushions, and clear floor and wall space available for use. The programme takes place immediately after the school day, which helps ensure good attendance levels.

In addition to the children's sessions, there is also a family component, whereby parents are encouraged to participate in a range of activities, including sitting in on child sessions and sharing reading activities.

Parental involvement is a strong feature of the Doodle Den programme, and six parent sessions are delivered throughout the year. These sessions are structured but informal, and offer parents a range of opportunities, including learning about the work their children are doing and how to reinforce this at home. Parents also learn about other services within their communities such as their local library.

'John talks about how his son loves Doodle Den and how surprised he is that he himself is learning so much, as he had never heard of a tricky word before and that they will now practise their tricky words at home after his son's homework' – Parent

'The time when we went to the library for our visit. Some families had never been before and didn't realise that it was free. To see the parents and children on the floor, looking at pictures and words, putting them into stories... It is priceless, those few moments that can make all the difference in a family's life. And that is what family literacy and engagement is all about. Those precious moments.' – Doodle Den Facilitator

Outcomes

Despite Covid-19, in 2020 – 2021, Doodle Den was delivered to eleven groups of children across Dublin 24, Dublin 1 and Dublin 7 and in Limerick. This was a significant achievement, and testament to the determination of the schools, facilitators, children, and their parents. In the figure below you will see the pre and post evaluation of findings for key outcomes of the programme.

Fig 7: Changes in writing skills before and after the programme (2020-2021)

Changes in children's literacy skills before and after the programme				
Literacy Skill	Number of Children	Pre-programme score (SD) ¹	Post-programme score	Average change
Phonics	95	17.64 (6.27)	24.44 (2.44)	6.8 (5.59) ↑
Sight Vocabulary	114	15.80 (16.40)	46.24 (18.18)	30.42 (17.0) ↑
Social Skills	115	15.4 (3.59)	20.50 (3.86)	5.10 (3.67) ↑

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. This is an important skill to develop before a child can learn to read. 93% of children improved their phonics scores, 5% of children's phonics scores did not change, and 2% of the children experienced a negative change on their phonic scores after the programme as shown by the figure above.

Sight Vocabulary

Sight vocabulary or sight words are the words that occur most frequently in printed English. There are approximately 200 of these words, and of these, the first 100 make up 50% of all printed material that any reader will encounter in books. Children need to learn these words to support their oral reading fluency.

98% of children improved their sight vocabulary, with one child staying the same and one child disimproving after the programme.

Social Skills

Improvement in social skills was demonstrated by 90% of children, while 5 of children were found to have no change or negative change, respectively. This could possibly be attributed to attendance or challenges the children may have experienced during the programme year that were external to the programme.

¹ Standard Deviation is a quantity expressing by how much the members of a group differ from the mean value for the group.

Fig 8: Changes in literacy skills on completion of the Doodle Den Programme



After the Doodle Den programme, 93% of children had improved their phonemic awareness, 5% had no change and 2% of children had a negative change to their phonemic awareness



After the Doodle Den programme, 98% of children had improved their sight vocabulary.

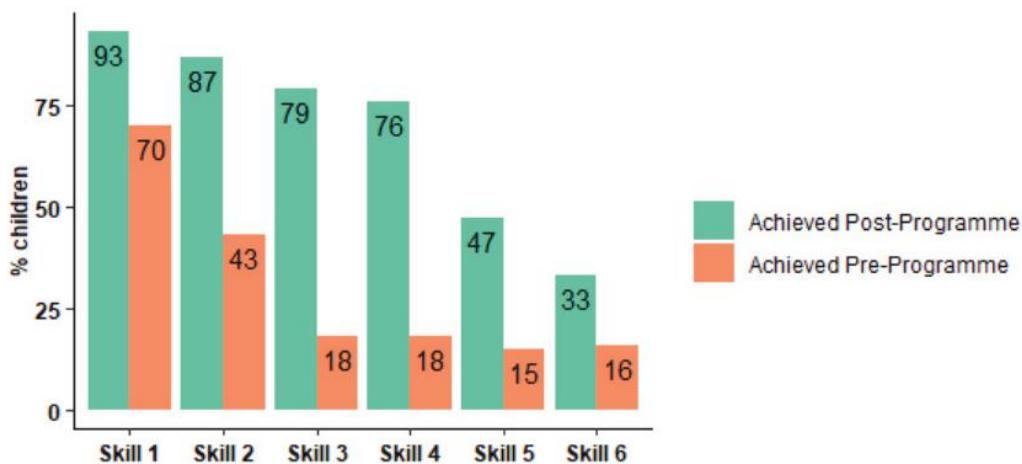


After the Doodle Den programme, 90% of children had improved their social skills, 5% had no change and 5% had a negative change to their social skills.

Writing Skills

Children’s writing skills were assessed using six items, and most children showed improvements in four: writing left to right, writing top to bottom, and spacing; writing own name using capitals; spelling common words correctly; and attempting to match sounds and letters. Less improvement was found in relation to writing an extended description and using capital letters and full stops appropriately, although an improvement was still demonstrated.

Fig 9: Writing skills before and after the Doodle Den programme



- Skill One** = Writing own name using capitals
- Skill Two** = Writing left to right, writing top to bottom, and spacing
- Skill Three** = Spelling common words correctly
- Skill Four** = Attempting to match sounds and letters
- Skill Five** = Using capital letters and full stops correctly
- Skill Six** = Writing an extended description

Key learning:

Embedding Doodle Den within the community through funding, training, and supporting facilitators and champions has been an important factor in the long-term success of the programme.

A randomised controlled trial evaluation of Doodle Den found significant improvements in children’s overall literacy ability, which included the following areas: word recognition, sentence structure, and word choice. Although improvement in literacy was the main aim of the programme, the evaluation also found that Doodle Den led to improved concentration, reduced problem behaviours in school, an increase in family library activity and the child’s reading at home (Biggart, Kerr, O’Hare, & Connolly, 2012).

This year's data continue to support the findings of the original randomised controlled trial evaluation in 2012.

There continues to be strong evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of the Doodle Den Programme on improving children's literacy and social outcomes.

Monitoring, evaluating and utilising the data to ensure that CDI continues to provide high-quality services is critical in ensuring strong outcomes for children.





3

From Seven to Eight Years...
Doodle Families



Doodle Families was developed in response to requests from schools for a follow-up programme to Doodle Den. Doodle Families is a manualised family literacy programme designed for children in First Class who would benefit from support with social skills and literacy development. The programme actively encourages children with a mixed range of abilities to participate, and it welcomes children who have completed the Doodle Den Programme, though this is not essential.

The programme focuses on family and home literacy and works to strengthen the links between home and school through increased parental involvement. Doodle Families focuses on the importance of literacy within the home and supporting parents to recognise how childhood literacy develops, so that they can help their own children learn and develop. Through building parents' capacity to engage with fun literacy activities in the home, Doodle Families aims to improve children's attitudes towards reading.

Doodle Families has been designed to be delivered in two components – one for parents/guardians and the other for children. Parents' sessions can be delivered during the school day, and aim to develop an awareness of literacy development, giving practical tips to increase home literacy activity and helping parents to feel more involved in their child's education.

Doodle Families requires one facilitator to deliver the parent component (e.g. the Home School Community Liaison teacher) and two facilitators for the children's programme (e.g. from the School Completion Programme, Special Needs Assistant or youth service).

Parent sessions have been designed to be informal and to create a space in which parents with a wide variety of literacy levels can participate fully. The language used is carefully chosen to facilitate this, and sessions include practical tasks that allow parents to focus on their own family's personal experiences. Each of the eight sessions lasts an hour. The children's sessions are delivered after school and also last for one hour. Each session complements the activities from the parent session by mirroring the learning focus and activities through child-appropriate methodologies. The sessions offer a wide range of fun and engaging literacy learning opportunities.

'The joy of the Doodle Families Programme is that it shows parents just how easy it is to help a child with schoolwork and homework and helps explain how things are taught in the classroom'
– Doodle Families Facilitator

'I feel he's doing better at writing in school now' - Parent

Outcomes:

An independent evaluation of Doodle Families undertaken by Maynooth University found that children's and parents' attitudes towards literacy significantly improved from pre-programme assessment to post-programme assessment. Doodle Families has a positive influence on shared reading activities in the home, engagement in supportive reading activities, and engagement in shared literacy and writing practices immediately after completing the programme.

Over 70% of parents reported that their child had improved writing skills. In addition, many parents (70.6%) noticed an improvement in how their child learns, two-thirds (66.7%) noticed improvement in how their child uses stories when playing, and 58.8% of parents indicated an improvement in their child's spoken communication.

Almost all parents (96%) reported that their experience of Doodle Families was 'good', with 98% indicating that they learned new ways (tips, games, activities) to support their child in the development of their literacy. Over 80% of parents reported that they implemented these new ways of supporting their child's literacy development at home.

Evaluation Findings

Children’s attitudes to literacy were assessed using 11 selected questions from the Elementary Reading Attitude survey. The results show that children’s attitudes to literacy improved after the programme, with an average score of 3.30, compared to the pre-programme assessment average score of 2.99.

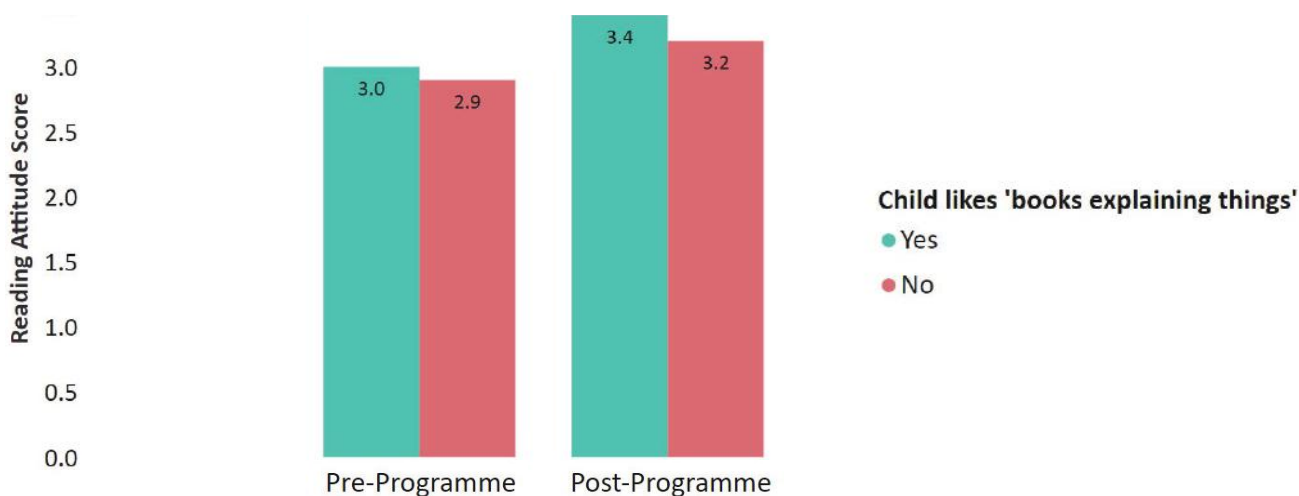
Differences in children’s attitudes were noted to be influenced by their age. Children aged seven years old had a greater improvement in their reading and writing attitudes after the programme compared to children aged eight years. A possible explanation for this was the availability of the types of reading material the children had access to.

Figure 10: Reading attitude scores by age



On establishing the types of reading material children engaged with, results showed that attitudes to literacy were associated with the type of books children enjoyed reading. In the pre-programme assessment, the average score for children who liked to read books to ‘explain things’ was 3.0 compared to 2.9 for those who did not. In the postprogramme assessment, the average score for children who read books to ‘explain things’ was 3.4 compared to the average score of 3.2 for those who did not.

Figure 11: Elementary reading attitude scores by types of books



This suggests that when engaging children in reading activities, the types of books children like reading may have an impact on their attitudes to reading.

Key learning:

Good communication and engagement between those working with the parents and those working with the children is very important – engaging parents in their children’s learning is especially key to improving outcomes.

It is important that the approach to activities is playful and that the programme is fun so that this approach is maintained in the home.

It is important to be sensitive to a variety of literacy abilities and needs and to adapt the programme to suit the individual and group needs.

It is important to consider a variety of reading materials when planning the programme.



The background consists of a complex arrangement of overlapping triangles in various shades of pink and purple. The colors range from light, pastel pinks to deep, dark purples. The triangles are of different sizes and orientations, creating a dynamic, abstract composition. The word "Conclusion" is centered in the middle of the image, overlaid on a light pink triangular area.

Conclusion

Early intervention and prevention remain core principles, as do the nurturing of positive relationships and the adoption of a collaborative, shared-learning approach with all stakeholders. Early intervention and prevention in this instance are about investing in children and their families as a way that demonstrates measurable successful outcomes. The earlier this begins in the child's life and home, the stronger the outcome for the child and for the child's family and community.

Services tend to be driven by acute remedial need when difficulties reach a critical point. By adopting this approach, the causes of these problems are not being tackled – only the symptoms. Services must be developed in response to identified need, with corresponding needs-based resources allocated and investment in programmes that can demonstrate their effectiveness.

Early intervention and prevention remain core principles, as do the nurturing of positive relationships and the adoption of a collaborative, shared-learning approach with all stakeholders.

We continue to work to improve the outcomes for children, families, and communities through the provision of high-quality evidence-informed services designed to respond to need and drive change. All our children's literacy programmes are rigorously evaluated, and considerable attention is given to quality assurance and the promotion of reflective practice.

The Dolly Parton Imagination Library, Doodle Den, and Doodle Families have proved to be hugely beneficial to children and their families; evidence shows that school attendance levels are better, reading and word recognition is better, children enjoy school time more, and there is a reduction in school-based behavioural problems. For families, reading in the home increases, as does the number of books in the home.

CDI always promotes the concepts of working positively with stakeholders, inter-agency collaboration, and the integration of services at local level. CDI is also committed to shared learning amongst all to facilitate the delivery of best practice services, and the three children's literacy programmes clearly demonstrate this commitment.

We would like to acknowledge the fantastic engagement and support from the stakeholders in our community – from the schools, Principals, teachers, early years staff, public health nurses, and librarians, and most especially the parents and children we will continue to serve for many years to come.

If you would like to find out more, please visit our website at www.cdi.ie or email us at info@cdi.ie.





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