



Early Childhood Education and Care provided sustained learning benefits during COVID-19

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New research shows that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) attendance boosted preschoolers' learning and preparedness for school in the year after the first COVID-19 lockdown, with greater gains made by children from less advantaged backgrounds. With further support, ECEC can play a critical role in developing skills in children born during the pandemic and levelling socioeconomic inequalities.

Good quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) supports young children's cognitive, language, and social development¹. During the full and partial closures of ECEC settings as part of the 2020-21 COVID-19 lockdowns, access to these benefits were limited.

Improving school readiness, as part of ensuring that every child has the best start in life, has been the focus of various Government initiatives over the past decade (e.g. 2). As children born during the pandemic move through early years and transition to primary school, ECEC has the potential to allow children to catch up on lost development and improve school readiness.

Government investment in early years entitlements is now set to expand provision to all working parents of children aged 9 months to 3 years³. However, the sector faces significant challenges stemming from these changes to early years entitlements, family work patterns, and difficulties in funding and recruitment.

The research summarised here analyses how partial access to ECEC affected children from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds for the year following the initial UK lockdown in March 2020.

171 UK families provided information about their 5-to-23-month-olds' attendance at ECEC (March 2020 to March 2021), their child's skills in vocabulary, thinking, and emotional regulation, as well as the communication, problem-solving, and personal-social skills needed for starting school. Using this data, we analysed changes in children's abilities relative to the ECEC they had received. We also looked at the influence of their socioeconomic background.

Results highlight ECEC's power to boost children's development as settings accommodated ongoing pandemic restrictions. Findings strengthen the case for sustainable ECEC funding based on its delivery of educational attainment, its remediation of the impacts of COVID disruptions, and its ability to narrow attainment gaps.



ECEC boosts language skills and school readiness

After accounting for age-related increases in skills:

- Children who attended more ECEC during the pandemic could understand significantly more new words over the first year of the pandemic than peers who did not attend formal childcare.
- In real terms, this means that a child who attended one day of ECEC per week could understand an average of 16 more new words over the year; attending for two days a week generated 32 more new words, and so on.
- Among children from less advantaged backgrounds, ECEC was also associated with greater growth in their productive vocabularies: each day these children attended ECEC per week, they produced on average 29 more new words over the year.
- The children's 'school readiness' data showed that the more time they had spent in ECEC, the better their personal-social skills, e.g. drinking from a cup without spillages.
- In addition, for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the more time spent in settings, the better their communication skills (e.g. correct usage of at least two pronouns), and problem-solving skills, (e.g. retrieving a sweet from a bottle by turning it upside down).

ECEC provides robust learning benefits

Extending our previous findings from the initial 6-month lockdown period⁴⁵, learning advantages were sustained over the first full year of the pandemic, with specific benefits for children from less affluent home environments. The fact that ECEC settings were grappling with COVID-related disruption into 2021 yet still maintained these protective effects underscores its robust influence on children's development.

By using multiple measures of communicative growth, our findings add to the evidence base that ECEC enriches the development of children growing up without socioeconomic advantage¹. Such inequalities have broadened and deepened during the pandemic^{6,7}: our findings evidence the power and importance of buffering factors such as ECEC⁸.

English education policy states that school readiness gives children the range of knowledge and skills providing the foundation for good progress through school and life⁹. Increasing opportunities for socialisation, emotional wellbeing, physical development, and foundational academic skills through ECEC is likely to address concerns about the school readiness of babies born during the pandemic and help to mitigate socioeconomic attainment gaps.

Children born in 2019–20 missed out on many of these opportunities in their first 1000 days of life. That cohort started primary school in 2023–24: the crucial role of ECEC must be recognised and supported as a matter of urgency.

Recommendations

On the basis of our findings, we make the following policy recommendations for the Department for Education:

- Promote the role of ECEC for children's development, for example by highlighting its provision of *education* as well as care, and as an engine for narrowing attainment gaps, generating higher income and decreasing crime.
- Support lower-income families to access early childhood education and care, e.g. by simplifying application processes and increasing funding for the Early Years Pupil Premium.
- Review ECEC funding under the upcoming sector expansion, with the goal of ring-fencing sufficient resources for high-quality, flexible, professionalised provision. This could include exempting providers from business rates.
- Resource schools to nurture children who may not have developed prepandemic levels of school readiness during the preschool years, e.g. by investing in family and community support and parent engagement opportunities.

Further information

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