

Early learning: Policies for children's first 3 years

Children's development in their first three years has a huge impact on their later development. The evidence shows that early years services and supports can impact positively on this early development – provided they are of high quality.

From their very first days, children are learning about the world around them. Indeed, children's learning and development is at its fastest before the age of 3. But our main support for children's early learning – the Free Pre-School Year – is only available from 3 years and 2 months at the earliest, and some children only begin it at the age of 4. Children and families need services and supports right from the start of a child's life.

A critical phase of development

Early learning

Children's early learning has a big impact on their later learning. Right from their first days, children start learning about the world around them. And in their earliest years they begin to develop persistence in achieving goals and curiosity about the world – skills that will be vital in their later education. In effect, they are *learning how to learn*.

- Research from the UK shows a close link between children's cognitive development by the age of 3 and their educational qualifications as adults.¹

Language skills

The foundations of literacy are laid from the beginning of a child's life. Communication skills develop early, and oral language skills develop fast in the first three years. By the age of 3, there are already marked differences between children in their language skills.

- Research from the US has shown the vocabulary of 3 year olds from professional families to be double that of 3 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds, reflecting greater exposure to oral language. By the time they *begin* kindergarten in the US, children from professional families have heard 30 million more words than children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.²

Emotions and behaviour

Children's earliest relationships with their families and carers are crucial for their emotional security. And through their early interactions, children develop essential behavioural and social skills, including the ability to regulate their own emotions.

- Research from New Zealand has shown a significant connection between difficulties in children's behavioural development at the age of 3 and problems in adulthood such as depression, anti-social behaviour and criminal activity.³

¹ L. Feinstein (2003) 'Inequality in the Early Cognitive Development of British Children in the 1970 Cohort' in *Economica*, vol.70, pp.73-97.

² B. Hart and T. Risley (1995) *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Michigan: P. H. Brookes.

³ A. Caspi, T. Moffitt and D. Newman (1996) 'Behavioral Observations at Age 3 Years Predict Adult Psychiatric Disorders: Longitudinal Evidence from a Birth Cohort', in *Archives of General Psychiatry*, vol.53, pp.1033-9.

The highest rate of return

Supports in those first 3 years can make a big difference – both care and education services outside the home and supports for parents inside the home – and the quality of those services and supports is critical.

Supporting parents

- The learning environment in the home in children's early years has a big impact on intellectual and social development and language skills. Parents can help their children's early learning through reading to them, setting clear routines and seeking learning opportunities in everyday life. Parents themselves can be supported through home visits, parent-and-toddler groups, and programmes that offer advice on parenting.⁴

Services for young children

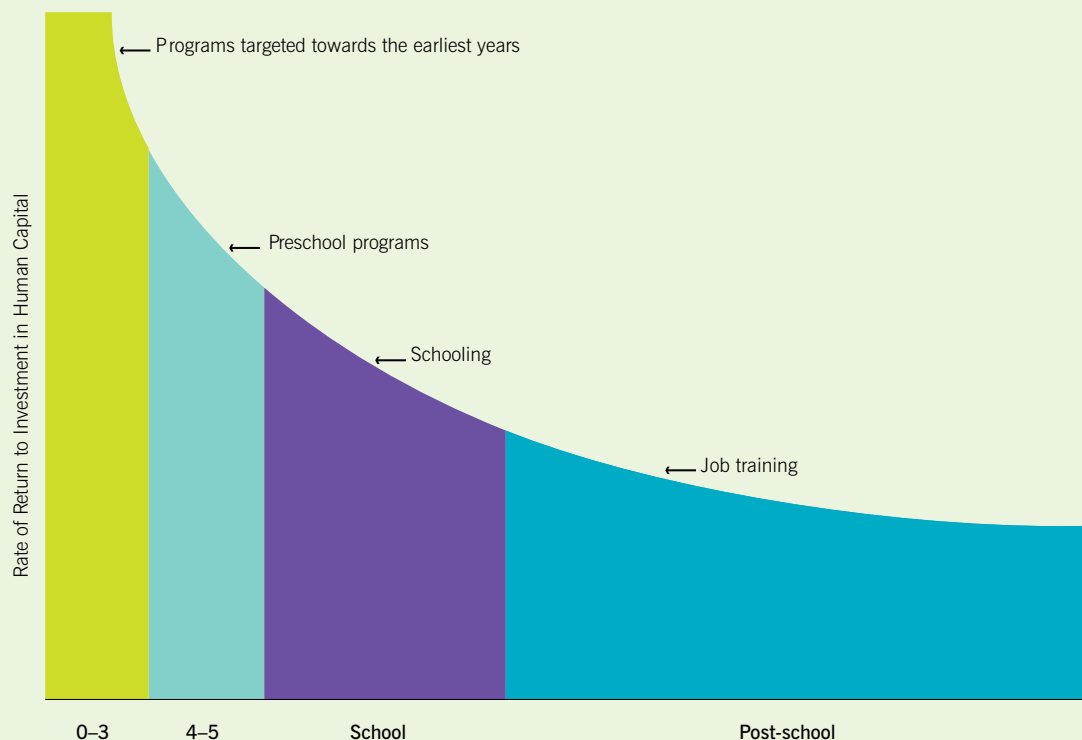
- The EPPE study in the UK has shown that every additional month of pre-school experience from the age of 2 is linked to better intellectual

development, improved independence and social skills.⁵ Crèches, playschools and childminders are not just there to “mind” children – they have important contributions to make to children's early learning and development.

The quality of services is crucial

- Early care and education services must be of high quality if they are to have the positive impact that research on child development has demonstrated.⁶ Quality matters just as much for under-3s as it does for over-3s. Indeed, long hours in low-quality services at a very young age can have a negative effect on children's development.⁷

Drawing on the evidence on the impact of policies to support children's learning and development, economists such as Professor James Heckman – the Nobel Prize winner – have argued that the economic rate of return on educational investment in children is even greater in children's first 3 years than in the pre-school year, as illustrated in the figure:



Returns per annum to a unit dollar invested

Source www.heckmanequation.org/content/resource/heckman-equation-brochure

⁴ I. Siraj-Blatchford and J. Siraj-Blatchford (2010) *Improving Children's Attainment through a Better Quality of Family-based Support for Early Learning*, London: C4EO (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services).

⁵ K. Sylva et al. (2008) EPPE 3-11: *Final Report from the Primary Phase*, London: Institute of Education, p.2.

⁶ M. Burchinal et al. (2010) 'Threshold analysis of association between child care quality and child outcomes for low-income children in pre-kindergarten programmes', in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol.25, issue 2. D. Lowe Vandell et al. (2010) 'Do effects of early child care extend to 15 years? Results from the NICHD study of early child care and youth development', in *Child Development*, vol.81, issue 3.

⁷ E. Melhuish (2004) *A Literature Review of the Impact of Early Years Provision on Young Children*, London: National Audit Office, p.4.

Under-3s in Ireland: a policy vacuum?

With so much at stake, it is vital that we have the right supports and services in place for our youngest children. There is a range of supports and programmes for parents already in place in Ireland which needs to be built on and further developed. In comparison with the care and education of over-3s, however, the care and education of under-3s in Ireland is of less certain quality, less affordable and more fragmented:

Quality

While many services operate to high quality standards, others do not, and those services need more intensive support. The Government has introduced positive measures in recent years to raise the quality of early care and education, but they have largely focused on over-3s:

- Quality in early care and education depends above all on practitioners' skills. In 2010 the Government for the first time announced minimum qualification requirements for early years practitioners – a welcome development – but they only apply to staff delivering the Free Pre-School Year. So under-3s do not benefit. In fact, the Free Pre-School Year incentivises services to put their least qualified staff with under-3s.
- Síolta is our National Quality Framework for early care and education, but it is only in the Free Pre-School Year that services are required to engage with it, even though it was designed for all children aged 0-6. The Aistear curriculum framework was similarly designed for all aged 0-6, but its roll-out is so far limited to the infant classes of primary schools.
- Much care of under-3s is carried out by childminders, but most childminders are unregulated.⁸ Where childminders are unregulated, there is no assurance of the quality of care and education they provide, and no mechanism to enhance quality.

⁸ The Child Care Act 1991 only requires notification to the HSE where a child-minder cares for 4 or more pre-school children from different families.

⁹ OECD (2007) *Benefits and Wages 2007: OECD Indicators*, Paris: OECD, pp.129-130.

Affordability

Financial assistance from the Government is mostly for 3-6 year olds. Early care and education services for under-3s are unaffordable to many families (see box) – even though we know from the EPPE study in the UK that children do better if they start at the age of 2. As a result, many children who would benefit from them do not have the opportunity. At the same time, the high cost of childcare to parents is a major barrier to many parents' employability, raising the level of child poverty.

Integration

There is little connection or continuity between different services. A wide range of services and supports impacts on the lives of young children and their families – especially children younger than 3 – including Public Health Nurses, childminders, crèches, GPs and Speech and Language Therapists. Parents are often unaware of the services available to them, and early care and education services are rarely part of formal referral systems.

The most expensive childcare in Europe

Childcare for under-3s in Ireland remains among the most expensive in Europe and the OECD, amounting to more than 50% of the net income of some families.⁹ Most families with young children receive no financial assistance with childcare costs, other than Child Benefit, which has been cut significantly. A proportion of low-income families receive some help with costs, e.g. through the Community Childcare Subvention scheme – though that is only available for those who live close to a community service that participates in the scheme.



Policies that can make a difference

To help give children the best start in life in their first 3 years, we call for the Government to:

1. Support quality in *all* early years services

Given the central importance of practitioners' skills and training in achieving quality, measures to professionalise the early years' workforce must be extended to all services for children aged 0-6.

- Extend minimum qualification requirements to all practitioners in early care and education services, not just those leading the Free Pre-School Year.
- Broaden the roll-out of the Síolta National Quality Framework and the Aistear early years curriculum framework to all early care and education services.

2. Move towards a second free pre-school year

We know from research that children do better when they begin early care and education services at the age of 2. We warmly welcome recent statements by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald TD, that she would like to move in this direction. While there are significant costs associated with a second universal free pre-school year, it can be introduced in stages.

- Make a commitment in the National Early Years Strategy to introduce a second, universal, free pre-school year within the lifetime of this Government.
- Introduce this measure on a phased basis, initially by rolling it out to children with disabilities and to children in disadvantaged areas (e.g. in the ten areas the Government has indicated for new area-based, child poverty initiatives¹⁰).

3. Make parenting supports accessible to all families of under-3s¹¹

To be effective, there should be no stigma attached to parenting supports, and they should include positive advice for families on how to support their children's early learning in the home. Parenting supports in Ireland have spread rapidly in recent years, but are still often seen as valuable only for "problem families" or where children have behavioural difficulties.

- Use the infrastructure of Public Health Nurses and early care and education services to make parenting supports accessible to all families of under-3s.

4. Regulate childminding

Child protection concerns alone suggest it is unacceptable that most paid childminders are exempt from regulation. It is also a missed opportunity to engage with childminders to help them support children's early learning and development.

- Introduce compulsory notification and provide at least basic training for all paid childminders.

5. Develop area-based, integrated initiatives

Stronger connections are needed between early care and education services and other supports for young children, including Public Health Nurses; supported parent-and-toddler groups; childminder networks; and specialist supports such as speech and language therapists.

- Take steps to fulfil the Government's commitments to develop area-based, integrated initiatives for children and families. Local hubs should build on the infrastructure of early care and education services and Public Health Nurses, and should learn from international experiences such as Sure Start in the UK.

¹⁰ Government of Ireland (2011) *Towards Recovery: Programme for a National Government 2011-2016*, p.22.

¹¹ Start Strong will shortly be publishing a paper which focuses specifically on supporting parents and the home learning environment.



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