

# Early Childhood Education and Care



Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) refers to education and childcare provided in regulated settings from birth to the start of primary school. This POSTnote summarises the evidence on the association between ECEC and children's development in England and the key factors that affect this. It also covers the impact of government-funded ECEC places on families and the sector, and stakeholder perspectives on public policy priorities.

## Background

In this briefing, ECEC is used to refer to formal education and care provided in settings registered with a regulator, such as Ofsted in England, including childminders, nurseries, playgroups and children's centres. It does not cover informal care provided by relatives or friends, or school reception year. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ECEC is covered in a POST rapid response ([to be published in September 2021](#)). This briefing applies to England only and provides an overview of the:

- evidence on the impact of ECEC on children's development;
- key factors associated with positive development outcomes;
- impact of Government-funded ECEC places in England; and,
- stakeholder views of public policy priorities.

## ECEC sector in England

The UK Government provides support to families in England for ECEC costs. It does this by funding early education and childcare places in regulated ECEC settings ('entitlements') and through subsidies in the tax and benefit systems, including Tax

## Overview

- In England, the best available evidence indicates that some use of high-quality ECEC is beneficial from age 3 for all children and from age 2 for disadvantaged children. There are limited data on children aged 0-2.
- Positive outcomes are strongly associated with the quality of ECEC and the child's home learning environment, and, to a lesser extent, the quantity of ECEC.
- The quality of ECEC in England has improved over the last decade, but it is lower in deprived areas. Many stakeholders consider that some Government policies prioritise quantity over quality of ECEC and that this is widening the disadvantage gap.
- Stakeholders consider key policy priorities to be effectively coordinating early years policies, improving parental engagement and uptake of the funded entitlements, and supporting the ECEC sector to provide high-quality ECEC in a sustainable manner.

Free Childcare, Universal Credit and tax credits (see [Commons Library briefing on childcare](#)). Education is devolved and there are different policies in the devolved Nations.<sup>1-3</sup> In England, the Department for Education (DfE) funds three entitlements (Box 1). The aims of these are to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, promote school readiness and improve employment rates.<sup>4</sup> In 2019-20, DfE distributed around £3.5 billion to Local Authorities (LA's) for the entitlements.<sup>4</sup>

Regulated ECEC settings include private and public providers. In 2019 in England, 1.7 million ECEC places for children (0 – 4 years) were offered by 72,000 private, voluntary and independent (PVI) providers and public (maintained) nurseries.<sup>5</sup> National statistics show that between 2018 and 2020, the majority of 4 year olds accessed their funded entitlements in the maintained sector, such as a reception class (approximately four fifths). In contrast, the majority of 2 year olds (more than four fifths) and 3 year olds (approximately two thirds) accessed their funded entitlement in the PVI sector.<sup>6,7</sup>

**Box 1: Government-funded ECEC in England**

The Department for Education fund three entitlements.<sup>8</sup>

- **Universal Entitlement.** Since 2010, it provides 15 hours per week (38 weeks a year) to all 3- and 4-year olds. In January 2020, take-up was 93%, unchanged from 2019.<sup>6</sup> This includes 4-year-olds in a reception place.
- **Disadvantaged Entitlement.** Introduced in 2013, it provides 15 hours per week (38 weeks a year) of free ECEC to certain 2-year olds, including where families qualify for specified benefits, the child has an Education, Health and Care Plan or is 'Looked After'. In January 2020, take up was 69%, up from 68% in 2019.<sup>6</sup>
- **Extended Entitlement.** Introduced in 2017, it provides an additional 15 hours per week (38 weeks a year) to 3- and 4-year olds of eligible working parents. Taken with the universal entitlement, this totals 30 hours per week. In January 2020, take-up was up 5% from January 2019.<sup>6</sup>

**Evidence on children's development**

ECEC attendance is voluntary and dependent on parental choice. This means it is difficult to directly determine causal relationships between ECEC characteristics and children's development, because effects may be influenced by other factors.<sup>9</sup> In England, there are two major longitudinal research studies, which track the same children's development over time and use statistical controls for background influences, that provide a high-quality evidence base for understanding associations between ECEC and children's development:<sup>9</sup>

- **EPPSE** (Effective Provision of Pre-school, Primary & Secondary Education Project). This ran from 1997–2014 and tracked 3,000 children from age 3 to 16, comparing outcomes with children who had not accessed ECEC.
- **SEED** (Study of Early Education & Development). This started in 2013 and is tracking 6,000 children from age 2 to 7 and compares outcomes between groups that access different amounts and types of ECEC.

Other key studies in England have used administrative data – information created when people interact with public services and collated by the government – to link data on children attending state schools to data on ECEC use, to provide high-quality evidence on ECEC and children's outcomes.<sup>10–13</sup>

**Cognitive development**

Cognitive development refers to the acquisition of spoken and written language, numeracy and problem-solving skills.<sup>14</sup> Data from EPPSE and SEED, as well as from administrative data, indicates that attending high-quality ECEC is associated with positive cognitive outcomes at age 5, particularly for disadvantaged children and children with less stimulating learning environments at home.<sup>12,15,16</sup> EPPSE data show that at age 5, children who had attended ECEC had better cognitive skills, including language, early number concepts and pre-reading, compared with children who did not attend ECEC. While SEED showed cognitive benefits of attending ECEC at age 5, the effects were smaller and more limited. The researchers suggest this may be due to the fact that all children in SEED had some experience of ECEC, whereas in EPPSE comparisons were made with a 'home group' with no ECEC experience.<sup>16</sup> In addition, in EPPSE, start of school measures were taken before entering Reception and for SEED they were taken at the end of Reception and during Year 1.<sup>16</sup>

**Socio-emotional & behavioural development**

Socio-emotional development refers to children learning to understand and manage emotions, form relationships and empathise, and concentrate. Behavioural development refers to monitoring and self-regulating behaviour and attention.<sup>14</sup> Data from EPPSE and SEED suggest that some level of high-quality ECEC is beneficial for socio-emotional and behavioural development measured at age 5, but that high use can have negative effects (see below).<sup>15,16</sup> The EPPSE study found that children who did not attend ECEC were rated more poorly on independence, concentration, co-operation and peer sociability than children who did.<sup>17</sup>

**Physical development**

EPPSE and SEED did not include measures of physical development. Other studies indicate that gross and fine motor skills (such as jumping and cutting with scissors) are important for supporting physical wellbeing and are also mutually supportive of other aspects of cognitive and non-cognitive development.<sup>18–21</sup> Research undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research for the DfE in 2021, building on the 2018 international early learning and child wellbeing (IELS) study, reported that ECEC settings have an important role in supporting children's motor skill and physical development. It called for future research to strengthen the evidence base and to identify the most effective approaches.<sup>20</sup>

**Longer-term benefits**

Some international evidence suggests that positive effects may fade during the first years of school.<sup>22</sup> However, other evidence indicates that high-quality ECEC can lead to long-lasting effects, affecting later educational and employment outcomes, especially if it is high-quality.<sup>23,24</sup> In England, the EPPSE study found that the positive associations between attending pre-school and academic attainment were stronger in primary school but continued into adolescence.<sup>25</sup>

**Impact on the disadvantage gap**

Research shows that ECEC has the capacity to narrow the disadvantage gap, including inequalities in cognitive and socio-emotional development and the gap in educational attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.<sup>26,27</sup> High-quality ECEC is associated with improved language, cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> Disadvantaged children benefit particularly from accessing high-quality ECEC in socially mixed groups.<sup>15,22</sup>

However, analysis by the Education Policy Institute of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), a teacher-led assessment at the end of Reception across a range of developmental goals, suggests that there has been 'very little progress' in closing the gap between children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and children not eligible for FSM between 2013 and 2019.<sup>28</sup> Analysis of EYFSP by the National Audit Office found that between 2016 and 2019 the gap in development between children in the 10% most and least deprived areas had narrowed slightly, but 'remained substantial'.<sup>4</sup> Stakeholders emphasise that ECEC is not a 'magic bullet' and that it is most effective at narrowing the gap when associated with supportive learning opportunities at home, effective statutory education and combined with other policies to tackle inequality.<sup>11,15,25,29</sup>

For example, Children's Centres provide integrated services to families with children (up to age 5 years) in the local community, to support children's development, parenting skills and family health.<sup>30</sup> Research indicates that they can be particularly beneficial for disadvantaged families and can help to reduce the disadvantage gap (Box 2).<sup>29,31</sup> The number of children's centres and Government spending on them has substantially reduced since 2011.<sup>32,33</sup> The current Government committed to champion Family Hubs in its 2019 manifesto, to improve outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable children.<sup>34</sup>

## Factors associated with positive outcomes

### Quality of ECEC

Robust evidence indicates that improvements in children's outcomes, in both the short and long-term, are strongly associated with the quality of ECEC.<sup>22,24,35,36</sup> This includes:<sup>37,38</sup>

- **Structural quality.** This refers to measurable features of the setting, which are often the focus of government policy, such as staff qualifications and group sizes. Evidence indicates that positive development outcomes are associated with higher staff qualifications, training opportunities, higher staff to child ratios and smaller group sizes.<sup>15,22,35,37</sup>
- **Process quality.** This refers to features of the care provided, such as the quality of interactions between children and staff and learning approaches. Evidence indicates that positive developmental outcomes are associated with stable relationships with staff, high quality staff-child interactions that promote language development, a focus on play-based activities and routines where children can take the lead as well as opportunities to be physically active.<sup>22,29,36,39-41</sup>

Structural quality shapes process quality, because it affects the quality of the curriculum and learning approaches, and therefore the experiences of the child.<sup>42</sup> Staff qualifications and training have been highlighted as two key elements of quality.<sup>15,36,43,44</sup> In the EPPSE study, having trained teachers working as curriculum leaders had the greatest impact on quality.<sup>15</sup> One study of administrative data found a small but positive association between children's attainment at 5 and presence of a graduate in PVI settings; remaining at age 11.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, another study of administrative data found that positive effects on children's attainment at age 5 were larger in settings with the highest Ofsted-inspection quality rating but not in settings with highly qualified staff.<sup>12</sup> The researchers argue that this implies that staff quality matters, but that staff qualifications are not an adequate proxy for this.

### *Quality of ECEC in England*

Data suggest that ECEC quality and staff qualification levels have improved between the EPPSE (1998-2000) and SEED (2014-16) studies.<sup>45</sup> Using validated quality scales, all settings were rated as at least adequate in the SEED study.<sup>45</sup> The proportion of providers rated as 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted increased between 2015 and 2019.<sup>4</sup> However, Ofsted quality ratings were lower on average in deprived areas compared to more affluent areas in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Studies in England found that the quality of ECEC was higher in state-maintained settings (such as nurseries attached to schools) and integrated children's centres compared to the PVI sector.<sup>15,45</sup> This may be because ECEC staff in the state-maintained settings tend to have higher qualifications compared to staff in the PVI sector.<sup>45</sup>

## Box 2. Integrated services for the early years

- **Children's Centres.** These were established as part of the Labour Government's Sure Start policy from 1999, initially in the most disadvantaged areas.<sup>46</sup> In 2010 there were 3,620 Sure Start Children's Centres across England, which provided integrated children's services for under 5's and access to ECEC.<sup>33</sup> The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) found that access to these Centres had a small but positive effect on parenting approaches, learning at home and children's social development and physical health.<sup>47-49</sup> Evaluation of Children's Centres in 2015 found that in centres serving disadvantaged communities, use was associated with improvements in the home learning environment.<sup>31</sup> A 2019 IFS study found long-term health benefits of Sure Start.<sup>50</sup>
- **Family Hubs.** These are promoted by the current Government to provide a central point of access for integrated services to support families with children and young people (0-19 years), including early years provision.<sup>34</sup> They were highlighted as one of six key areas for action to improve health and development outcomes in the Government's Early Years review in March 2021.<sup>51</sup> The National Centre for Family Hubs, funded by the DfE, was launched in May 2021 to support best practice and the scale-up of hubs across England.<sup>52,53,54</sup>

## Home Learning Environment (HLE)

The HLE refers to the learning opportunities and activities parents create and do with children in the home, such as reading, drawing and singing nursery rhymes. Evidence shows that the HLE and demographic characteristics, such as parent education level and socio-economic status, are among the strongest predictors of children's development in the early years.<sup>15,42,55</sup> The positive effect of high-quality HLE on social, emotional and educational outcomes continues to age 16.<sup>24</sup> There are effective ways to support parental engagement, such as home visits, promoting activities that support early language and literacy and parenting programmes.<sup>21,29,56-58</sup> National and local initiatives have been established to promote parental engagement.<sup>59,60</sup>

## Quantity of ECEC

### *Age ECEC started*

Data suggests that high-quality ECEC has a positive impact on children's outcomes when accessed from 3 and above.<sup>13,22,27</sup> For children aged 3 and under, international evidence is more mixed.<sup>22,27</sup> EPPSE found that use of high-quality ECEC between the ages of 2 and 3 is beneficial for cognitive outcomes, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> SEED data suggest that for disadvantaged children, starting ECEC no later than 2 for 10 or more hours and accessing more than 20 hours per week on average between 2 and starting school had the greatest benefits.<sup>16</sup> However, evidence also suggests that high use (over 35 hours) of ECEC under age 3 (especially before 2) can have negative effects on socio-emotional and behavioural development for a small number of children.<sup>13,15,16,61</sup> EPPSE did not find any cognitive benefits from ECEC use under age 2 for children overall.<sup>15</sup> Analysis of administrative data found that an extra term of ECEC at age 3 was associated with very small benefits for development at 5.<sup>12</sup>

### *Average weekly hours of ECEC*

In the EPPSE study attending ECEC full time had no additional benefits compared with part-time attendance.<sup>15</sup> SEED findings

suggest that large amounts of time (over 35 hours a week) spent in ECEC, especially in a group setting such as a nursery, is associated with some negative social and behavioural outcomes for some children.<sup>16</sup> However, for children with less stimulating backgrounds, more time spent in group ECEC settings between age 2 and starting school was associated with increased verbal ability at age 5.<sup>16</sup> Attending an ECEC setting with a graduate for more than 15 hours per week at age 3 has been positively associated with children's attainment at 5.<sup>11</sup>

## **Impact of funded ECEC places in England**

### **Factors affecting uptake and impact on families**

Research suggests that free ECEC places are popular among parents and boost the incomes of families with young children.<sup>62</sup> Take-up varies by family and child characteristics, such as socio-economic background, language and whether a child has Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.<sup>63,64</sup> Regional variation is marked.<sup>63</sup> There are several factors affecting take-up of entitlements, which may interact. Research commissioned by DfE in 2018 indicated that key factors that influenced parental demand for funded hours were perceived constraints relating to the costs, quality, nature and availability of provision and parental preference.<sup>63</sup> Research has identified specific barriers to the take-up of entitlements for:

- **Working families.** Research suggests that the universal entitlement has had only modest effects on mothers returning to work, perhaps because it is not sufficient to cover the costs of childcare if working full-time.<sup>65,66</sup> Because the extended entitlement has only been available since 2017, there are limited data on its impact. There is evidence that access to full-time free childcare leads to significant increases in employment of mothers.<sup>65</sup> Survey data indicates that parents perceive the extended entitlement as having a positive impact on their ability to work, flexibility in the hours they can work and family finances.<sup>67,68</sup> However, some research suggests that because it can usually only be claimed in the term after starting work, this is a barrier to low-income families who cannot meet the shortfall.<sup>67</sup>
- **Disadvantaged families.** Across all areas, children from the most disadvantaged families are the least likely to access the entitlements.<sup>4,63</sup> There is substantial variation in take-up of the disadvantaged entitlement between and within LA areas, ranging from 39% to 88% between LAs in 2021.<sup>69</sup> Take-up may be limited by access to places and differences in the type of providers offering funded places to 2-year-olds.<sup>70</sup> Disadvantaged families may also be less likely to take up the entitlements because of the extra charges required by some nurseries.<sup>63</sup> Some research suggests that ECEC provided through voluntary providers or children's centres may be more accessible to low-income families.<sup>64</sup>

A 2018 evaluation of the universal entitlement found that it led to an increase in ECEC participation, but it primarily supported parents to meet the costs of ECEC they would have paid to use without the policy.<sup>71</sup> In 2019, the Commons Education Committee reported that the extended entitlement was 'entrenching inequality rather than closing the gap' and called on the Government to review it.<sup>72</sup> Some research suggests that it benefits more affluent families and may reduce high-quality places for non-working and disadvantaged families.<sup>72,73,74</sup>

## **Impact of funded places on the ECEC sector**

There is a broad consensus among ECEC providers that the extended entitlement has put financial strain on the sector.<sup>75</sup> In 2021/22, the average hourly funding rate provided by the Government to LA's is £5.56 for 2 year olds and £4.88 for 3-4 year olds.<sup>76</sup> These rates have been criticised for not covering the costs of delivering high quality ECEC.<sup>73,75</sup> Data obtained through a Freedom of Information request, indicate that in 2015 DfE itself estimated that the cost of providing a funded ECEC place for a 3- or 4- year old would reach £7.49 by 2020.<sup>77</sup>

Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) indicates that real term spending per hour has been falling since 2017/18.<sup>78</sup> Many PVI settings rely on additional fees paid by parents to top-up public funding for the entitlements.<sup>73</sup> DfE provides supplementary funding to maintained nurseries on top of the hourly funding rate. However, this only applies to hours provided through the universal entitlement.<sup>79</sup> Research by the Sutton Trust suggests that this has placed the maintained sector under financial strain, and that increasing pressure on school budgets is decreasing the scope for cross-subsidising.<sup>73</sup> Recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff is a substantial problem for the ECEC sector, especially in PVI settings.<sup>80</sup> This is linked to low pay and perceived low status of the ECEC sector, and disparities in pay and conditions with teachers in schools.<sup>80-85</sup>

## **Public policy priorities**

Stakeholders have identified several priorities for policymakers to consider in relation to ECEC in England, including how to:

- **Effectively deliver the different aims of ECEC policies and ensure coordination with other early years services.** For example, the Children's Commissioner<sup>86</sup> and the Sutton Trust<sup>74</sup> have called for the eligibility criteria of the extended entitlement to be reviewed, alongside other early years services. The Early Years Commission<sup>87</sup> and Children's Commissioner<sup>86</sup> have called for a cross-government strategy for the early years, led by a cabinet minister.
- **Promote parental engagement and uptake of the entitlements.** For example, the Early Intervention Foundation recommend that understanding how to engage effectively with communities less likely to take up the entitlements could significantly boost take-up.<sup>70</sup> The Sutton Trust recommend that ECEC settings, particularly those in deprived areas, should be resourced to provide more support for parents in terms of the home learning environment.<sup>73</sup>
- **Best support the ECEC sector to provide high-quality ECEC in a sustainable manner.** For example, the Nutbrown Review,<sup>88</sup> Sutton Trust,<sup>80</sup> Education Policy Institute,<sup>82</sup> Early Years Commission<sup>87</sup> and Social Mobility Commission<sup>81</sup> have called on the government to strengthen the early years workforce, including consideration of qualifications and training, alongside pay and conditions. Many stakeholders, including the Commons Petitions Committee<sup>89</sup> and the All Party Parliamentary Group for Childcare and Early Education have called for a review of ECEC funding.<sup>75,90</sup> Some researchers have noted that to support high-quality provision of ECEC, policymakers may need to consider how to refocus spend on ECEC and the role of regulation and inspection.<sup>12,65</sup> Other researchers have called for broader, transformative reform of ECEC.<sup>91</sup>

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