



Evaluation of Open Kindergarten, Phase 3 – Executive Summary

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*'My child plays,
I can breathe'*



Overview

Open Kindergarten is a universal, low-threshold model of early years family support adapted in Scotland from Nordic open preschool traditions. It provides free, drop-in, parent-and-child sessions for families with children aged 0–3 years. The model is relational, parent-led and rights-based, aligning closely with Scotland’s commitments under Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC), Whole Family Wellbeing Funding, The Promise, the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and the incorporation of the The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Phase 3 built on earlier pilot work and tested delivery across multiple local authorities, examining sustainability, reach, workforce needs and system integration. The evaluation was conducted by The Open University using a mixed-methods design including surveys, interviews, focus groups, structured observations, practitioner diaries, parent diaries and service-level attendance data.



Delivery and Reach

Delivery (October 2024 – August 2025):

- 15 groups across Midlothian, East Lothian, Edinburgh and West Lothian
- 228 sessions delivered
- 561 participants (249 parents/carers; 312 children)
- 94% of children with data were aged 0–3
- Attendance grew steadily across the delivery period.

Sessions were delivered in community centres, libraries, early learning and childcare (ELC) settings, GP practices and outdoor spaces. Provision included weekday daytime groups, one evening group and one weekend group. Outdoor groups attracted particularly strong attendance.

Survey and qualitative data indicate that Open Kindergarten engaged families across a broad socio-economic range, including households experiencing disability, minority ethnic background, larger families, lone parenthood and financial strain. Many families described Open Kindergarten as the only regular support space they accessed.

Key Elements of the Phase 3 Model

Gaps in provision for families with children under three

Open Kindergarten remained free, voluntary and drop-in. No referral, assessment or payment was required. This removed both financial and psychological barriers to engagement.

Parents and carers repeatedly described the importance of:

- Being able to arrive late or leave early
- Not needing to explain or justify their attendance
- Not feeling assessed or judged
- Having access to a space that was welcoming / accessible for everyone.

For families experiencing poverty, isolation or mental health challenges, this design was critical.

Relational, practitioner-led containment

Practitioners were central to the success of the model. Families consistently described them as warm, calm, non-judgemental and emotionally present. The practitioner role involved:

- Creating a psychologically safe environment
- Supporting peer connection
- Offering informal developmental guidance
- Identifying emerging needs
- Signposting into wider services.

Parents and carers described feeling seen, held and supported without pressure. For many, this relational presence reduced isolation, improved confidence and strengthened parenting self-belief.

The evaluation highlights that this work involves significant emotional labour and requires:

- Reflective supervision
- Manageable caseloads
- Flexible staffing
- Organisational containment.

Sustainability depends on supporting the workforce as well as families.

A space that reduces isolation and supports mental health

Across interviews, focus groups and diary data, parents and carers described:

- Loneliness
- Sleep deprivation
- Anxiety or low mood
- Limited adult interaction
- Reduced confidence following birth or relocation.

Open Kindergarten functioned as a stabilising weekly anchor. Parents and carers frequently reported arriving feeling overwhelmed and leaving feeling steadier. The space enabled informal conversation, peer reassurance and the normalisation of everyday parenting challenges.

Many parents and carers described it as:

- A “lifeline”
- The only place they could relax
- A space where they could “be themselves”.

This aligns strongly with Scotland’s perinatal mental health and Whole Family Wellbeing commitments.

Benefits for babies and young children

Parents, carers and practitioners observed that children participating benefited from:

- Early peer interaction
- Play-based exploration
- Language-rich environments
- Gentle exposure to group settings.

Parents and carers who did not use formal childcare described Open Kindergarten as their child’s only regular social experience. Practitioners also observed smoother transitions into ELC where families had attended Open Kindergarten. The model therefore supports children’s rights to play, development and participation under the UNCRC.



Filling a service gap

Phase 3 confirms Phase 2 findings that Open Kindergarten fills a structural gap in provision for families with children under three. Scotland’s expansion of funded ELC begins at age two or three. Health visiting remains the primary universal service before that point. Parents and carers described the period from birth to age three as one where support feels fragmented or limited.

Open Kindergarten provided:

- A universal entry point into early support
- A bridge into other services
- A non-stigmatising space for early conversation
- A stepping stone into ELC

It functioned as both community resource and soft entry into wider systems.

Early years landscape and scalability

Phase 3 examined whether Open Kindergarten could operate effectively at scale across diverse Scottish contexts. The findings indicate that the model is transferable, but that successful expansion depends on preserving its relational ethos and establishing the right organisational conditions.

Protected local set-up time is critical to successful implementation. Establishing strong relationships with health visitors, Early Learning and Childcare providers, Children's Services Planning Partnerships and community organisations strengthens referral pathways and supports effective integration within local early years provision.

Sustainable practitioner capacity is equally important. The model relies on emotional attunement and relational presence, which cannot be maintained under excessive caseloads or administrative pressure. Realistic workloads and structured professional support are therefore critical.

Flexible staffing arrangements are required to respond to fluctuating attendance and varying levels of need. Some sessions operate well with a single practitioner, while others benefit from co-facilitation to maintain safety and relational quality.

Values-led recruitment safeguards fidelity to the model. Practitioners must be comfortable working in unstructured, parent-led environments and prioritise relational practice over programme delivery.

Clear, partnership-sensitive rollout helps avoid duplication concerns and supports collaboration within the early years landscape. Integration within Children's Services Planning Partnerships offers a route to sustainability, aligning Open Kindergarten with Whole Family Wellbeing Funding, The Promise and GIRFEC ambitions.

Overall conclusions

Phase 3 demonstrates that Open Kindergarten provides a meaningful and valued contribution to early years support across diverse Scottish localities, addressing a clear gap in provision for families with children under three.

For families, the model offers emotional support, reduces isolation and strengthens parenting confidence, while fostering community belonging and enabling access to early help without stigma. For children, it provides early opportunities for play and socialisation within developmentally attuned environments, supporting gentle preparation for group settings and transitions into Early Learning and Childcare.

At a wider level, Open Kindergarten represents a practical embodiment of Scotland's relational policy commitments. It operates as a preventative, community-based and universal platform capable of reaching families experiencing adversity without formal thresholds.

Its strengths lie in its flexibility, low-threshold design and the relational skill of its practitioners. When delivered with fidelity and supported appropriately, Open Kindergarten offers a sustainable and transferable approach that can contribute meaningfully to Scotland's ambitions for early intervention, child poverty reduction and children's rights.



Recommendations

Organisational Practice

- Families taking part in Open Kindergarten valued the warmth, flexible and non-stigmatising approach it offered. In order to achieve this environment, organisations wishing to incorporate Open Kindergarten approaches need to consider;
 - Flexible staffing models tailored to local need
 - Values-led recruitment focused on relational practice
 - Sustainable practitioner capacity
 - Embedding training, support and supervision for staff
 - Outreach capacity to engage with those furthest from support
 - Long term group commitment to provide support to families over time
- The Open Kindergarten Project's implementation pack and elearning module offers some guidance with how to develop and implement Open Kindergartens in different context. To support further roll out, it is recommended that these resources are further enhanced through the development of specialised training packages, organisation development support and an Open Kindergarten community of practice.

Systems and Structures

- Open Kindergarten fills a gap in support for families, providing a universal offer that can sit well within a wider system of community based whole family support. It is recommended that Children’s Services Planning Partnerships embed Open Kindergarten approaches within their Children’s Services Plans, identifying local third sector or statutory ELC providers who are well placed to deliver these approaches.

National Policy

- The Open Kindergarten Project (Phase 3) was funded by the Scottish Government’s Whole Family Wellbeing Fund. To sustain and further build capacity for whole family support across Scotland, it is recommended that the Scottish Government extends its commitment to whole family support and the Whole Family Support Fund beyond 2027 to the lifetime of the next parliament (2031).

Research

- Phases 2 and 3 of The Open Kindergarten provided positive evidence about the impact of Open Kindergartens for families and factors that help and hinder their roll out in different contexts. Future research should focus on gathering evidence on social return on investment of Open Kindergartens to outline the costs of provision in relation to their benefits.

