



# Why early care and education?

High quality early care and education works:

## For children

First and foremost, quality care and education in the early years helps children to flourish and make the most of their lives. There is a large body of evidence that demonstrates the long-term beneficial effect of quality care and education for young children's development.

## For the economy

A strong economy depends on people's skills, creativity, motivation and knowledge. Investment in young children has high economic and social returns, because its impact on people's skills and dispositions lasts a lifetime.

## For society

Quality care and education for young children helps make society fairer and more equitable through reducing social and economic disadvantage and strengthening equality.

There is growing international recognition of the importance of policies and supports for quality care and education for young children. Ireland's performance has improved significantly in the last decade, but from a low base, and still lags behind most other EU and OECD countries.<sup>1</sup>



## Early care & education

By early care and education we mean care and education in the early years, for children aged 0–6. Early care and education is not limited to any one place or time of the day. Young children develop, learn and are nurtured in many places: in their own homes – with their parents and families – in the homes of their grandparents, other relatives and childminders, and in centre-based services such as crèches, playgroups and naíonraí.

For young children, care and education should be inseparable. From the very start, children's care should be attentive to their capacity for learning and development, while their early education should be based on play and should include a strong focus on social skills and emotional development. Children's need for nurture, caring relationships and learning-through-play extends right through their early years and beyond.



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strong**

Advancing Children's  
Early Care & Education

# For children

There is a large and growing body of evidence on the long-term benefits of quality early care and education for children's development and life chances. The quality of their care and early learning is also vital to children's happiness and well-being here and now. These facts are our starting-point as the best interests of the child should be the primary consideration in policies that concern children (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 3.1).

## Enhancing children's development

The earliest life experiences are critical in the development of the human brain and in forming the skills and dispositions that are essential if children are to have firm foundations on which they can build their lives.<sup>2</sup> International research has demonstrated that quality early care and education brings a wide range of benefits for children's well-being and for their social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive and language development.<sup>3</sup>

The benefits to children of quality care and education in their early years are both widespread and long-lasting. Recent research in the UK has shown that, while the benefits are greatest for disadvantaged children, all children benefit.<sup>4</sup> Research in the US has shown that adults aged 40 who received quality care and education in their early years had significantly higher educational attainment, a much higher earnings level, and were much less likely to have been arrested for crimes, than those who did not receive quality early care and education.<sup>5</sup>

## Care and education – both inside and outside the home

Quality early care and education is not just about services, as families are at the centre of young children's care and education. Indeed, evidence from research suggests that the home learning environment is one of the most important factors in determining children's development.<sup>6</sup> So there is a strong case for combining quality care and education services with supports for children and families in the home.

The full-time care of a loving adult is especially important for the very youngest children. There is evidence that paid parental leave during a child's first year can support a range of positive outcomes for children's development.<sup>7</sup> That is why UNICEF recommends sufficient paid parental leave to enable a parent to remain at home until a child is at least 1 year old.<sup>8</sup>



## Quality is crucial

The evidence shows that early care and education only has strong developmental benefits where it is of sufficient quality. According to a recent review of international research, the following aspects of quality within services *'are most important for enhancing children's development'*:

- *Adult-child interaction that is responsive, affectionate and readily available*
- *Well-trained staff who are committed to their work with children*
- *Facilities that are safe and sanitary and accessible to parents*
- *Ratios and group sizes that allow staff to interact appropriately with children*
- *Supervision that maintains consistency*
- *Staff development that ensures continuity, stability and improving quality*
- *A developmentally appropriate curriculum with educational content.'*

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



# For the economy

Public investment in early care and education is a sound investment with high economic and social returns. Research evidence shows that it enhances economic growth, increases financial returns to the Exchequer, and delivers social benefits including a better educated society and a lower level of crime.<sup>9</sup> Public investment in early care and education is particularly important in a recession, as it lays the foundations for a strong economy in the future.

## An investment in the next generation

Investment in young children has high economic and social returns because its impact on people's skills and dispositions lasts a lifetime. While investment in human capital is essential at all levels of the education system, the returns are highest for education and supports in the earliest years.<sup>10</sup> Nobel Prize-winning economist Professor James Heckman and others have demonstrated that the benefits are cumulative over the life-course: those who receive quality care and education in early childhood make more effective use of primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Prevention and early intervention are cost-effective. Those who do not receive early supports may require much more costly interventions later in life. Investment in young children leads to:

- A firm foundation for the skills, creativity and motivation that are needed in a strong, knowledge-based economy.
- Greater productivity and earnings, leading to higher tax returns and lower welfare payments for the Exchequer.
- Reduced costs of crime and reduced costs to Government in the justice system.
- Reduced costs to Government in remedial education and healthcare.

Economic cost-benefit analysis provides a strong rationale for quality early care and education. Economic analyses have consistently shown positive returns on investment, with benefits ranging from 2.5 to 16 times the costs.<sup>11</sup>

## Social gains require Government investment

The returns to investment are not just benefits for the individual child, they are benefits for society as a whole. Given the large social returns or 'externalities', the market on its own does not result in a sufficient level of investment. In addition, the returns

to investment depend on the care and education being of high quality. Where the Government is not involved, there are real challenges in ensuring high quality care and education for all: parents may not be aware of the benefits of quality, nor of how to judge quality services, and many parents cannot afford to pay for them.

These 'market failures' create a need for the regulation of standards, supports for quality and for upskilling the early care and education workforce, and public funding to make quality care and education services affordable. Following a survey of international research, the OECD concluded that there is 'an overwhelming case for strong government investment in early childhood services'.<sup>12</sup>

## Supporting economic recovery

A 2009 report from the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) argued that quality care and education in early childhood should be a policy priority in the recession as it is 'a good long-term investment for the state and a sound basis for the move towards a knowledge-based economy'.

NESC (2009) *Well-being Matters: a Social Report for Ireland*, Dublin: NESC, p.160.

Also in 2009, the National Competitiveness Council observed that '[i]nternational evidence suggests that Ireland is under-investing in services for younger children'. Referring to the effects of quality care and education on educational attainment and productivity in the economy, the National Competitiveness Council argued that: 'While this is a time of considerable difficulty in the public finances, the case for targeting expenditure where returns are greatest remains strong'.

National Competitiveness Council (2009) *Statement on Education and Training*, Dublin: Forfás, p.20.



# For society

Public investment in care and education for young children can help make society fairer and more equitable through reducing social and economic disadvantage and strengthening equality.

## Breaking the cycle of social exclusion

Quality early care and education can help to break the inter-generational cycle of social exclusion. Recent research in Ireland has shown that 'social class background and parental education are significantly associated with a range of educational outcomes among young people in Ireland, including reading and mathematics performance, grades achieved in State examinations, and how long young people remain in the educational system'.<sup>13</sup> This has major consequences for young people's life chances, which are particularly negative for those who leave school early.

Actions aimed at breaking the cycle of social exclusion are most effective if they start before children reach school-age.<sup>14</sup> Prevention and early intervention include early care and education services as well as supports for children and families in the home.

## Reducing child poverty

Child poverty has a damaging impact on children's development and opportunities.<sup>15</sup> The Government has set as a long-term goal that 'every child should grow up in a family with access to sufficient resources, supports and services, to nurture and care for the child, and foster the child's development and full and equal participation in society'.<sup>16</sup> Where subsidised through public funds, early care and education services help reduce child poverty through lowering the barrier to employment for parents who choose to seek work.<sup>17</sup>

The cost of services is a large barrier to employment for many parents, particularly lone parents. Typical costs in Ireland amount to 35% of the net income of a dual-earner family with two young children where each parent earns two-thirds of the average wage, and more than 50% of the net income of a lone parent who earns two-thirds of the average wage.<sup>18</sup> The high cost of early care and education services is one of the central reasons for the high child poverty rate in Ireland – 7.4% of children lived in 'consistent poverty' in 2007, compared to 4.7% of adults of working age.<sup>19</sup>

## Strengthening equality between men and women

For women to have a fair choice about their participation in employment, education and training and their work-life balance, it is important to have strong parental leave policies as well as early care and education services that are not only affordable and accessible but of high quality.<sup>20</sup>

Where these are not in place, many women's choices are constrained, and the birth of children results in many women taking extended career breaks who – if the right policies and quality services were in place – could choose to return more quickly to employment, education or training.<sup>21</sup> This lack of meaningful choice limits many women's career prospects and participation in public life and is also a key factor in explaining the large gender wage gap in Ireland.<sup>22</sup>

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5. Lawrence J. Schweinhart et al. (2005) *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40*, Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.
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7. Paul Gregg and Jane Waldfogel (eds.) (2005) *The Economic Journal, special issue: Parental Leave, Early Maternal Employment and Child Outcomes*, Vol.115.
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9. For a summary, see Start Strong (2009) *The Foundations of Growth – Investing in the Next Generation*, Dublin: Start Strong.
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18. OECD (2007) *Benefits and Wages: OECD Indicators*, Paris: OECD.
19. Central Statistics Office (2008) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) in Ireland 2007*, Dublin: Stationery Office.
20. National Women's Council of Ireland (2005) *An Accessible Childcare Model*, Dublin: NWCI.
21. Helen Russell et al. (2009) *A Woman's Place: Female Participation in the Irish Labour Market*, Dublin: Equality Authority / ESRI.
22. Seamus McGuinness et al. (2009) *The Gender Wage-Gap in Ireland*, Dublin: Equality Authority / ESRI.

**Start Strong** is a national organisation committed to advancing early care and education in Ireland. **Start Strong** advocates evidence-based policy-making.

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