

SmartStart Child Outcomes Evaluation 2023

Who is SmartStart?

SmartStart is South Africa’s leading network of partners and practitioners working collaboratively to provide quality early learning opportunities to children in every type of community. We seek to harness the power and potential of affordable home and community-based early learning programmes, which can reach more children, more quickly. Our vision is to give one million children access to quality early learning every year by 2030.

What is early learning?

Early learning programmes (ELPs) are structured programmes attended by young children aged 0-5 years, in a wide range of formal and informal settings. ELPs provide both care, stimulation and development opportunities, which help children develop essential cognitive, language, social and emotional skills during the critical early years of growth.

What was the study investigating?

The research questions focused on the extent to which SmartStart programmes are shifting outcomes for children, and whether some of the key contributors to these changes can be identified. This would help to answer the question, does a pragmatic home and community-based solution for access to early learning, like SmartStart, work at scale and, if so, how?

Why does it matter?

The answer to this question has substantial implications for how we think about the most affordable and immediate ways to close the early learning gap. It is well established that children’s access to the right development and learning opportunities before they start school, has the potential to transform outcomes across the life course. However, over one million new places in ELPs will be needed in South Africa to achieve universal access for 0-5 year-olds.

Isn’t SmartStart’s programme design based on evidence?

Yes. SmartStart’s programme and curriculum design was based on a review of evidence on the ingredients of quality in ELPs, including process factors such as pedagogy and interactions, as well as key support structures such as coaching and quality assurance systems.

Why did you conduct an evaluation so soon after the 2018 evaluation?

Between 2018 and 2023, the SmartStart network had more than doubled to 8,629 ELPs and 66,051 children (and has grown further to nearly 13,000 ELPs and 120,000 children in 2025). As programmes like SmartStart are seldom delivered at such scale, it was the right time to investigate whether or not impact for children is being maintained as SmartStart continues to rapidly expand.

How big was the study?

The researchers used a cohort field study design, to track the progress of a representative sample of 551 children in 325 SmartStart ELPs over an eight-month period, using the [Early Learning Outcomes Measure \(ELOM\)](#). ELOM is a set of population-based child assessment tools designed to determine whether children are developmentally on track for their age. At the time of publication, this was the largest ELOM evaluation of a South African early learning intervention to date.

Who conducted the research?

The research team was led by Professor Sarah Chapman at the University of Cape Town and data specialists at ikapadata (now a unit at Genesis Analytics).

What are the main findings?

Overall, the percentage of SmartStart children ‘*On track*’ increased by 20 points in just eight months, from 45% to 65%, while the proportion of children ‘*Falling far behind*’ nearly halved. (Note: ‘*On track*’ means children meet the standards and are able to do the tasks expected of a child their age. Children who are ‘*Falling far behind*’ need intensive intervention to reach the standard and are at risk of not catching up with their peers.)

The performance gap between children attending ELPs in the highest and lowest income quintiles narrowed substantially, from 25 points to 6 points. (The ‘performance gap’ measures the difference in outcomes between children from high-income and low-income homes.)

How did children’s improvement vary across different developmental domains?

Improvements varied by domain. The largest increase was in early maths, followed by fine motor skills and early literacy. Smaller gains were observed in cognitive and executive function and gross motor skills.

How does this compare with outcomes for South African children in general?

The Thrive by Five 2021 Index is a representative survey of 5,222 South African children attending pre-school, using the ELOM tool. The average Total ELOM score for SmartStart children at endline, was 11 points higher than the Thrive by Five Index, and a significantly higher proportion of SmartStart children was ‘*On track*’ at endline (65% vs 46%). As Thrive by Five uses a representative sample of children, whereas SmartStart targets low-income communities, the difference in gains would be likely to be even larger if the samples were matched for socio-economic status.

What does the study tell us about *how and why* these programmes are shifting child outcomes?

Using SmartStart’s quality assurance tool, the researchers looked at what specific practices seem to be linked to better outcomes for children. This revealed that there is a notable likelihood of increased gains for children in programmes that routinely use the SmartStart curriculum and where children can play and learn at a level that is appropriate to them. Other simple child-centred practices like building children’s language, acknowledging and encouraging children’s efforts, and involving children in solving conflicts, were found to be positively associated with gains in early maths and early literacy.

So what is the take-home message?

This study shows that even in low-resource contexts, basically trained paraprofessionals can significantly improve outcomes for young children when using a carefully designed daily programme supported by child-centred approaches and contextually appropriate materials.

And what are the wider implications?

This study challenges conventional conceptions of quality in early learning, and therefore urges us to re-imagine strategies to unlock access for excluded children. Far from being considered an inferior form of provision, home and community-based ELPs should be elevated as an immediate, pragmatic and affordable solution in closing the access and quality gaps in low-income communities.

For government, this understanding should inform more inclusive and enabling approaches to regulation and funding.