



Drawing
and Talking

When is the right time?

Using Drawing and Talking as an ELSA



Written by Cath Beagley, CEO of Drawing and Talking



A note from Cath...

Dear Colleague,

Schools across the country are demonstrating a stronger-than-ever commitment to mental health and wellbeing, and with the new Ofsted framework coming into effect, this focus is more important than ever.

Inspectors will be looking for evidence that schools not only deliver mental health interventions, but also have a clear understanding of the intended outcomes of each approach. Schools will also be asked to articulate why a particular intervention was chosen for an individual child.

We know that many ELSAs are also trained as Drawing and Talking Practitioners. Both approaches share the same aim: 'supporting children's emotional wellbeing', but they do so in different yet complementary ways.

With this in mind, we've created this booklet to help Practitioners and SENDCOs develop clarity around how ELSA and Drawing and Talking each work, and to confidently articulate their distinct purposes.

This resource is designed to make it easier to respond to Ofsted's key question: "Why this intervention, for this child?" We want you to feel equipped not only to describe what you are doing, but to clearly explain the reasoning and evidence behind your choices.

Remember that, as an ELSA and a Drawing and Talking Practitioner, you have a plethora of support available through your Educational Psychology team and your Drawing and Talking Membership. Make the most of these networks to ensure the children you support receive the best possible care.

Cath Beagley
CEO, Drawing and Talking





Introduction

Why This Matters

Every child deserves the right emotional support at the right time. Schools today face increasing demand to meet children's mental health needs, and choosing the right intervention is not always straightforward.

The two approaches we will be exploring:

Drawing and Talking Therapy – an attachment-based intervention using gentle, play-based therapy to work with the unconscious through drawing, storytelling and symbols.

ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) – structured, relational intervention helping children understand and manage emotions, build resilience, and develop social and coping skills, drawing on principles of emotional literacy, attachment theory and cognitive understanding.

Both are powerful, both have strengths. This guide helps SENDCOs, SLT and practitioners decide which is most suitable for a child, and how the two can complement each other.

At the heart of this is the nervous system. When children are overwhelmed, their ability to learn or "think clearly" goes offline. That's where the sequence of interventions can matter.

The Distinction Between the Two Approaches

- **Drawing and Talking** is play therapy, not art therapy. The emphasis is not on the artwork itself, but on the process of drawing and storytelling — a doorway to unconscious expression.
- **ELSA** is a structured, relational intervention helping children understand and manage emotions, build resilience and develop social and coping skills. It draws on principles of emotional literacy, attachment theory, cognitive understanding and building self esteem

INTERVENTION	Drawing and Talking	ELSA
Depth of work	Working at the Unconscious Level only	Working at the Cognitive Level
Theoretical Basis	Attachment & Jungian psychology	Emotional literacy, attachment theory, and cognitive understanding
How it works	Non-directive, child-led play therapy using drawing as the bridge to the unconscious. The child draws; the adult listens; the story unfolds safely.	Structured, supervised, child-centred sessions help children recognise and regulate emotions, develop coping strategies, and improve resilience.
Strengths	Provides containment, safety, and expression without relying on words. Especially effective for children carrying trauma, loss, or anxieties they cannot articulate.	Builds vocabulary of feelings, promotes problem-solving, empowers children to regulate behaviour.
Supports	Children who are withdrawn, dysregulated, or "stuck" in behaviours that don't shift with talking approaches.	Children who are ready and able to reflect, describe and think about their emotions.

ELSA and Drawing and Talking: A Perfect Match for Pupil Wellbeing

Why Order Matters — A Nervous System Perspective

Think of the nervous system as a car engine:



Gas pedal stuck down = fight or flight. The child is anxious, restless, or angry.



Battery flat = shutdown. The child is withdrawn, disconnected, or "not present."



Engine humming steadily = calm and safe. The child is curious, connected, and ready to learn.

This is Polyvagal Theory in practice. Children can only engage the "thinking part" of their brain when their nervous system feels safe (ventral vagal state)

That's why order matters:



Drawing and Talking is like gently lifting the child's foot off the gas or recharging the flat battery. It uses play, symbolism and relationship to regulate the nervous system without the pressure of words.



ELSA is like giving the child the map — teaching them the vocabulary, strategies, and self-awareness they need.

In practice:

A child who cannot yet talk about their feelings often thrives in **Drawing and Talking**.

After Drawing and Talking you may find a child is better able to access **ELSA** sessions — emotional understanding, social and friendship skills, emotional regulation and self-esteem are built.

Together, these two approaches can complement each other.



Strengths & Barriers at a Glance

Drawing and Talking

Unlocks unconscious feelings without pressure to verbalise.

Trauma-informed, attachment-based; provides containment and safety.

Works well for a child who is dysregulated, withdrawn, or unable to communicate their feelings.

Requires trained practitioners and a consistent safe space.

ELSA

Builds emotional literacy, coping skills, self-esteem and regulation.

Evidence-based in schools; formulation-led programme delivered by trained practitioners under Educational Psychology teams.

Supports a child who is ready to think and express their emotions.

Requires sustained staff time, supervision, clear role boundaries.

Recommendations to Schools

Try using Drawing and Talking as the first step for a child who is dysregulated, traumatised, or unable to talk.

Transition to ELSA once the child feels safe and ready to explore emotions cognitively.

This widens the school's capacity to support children at the unconscious level – often where the deepest pain resides.

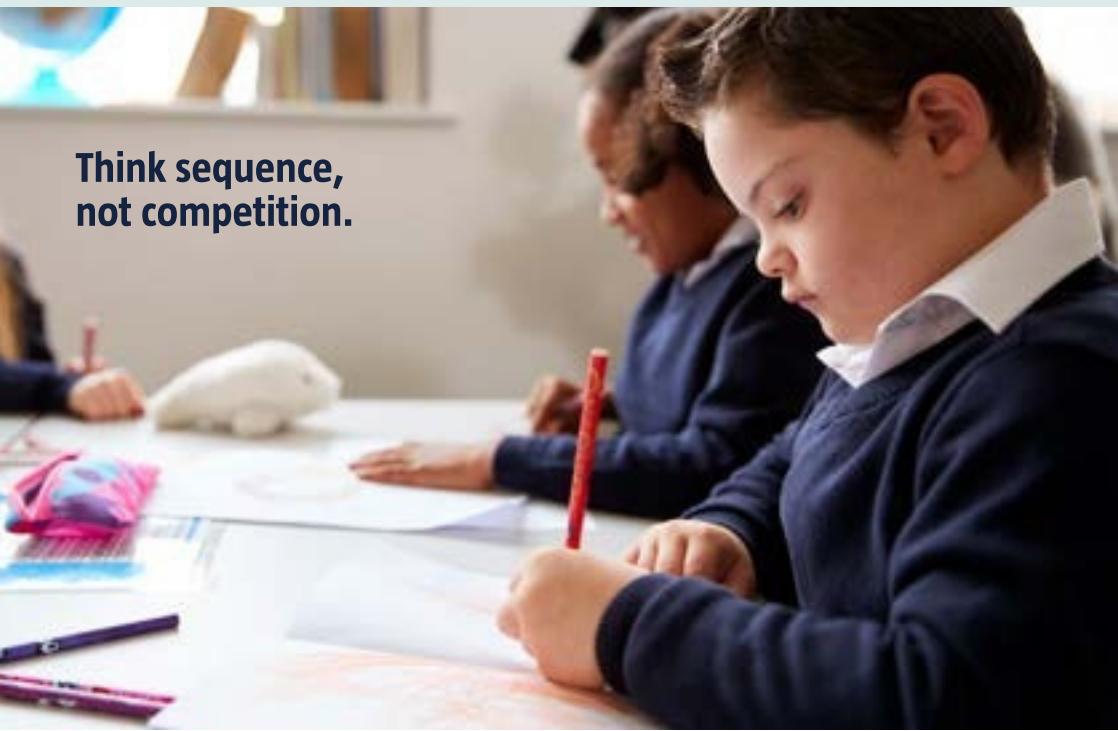
Embed both in a whole-school approach.

ELSA builds ongoing emotional literacy and regulation, self esteem and resilience.

Drawing and Talking addresses unconscious distress.

Together, they provide a continuum of support aligned with the DfE's principles of emotional wellbeing.

Think sequence, not competition.





How Drawing and Talking Supports and Strengthens ELSA Practice

In schools across the UK, Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) play a vital role in helping children process difficult feelings and build emotional resilience. One experienced ELSA, who is also a Trust Lead SENDCo and Mental Health Lead, has discovered that the gentle, non-intrusive approach of Drawing and Talking can offer an ideal first step for children who aren't yet ready for more structured emotional work.

With over 20 years' experience in education, including roles as a headteacher, SENCO, and class teacher, this practitioner brings deep insight into how different interventions can be layered to meet children's evolving needs. She currently offers targeted emotional support across EYFS and primary settings, helping children with friendship challenges, bereavement, school avoidance, self-esteem, and big feelings.

A Safe Space to "Just Be"

She first encountered Drawing and Talking during a career break, and was immediately struck by its gentle, unmeasured approach. "It's a gift," she reflects, "a space where children aren't being instructed, assessed, or analysed. They can just 'be'."

Drawing and Talking, in her view, differs from other interventions in its simplicity and depth. It offers time and space for trust to grow, free from the pressure to talk about feelings directly. Children are encouraged to draw and tell stories about their pictures, which gives them emotional distance while still enabling expression.

Case Study: Creating Space to Heal



Why Drawing and Talking Before ELSA?

This ELSA practitioner finds that Drawing and Talking is often the ideal foundation before beginning ELSA. It helps:

- **Build trust** between child and practitioner
- **Create** a calm, consistent, emotionally safe environment
- **Encourage** expression through metaphor rather than direct questions
- **Ease the discomfort** that some children feel in emotionally focused conversations

The case of child 'S'

One powerful example involved a 8-year-old girl, 'S', who had recently lost her younger brother to cancer. Understandably, S was not ready to engage in traditional emotional support. Her family agreed to Drawing and Talking as a gentle starting point. Over 12 sessions, she explored themes through her drawings—including stories with siblings and cats—but avoided sadness and direct references to grief. The sessions helped her feel in control, respected, and emotionally safe.

When the time came to begin ELSA, the foundation laid through Drawing and Talking made all the difference. S was already comfortable working one-to-one, able to talk aloud about thoughts and feelings, and deeply trusting of her practitioner.

“From week one of ELSA, she felt safe. She knew I understood her and would respond appropriately.”

What Makes for a Smooth Transition?

For a successful shift from Drawing and Talking into ELSA, this ELSA highlights the importance of:

- Consistent practitioner across both interventions
- Clear endings and beginnings for each approach
- Maintaining structure and routine
- Staying emotionally attuned and prepared to be flexible
- Allowing continued space to 'just be'

Case Study: Creating Space to Heal



While Drawing and Talking is entirely child-led, ELSA sessions are more fluid—often a mix of child-led and adult-guided activities. The key is ensuring the child feels emotionally safe enough to explore more direct or challenging themes in ELSA, having first experienced a less demanding space.

Demonstrating Impact to Stakeholders

Drawing and Talking also provides a clear rationale for intervention choices—something that's invaluable when speaking with senior leaders, parents, or Ofsted.

"It shows we aren't using a one-size-fits-all approach," she explains.

"Sometimes children aren't ready for direct interventions.

Starting with Drawing and Talking demonstrates we understand their emotional needs and are prioritising wellbeing."

This layered approach reflects a strong, child-centred SEMH (Social, Emotional and Mental Health) strategy, helping schools show they are committed to long-term emotional regulation and resilience, not just short-term fixes.

Advice to Schools New to Drawing and Talking

Her advice to colleagues is clear: start with Drawing and Talking when you're supporting children who are overwhelmed, withdrawn, or emotionally shut down.

"Many children can't identify their feelings, let alone talk about them.

Drawing and Talking gives them the space to begin that journey safely."

When schools adopt Drawing and Talking as a pre-ELSA tool, they open the door to more meaningful, effective emotional support—and ensure children feel seen, heard, and understood, long before they're expected to talk about what hurts.



Children don't always need us to know "why." They need us to offer safety, connection, and acceptance.

Drawing and Talking provides the doorway – a gentle, non-verbal path to regulation and healing.

ELSA provides the scaffolding – the language, strategies, and resilience to navigate life's challenges.

Drawing and Talking →
Upcoming Foundation Dates

Learn more about Drawing and Talking supporting ELSA →

Together, they give schools a powerful framework to meet children where they are — and help them move forward.

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