



Boosting early years learning during COVID-19

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High-quality, centre-based Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) benefits toddlers' development. New research investigated the effects of the COVID-19 disruptions on attendance and learning. It showed that ECEC boosted language and thinking skills throughout the pandemic, particularly in children from less advantaged backgrounds. This shows the importance of fully-funded ECEC for developing key skills and for levelling inequalities.

ECEC levels inequalities

A wide range of evidence shows that ECEC benefits young children's cognitive, language, and social development. Despite substantial government investment in Free Early Education Entitlements for targeted 2-year-olds, take-up remains uneven. In England, 68% of eligible 2-year-olds benefited from funded places in 2019, with a significantly lower take-up in areas of deprivation. This means that a substantial minority of young children are missing out on the benefits of ECEC. This was compounded by the COVID-19 lockdown from March 2020, when ECEC settings were closed to all children except those of critical workers or those classed as vulnerable. Between March and June, only 5-10% of children who usually attended ECEC did so. This was followed by an extended period disrupted by quarantine measures and prolonged absences.

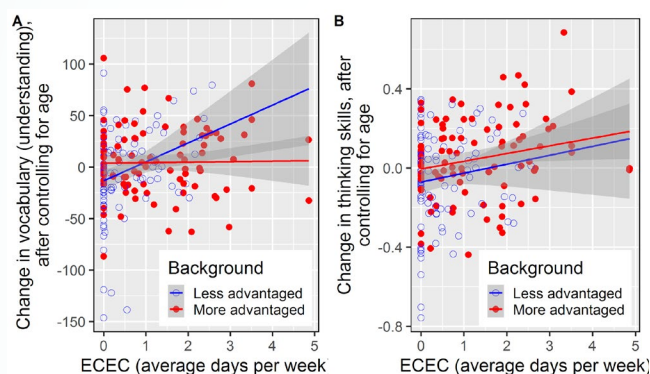
Our project analyses how restricted access to ECEC affected children from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds during the pandemic. Its findings are crucial for informing policy in the event of further lockdowns, when planning how to remediate the impacts of ECEC disruptions, and for promoting ECEC to improve take-up among those families who stand to benefit the most.

189 UK families with 8-to-36-month-olds completed questionnaires during the Spring and Winter 2020 lockdowns. They told us about the childcare they used, and their child's vocabulary and executive functions — the thinking skills used to control impulses and to solve problems. We measured changes in children's abilities relative to the amount of ECEC they had received and their background (neighbourhood, parental education, income, and occupational status).



What did we find?

After accounting for age-related increases in skills, children who attended more ECEC during the pandemic showed greater growth in their vocabulary understanding. This was specific to less advantaged children (Fig. A. red line shows that more advantaged children develop at the same rate as peers who didn't receive ECEC). Whilst good news for children attending ECEC, it suggests that children from less privileged backgrounds who lost access to ECEC were disproportionately disadvantaged by social distancing measures, risking their language development and the knock-on benefits of good language skills. Children who attended more ECEC during the pandemic showed greater growth in their thinking skills regardless of socioeconomic background (Fig. B).



Take-up of nursery places

Our data highlight the clear benefits of ECEC for children's cognitive development, and the disproportionate penalty for disadvantaged children who lost access to ECEC during the pandemic. Coupled with the factors associated with low take-up, e.g. region, economic disadvantage, English as an Additional Language, ethnicity, population mobility, and employment status^[1], it is clear that children from the most disadvantaged families stand to gain most but are least likely to access funded entitlements.

The DfE reports both provider- and parent-related factors affecting take-up^[1]. Overwhelmingly, ECEC providers report insufficient funding for 2-year-olds, while parents cite a lack of need relating to their own employment status, a desire to be involved with their children (including wanting to teach them about their cultural background), attitudes about the appropriate age for formal education, and how much they trust formal ECEC to meet their child's needs. Misconceptions over minimum hours and eligibility criteria are also barriers. Lack of sustainable funding is a serious ongoing concern in the sector. Calls continue for increased government funding to ensure that delivery is viable and quality is maintained.

Recommendations

On the basis of these data, and the broader context of ECEC provision, we recommend that the Government:

- Conducts a wholesale review of ECEC funding with the goal of ring-fencing sufficient resources for high-quality, flexible provision.
- Promotes the educational role of ECEC for children's development, alongside its childcare function.
- Removes barriers to the take-up of funded places, e.g. by providing families with timely information about different types of ECEC and entitlements relative to their specific circumstances and requirements.
- Improves the application process, e.g. by moving to an annual renewal system for eligibility.
- Keeps ECEC settings open to children from disadvantaged backgrounds throughout future lockdowns with adequate protections for staff.

Further information

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Reference

[1] Department for Education. (2018). Take-up of free early education entitlements. Research report. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/take-up-of-free-early-education-entitlements>