



**Drawing  
and Talking**

# What's the right time?

**When to use Drawing and Talking or 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 essential. Inspectors will be looking for evidence that schools not only deliver mental health interventions but also have clear knowledge of the outcomes of each intervention's intention. Schools will also be asked to demonstrate why a particular approach was chosen for an individual child.

We know that many ELSAs are also trained and accredited as Drawing and Talking Practitioners. Both approaches share the same aim — supporting children's emotional wellbeing — but they work in different, complementary ways. With this in mind, we've created this booklet to help practitioners and SENDCOs gain clarity on how ELSA and Drawing and Talking each work, and to articulate their distinct purposes.

This resource is designed to make it easier to answer Ofsted's "why this intervention, for this child?" question with confidence — showing not just what you're doing, but the reasoning and evidence behind it.

**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** – a gentle, play-based therapeutic intervention working with the unconscious through drawing, storytelling and symbols.

# ELSA

**ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant)** – a structured, cognitive-based intervention helping children understand and manage their emotions.

Both are powerful, both have strengths and limitations. 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 matters: sometimes Drawing and Talking must come first to prepare a child to benefit fully from ELSA.

# 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 cognitive intervention. It supports emotional literacy and practical coping skills once a child feels safe enough to engage cognitively.

INTERVENTION	 <b>Drawing and Talking</b>	<b>ELSA</b>
Depth of work	Working at the Unconscious Level	Working at the Cognitive Level
Theoretical Basis	Attachment & Jungian psychology	Emotional literacy, cognitive theory
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 sessions help children recognise 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

**ELSA** is like giving the child the map — teaching them the vocabulary, strategies, and self-awareness they need. But a map is useless if the car won’t start.

## In practice:

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

Once regulated, they are better able to access **ELSA** sessions — where emotional literacy and resilience are built.

Together, these two approaches complement each other. One reaches the unconscious, the other strengthens the conscious.





## Strengths & Barriers at a Glance



**Drawing  
and Talking**

# ELSA

**Unlocks unconscious feelings  
without pressure to verbalise.**

**Builds emotional literacy, coping  
skills, self-esteem.**

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

**Evidence-based in schools; aligns  
with DfE's whole-school wellbeing  
principles.**

**Works best for children who are  
dysregulated, withdrawn, or "stuck."**

**Works best for children already  
regulated and ready to think.**

**Requires trained practitioners and a  
consistent safe space.**

**Requires sustained staff time,  
supervision, clear role boundaries.**

# Recommendations to Schools

**Use Drawing and Talking as the first step for children who are 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 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.



**Drawing  
and Talking**

**ELSA**



## 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**

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

**Upcoming Foundation Dates →**

**ELSA**

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

**Learn more about ELSA →**

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

**For more information:**

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