

# Bright Beginnings Curriculum: Measuring the Impact

Executive Summary

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**Research question:** Can a wellbeing curriculum support practitioner knowledge and improve teaching and learning, to have a measurable impact on children’s engagement, self-regulation and wellbeing levels?

**Research themes:** Pedagogical Practice (Praxeology), Curriculum, and Children’s Wellbeing and Involvement.

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## Abstract

The concept of ‘emotional wellbeing’ in Early Years education remains under-represented in the EYFS (DfE 2021) curriculum. However, increasing research points to significant benefits of emotional wellbeing and regulation in early childhood (Moffitt et al, 2011; Raver et al, 2011), and on overall achievement. In the absence of significant research concerning the impact of a wellbeing-centric curriculum, with a focus on self-regulation and independence, we set out to explore the effect of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum on the children’s emotional wellbeing and regulation in Bright Horizons nurseries in the UK.

The study focused on 31 settings in England, and 69 practitioners. We employed environmental audits, documented observations of children’s play, and practitioner questionnaires, to gather quantitative and qualitative

data to investigate the impact upon emotional regulation and wellbeing, as well as changes to practitioner understanding of the ‘holistic’ nature of young children’s learning.

Results demonstrated significant improvement in children’s involvement in activities and wellbeing (Leuven Scales), and in pro-social behaviours. Further results from practitioner surveys highlighted improvements in children’s ability to control impulses to scream, hit others, express a ‘tantrum’ and to recognise positive behaviours in themselves and others. Improvements in adult understanding of the interconnectedness of children’s learning were apparent.

Overall, results suggest a positive improvement in children’s self-regulation skills following the introduction of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum.

## Introduction

The Bright Beginnings Curriculum was developed in 2020, in response to the demand for an internal curriculum for Bright Horizons UK. The curriculum aims to provide a consistent, high-quality approach to learning for young children. The conditions for successful learning in the early years, identified in the curriculum, consist of:

### HEARTS

- **H**ealthy bodies,
- **E**motional wellbeing,
- **S**ecure **A**ttachments,
- **P**ositive **R**elationships,
- **E**xcellent **T**eaching,
- **A**nd the need for children to be **S**afe and **S**ecure

The central theme of the curriculum aims to encourage high levels of wellbeing and self-regulation, in line with the belief that children learn best if they are emotionally secure and have caring adults to support them. The curriculum incorporates the Early Years Foundation Stage and Development Matters (DfE, 2021).

A new approach to introducing positive psychology interventions within schools is advocated and has been labelled as ‘Positive Education’ (Seligman et al 2009). This is reflected within the Bright Beginnings Curriculum, with its focus on emotional wellbeing, self-regulation and decision making. Positive Education aims to bridge the gap between what parents want for their children and academic achievement promoted in school, by introducing sound, positive psychology interventions in the school and classroom context (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009).

Bright Horizons Family Solutions operates around 300 settings within the United Kingdom, stretching across 139 local authorities, caring for around 20,000 children. Therefore, mitigating the onset of mental health issues in childhood through the introduction of a wellbeing-centred curriculum offers a unique opportunity to benefit the lives of children in our care.

# Theoretical Foundations of Bright Beginnings Framework:

In the context of growing focus on the importance of early attachment and the emotional experience of young children, Page (2013) highlighted the need for focused attention on emotional wellbeing, to ensure the feelings evoked by staff completing attachment work can be effectively supported (Page, & Elfer, 2013). The Bright Beginnings Curriculum was conceived as a wellbeing curriculum, supported by a theoretical approach derived from the Hierarchy of Need (Maslow, A. H. 1943).

It is divided into three sections forming a triangle with the ‘competent child’ at the pinnacle of the triangle. The curriculum is underpinned

by conditions for wellbeing, which form ‘Children’s Hearts Values for Wellbeing’ and are complemented by Opportunities and Experiences for Learning (areas of learning) and subsequent Aspects. The curriculum is based on the theory that when the conditions for learning (HEARTS) are successfully implemented, children will benefit from the ‘Opportunities and Experiences’ provided by the curriculum and will develop into confident, capable individuals with strong self-esteem, who demonstrate a positive learning disposition.



The curriculum is underpinned by the belief that children do not learn in subject areas; that learning is ‘holistic’. The curriculum is made up of opportunities, which together will support children’s knowledge, understanding and wellbeing. The opportunities and experiences do not sit in isolation from one another; they are interconnected, co-dependent and equal in status. The skills traditionally associated with Mathematics or Literacy, for example, are plotted across a number of Opportunities

and Experiences and Aspects within the curriculum, reflecting the idea that technical expertise should be taught and learned in a vast number of contexts.

We believe that there is a case for adopting a curriculum centred on emotional wellbeing and attachment. This study aims to provide new insights into the effect of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum on children’s emotional wellbeing, and engagement and self-regulation skills.

## Research Aims:

**Our key aim, when setting out on this research, was to find out whether or not a wellbeing curriculum could support practitioner knowledge and improve teaching and learning, in order to have a measurable impact on children's engagement, self-regulation and wellbeing levels. To this end, we identified three areas for investigation:**

1. Can a wellbeing curriculum support and improve the delivery of teaching and learning, to provide a measurable impact on children's engagement and wellbeing levels?
2. Has the Bright Beginnings Curriculum improved children's emotional wellbeing, engagement, and self-regulation skills?
3. What are nursery practitioners' subjective views on the introduction of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum and does it help them to promote children's holistic development?

## Methodology:

The initial sample recruited a cohort of 31 nurseries across England, who were all identified to be within "phase one" of the roll-out of the Bright Beginnings framework. All participants were anonymised and a random, purposive sample was chosen for the study.

A baseline was completed at the start of the intervention and again four months later to determine the impact of the intervention. The intervention was monitored at points in between to ensure consistency across settings by the early childhood specialist (ECS) team. The entire research program lasted six months, starting in November 2020 and concluding May 2021.

Routine observations were used to identify children's level of wellbeing and involvement before, and four months after the implementation of the intervention. The aim was to measure any improvements in children's engagement following improvements to practitioner knowledge, environments and activities provided.

The children were observed using Leuven Wellbeing

and Involvement scales (Laevens, 2005). In addition, observations using the Cambridge Independent Learning (CIndLe) checklist (Whitebread et al., 2009) were completed on a sample of children before the introduction of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum. The observations were repeated for a second period once the curriculum training had been embedded, using the CIndLe checklist (Appendix three).

Finally, a practitioner survey was created to determine the degree to which the Bright Beginnings Curriculum had been implemented by each practitioner and to outline their view of the impact on the children's emotional wellbeing. The initial survey was completed before the introduction of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum and again 4 months following the introduction of the intervention. Data collection took place between November 2020 and May 2021. During that time, the United Kingdom experienced the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown.

## Overall Findings:

Given the growing mental health crisis and significance of self-regulation (Bronson 2001) in young children, our aim was to develop an effective curriculum to support children's emotional development and give them the best possible start. This investigation was carried out to establish the extent to which the Bright Beginnings Curriculum can offer that support, whilst improving the delivery of teaching and learning, and have a measurable impact on children's engagement and wellbeing levels. Here is an overview of the findings:

### **1. To what extent can a wellbeing curriculum support and improve the delivery of teaching and learning, to provide a measurable impact on children's engagement and wellbeing levels?**

The Leuven Scale observations demonstrated a significant increase in children's holistic wellbeing and involvement scores, and provided initial evidence to suggest the positive impact of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum.

The results provide confidence that this effect could be observed within a larger cohort of children within the organisation and will be pursued in our next planned

research to commence in 2022. It is our conclusion that the introduction of the curriculum has positively impacted the quality of the practitioners' teaching and learning, producing measurable impact both on the children's engagement and wellbeing levels.

### **2. Has the introduction of the Bright Beginnings curriculum improved children's emotional wellbeing, engagement, and self-regulation skills?**

The results set out in the full research paper, demonstrated through CIndLe observations, suggest a significant increase in children's pro-social skills. The experiment could not provide significant increases in cognition, motivation, or emotional skills of the children observed, largely due to the relatively small sample size used within the follow-up results, due to several children no longer attending the nursery setting or isolating due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The environmental audits provide some evidence to suggest a positive impact from the Bright Beginnings Curriculum on children's overall self-regulation skills. Self-regulation is a complex concept that is multifaceted in terms of the mental capacities required. However, it is generally agreed that self-regulation requires emotional control, self-planning of self, meta-cognition, self-reliance and independence, and socially responsible behaviour (Bronson & Bronson, 2001). Therefore, the behaviours noted within the practitioner survey, and within the CIndLe results, highlight elements of improvement within the behaviours associated with self-regulation.

### **3. What are nursery practitioners' subjective views on the introduction of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum, and does it help them to promote children's holistic development?**

The practitioner surveys produced significant results when identifying improvements within children's ability to control impulses to scream, hit others, show a 'tantrum' and in their ability to recognise behaviours in themselves and others, which are socially acceptable.

In addition, the scores also demonstrated practitioners' confidence in using the Bright Beginnings Curriculum and their understanding of the holistic nature of children's learning and development.

## Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research:

It is crucial to outline that although this study has provided novel evidence to suggest the efficacy of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum, there are limitations present within the current study presented in this paper.

Firstly, during the period this study was completed, the United Kingdom was experiencing an unprecedented period of lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition, the experimental design did not control or measure for the traditional home learning environment, parental engagement, or parent-child relationships, which have all been documented to have positive associations with children's outcomes (Foster et al., 2005; Melhuish et al., 2008).

Finally, it is essential to note that the demographics of the current study were not collected, and therefore it is crucial to recognise that the well-documented effect of socio-economic status could not be accounted for. In addition, cross-cultural differences between resilience have been documented, particularly in expressing resilience within family constructs (Ungar, 2004).

Nonetheless, the study has provided some empirical evidence to demonstrate an association between the introduction of the Bright Beginnings curriculum and improvements in children's wellbeing, pro-social and involvement and self-regulation skills. This arguably provides a case for further research.

## Next Steps and Implications for Practice:

In conclusion, this study has provided initial evidence that a bespoke wellbeing curriculum can support practitioner knowledge and improve teaching and learning, having a measurable impact on children's engagement, self-regulation and wellbeing levels.

Bright Horizons' early childhood team will use the evidence presented within this study to:

- strengthen the consistency and embedding of the curriculum across all settings in the UK;
- develop practitioners' confidence in implementing the curriculum through bespoke training;
- develop Early Childhood Specialists knowledge of the curriculum through the Knowledge Community (Annings & Edwards 1998);
- gather parental perspectives on the impact of the curriculum as nurseries open following a period of 'lock down', to fully understand the broader context of Bright Beginnings and to begin to discover its impact on the home learning environment, in order to strengthen parental partnerships.



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## ANOVA – Practitioner surveys completed

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Able to regulate their actions and emotions	Between Groups	.731	1	.731	.675	.413
	Within Groups	145.239	134	1.084		
	Total	145.971	135			
Being able to calm down after excitement or being upset	Between Groups	.082	1	.082	.086	.769
	Within Groups	127.028	134	.948		
	Total	127.110	135			
Self-selecting activities and resources and making decisions for themselves	Between Groups	4.051	1	4.051	3.186	.077
	Within Groups	170.419	134	1.272		
	Total	174.471	135			
Focusing on tasks and remaining engaged	Between Groups	2.826	1	2.826	2.495	.117
	Within Groups	151.814	134	1.133		
	Total	154.640	135			
Control impulses to scream, hit others, show a 'tantrum'	Between Groups	6.426	1	6.426	5.220	.024
	Within Groups	164.957	134	1.231		
	Total	171.382	135			
Able to refocus attention on new task	Between Groups	3.704	1	3.704	3.713	.056
	Within Groups	133.679	134	.998		
	Total	137.382	135			
Recognising behaviours in themselves and others, which are socially acceptable	Between Groups	5.681	1	5.681	4.163	.043
	Within Groups	182.877	134	1.365		
	Total	188.559	135			
global_score	Between Groups	136.383	1	136.383	4.349	.039
	Within Groups	4202.559	134	31.362		

# About Bright Horizons

## What we do

For more than 35 years, Bright Horizons has been supporting the evolving needs of working families and their employers. We create, develop, and deliver solutions that remove barriers to performance, talent and diversity in our clients' businesses and help them succeed in their goals.

We address the wide range of challenges facing parents and carers in the workplace today, enhancing our clients' ability to attract and retain key talent, giving their teams the peace of mind and confidence to do their best work.

## How we do it

Bright Horizons' services include workplace and partnership nurseries, coaching and development provision, digital resources, and manager guidance, plus back-up care for adults, children of all ages - and even pets.

We provide our clients with access to live usage and engagement analytics on their programmes, and also keep them updated with ongoing research findings and benchmarking data.

## A partner, provider and employer of choice

- We have operations in the US, UK, India, Australia, and the Netherlands. 1,300 clients globally, more than 400 in the UK.
- We have been recognised as a UK Best Workplace by the Great Place to Work Institute every year since 2006, and actively committed to Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging, and to Mindful Business practices.
- We strive to minimise negative environmental impact guided by our Future Earth green agenda and, through our registered charity the Bright Horizons Foundation for Children, to make a positive difference in the lives of children and families in crisis.

To learn more, please visit: [solutions.brighthouse.co.uk](https://solutions.brighthouse.co.uk)

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