

The role of early childhood education and care in shaping life chances

Summary

About this review

The changing face of early childhood series explores how young children's lives have been changing over the last two decades. Two key themes run through the series: the implications of the changing nature of family life and family structures for the economic security, development and well-being of young children; and inequalities between children. This summary presents key learning from the fourth evidence review in the series:

The role of early childhood education and care in shaping life chances.

The review explores the quality, effectiveness and sustainability of early childhood education and care provision and the extent to which it has narrowed gaps

between the most and least advantaged young children. The review's authors—**Nathan Archer** and **Carey Oppenheim**—draw on key insights from work the Nuffield Foundation has funded, as well as other key studies, and set these in the current policy context. The full review is available to download from: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/early-childhood-education-care-shaping-life-chances

We value input and feedback on the series as it progresses and the responses we receive will inform the concluding review. You can provide feedback at: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/contact/feedback-changing-face-of-early-childhood-series



Key learning

Almost all children now experience some combination of informal and formal early childhood education and care well before they start school.

This takes many forms and is more than preparation for primary school. It focuses on the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and well-being.

Despite significant investment, there is no national coherent vision for early childhood education and care.

Over the past twenty-five years, public policy has sought to address different objectives: improving child outcomes, increasing mothers' labour market participation, and addressing disadvantage. The system accordingly is confused and fragmented. It comprises a diverse patchwork of different services and complex funding arrangements. Almost half of places (47%) are provided by the private sector, with 20% provided in state-maintained schools, 18% by the voluntary sector, and 15% by childminders (DfE 2019). Government funding is split between free entitlements that go directly to providers and support for parents to reduce the costs of childcare through the benefit system or tax-free childcare and employer childcare vouchers. The different types of provision and different government incentives to facilitate work, leave some parents confused and uptake is variable.

Government in England now spends around £5.7bn per year on early childhood education and care (including Sure Start children's centres), although real term spending per hour for places has fallen in the last year (Britton et al. 2020)

and government funding is not meeting the true cost of provision of funded places (Ceeda 2019). Given the scale of this investment, it is important to ensure it is enabling the best outcomes for children and families and to assess whether it is sufficient to meet young children's needs, especially for the most disadvantaged. The current picture is one of a dysfunctional market failing those that need it most. This is also seen in the significant strain on the financial sustainability (and in some cases closures) of numerous nurseries, pre-schools and childminders, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are inequalities in access, take-up and outcomes.

For some families the cost of childcare exceeds the support that is available (Coleman et al. 2020). Three- and four-year-olds from the most disadvantaged families are least likely to access their funded places (Campbell et al. 2019). Support targeted specifically at disadvantaged children, such as funded places for two-year-olds, is subject to wide regional variations in take-up, and close to a third of eligible children are missing out (Foster 2021). In some cases, policies designed to increase provision for working parents have inadvertently accentuated disadvantage, such as the 30 hour policy, which effectively gives children of higher-earning parents double the amount of funded early education than many disadvantaged children.

When it comes to children under the age of two, there is a large gap in the provision of funded early childhood education and care, particularly in the light of the closure of many Sure Start Children's Centres. There is also less

understanding of what constitutes quality provision for children under two.

This inequality of access and take-up is important because by the time children start school, there are already gaps in development between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. While this gap has narrowed since 2007, it began to marginally increase in 2018, and by 2019 had returned to 2015 levels, standing at 17.8 percentage points.

Despite significant growth in the number of early childhood education and care places in recent years, successive governments have struggled to resolve the trade-off between quantity and quality of education and care.

Much more attention on understanding and improving the *quality* of provision is needed. We know the core elements that make for enriching learning for young children. The underpinning structures, such as child-to-staff ratios, workforce training and size of group, are critical, as are the relationships, care routines and educational experiences offered by staff.

Key to improving outcomes for young children is the quality of the early childhood education and care workforce.

Research highlights a strong relationship between the level of staff qualifications and the quality of early childhood education and care, but despite cumulative reforms, qualification levels still vary across the sector. The recognition of the importance of early childhood education and care is not matched by the rewards for those working in the system, where there is little incentive to grow a workforce of increased expertise. Pay in the sector remains low and turnover of staff high.

The childcare workforce is less qualified than both the teaching workforce and the general female workforce. In the

private, voluntary and independent sector, the proportion of staff with an NVQ Level 3 qualification fell from 83% in 2014/15 to 52% in 2018/19 (NDNA 2019b). Current investment in qualifications and professional development is piecemeal and there is a lack of long-term strategy to develop the early childhood education and care workforce.

High quality early childhood education and care provision has been shown to benefit young children's development, though the evidence is complex and evolving.

There is a long-standing body of research that shows pre-school provision can have positive impacts on early childhood cognitive and non-cognitive skills. This is particularly true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds when quality is high and provision is accessed at a young age and for a sustained period. However, more recent research shows that some of these impacts fade out in primary school. There is also evidence of positive longer-term impacts of early childhood education and care provision for young people and adults in relation to exam performance, the labour market and some other outcomes.

The impact of COVID-19.

More recently, policy, practice and the experiences of children and families have all been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes in parental employment as a result of lockdown, increased home working and job losses, particularly for women, have had a significant impact on children's attendance at early childhood education and care settings. Short-term impacts suggest children starting school since the pandemic have fallen behind in relation to their learning and personal and social development, especially in the case of disadvantaged children (Ofsted 2020). The medium-term impacts of this are, as yet, unknown.

Conclusions

There are many examples of good practice in early childhood education and care provision and component parts that can form the basis for a successful system. However, the current fragmented structures with worrying geographical variations, exacerbated by shifts in policy and practice, have led to gaps in our understanding of what is going on in certain communities, compounded by COVID-19. The evidence points to the importance of local knowledge and experience.

A whole-system review of early childhood services is needed, one which articulates a clarity of purpose and which meets the needs of both young children and their families and makes a difference to disadvantaged children in particular.

Given the weight of evidence highlighting the complexities and inefficiencies of current programmes, the time is right for a wholesale evaluation of the purpose and provision of early education and care, learning from what has and has not been effective over the last two decades, to create a national early years strategy. Such a review would draw together the wealth of data and research and multiple stakeholders to create a bold, ambitious vision for early childhood education and care for the twenty first century.

Key questions to consider as part of such a review include those we have identified as points for discussion throughout:

- Should public policy and investment be prioritising the early childhood education of disadvantaged children over the childcare needs of the wider population, and if so, what are the implications for the funding and structure of early education and care provision?
 - What type of funding model would increase quality as well as affordability for parents and sustainability of provision?
 - What action can be taken to improve take-up of funded places by children who are most likely to benefit from early childhood education and care provision?
 - How might a long-term strategy, including a review of the funding model, improve the low pay and low status of the early childhood education and care workforce?
 - Can quality in early childhood education and care be effectively but efficiently measured, and if so, who should be doing it?
 - How can early childhood education and care settings further engage and support parents and carers to enhance the learning and development of young children at home?
 - How can multiple services for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers be better integrated and coordinated, starting from the places and services that children already access?
- In addition to these questions, a review of early childhood services needs to address other areas, such as the development of curriculum and listening to the voices of children and parents about their needs.
- Given the complexity of a mixed market of early childhood education and care provision—is there a case for more structured standardisation akin to schools, or are there advantages in a plurality of provision?