



Early learning and childcare



Why is it important?

Children's early learning experiences and relationships affect their health and wellbeing as well as their socio-emotional, cognitive and language development. All children can benefit from attending good quality childcare but children from poorer backgrounds have the potential to gain the most. Living in poverty can disrupt parent-child relationships and limit opportunities for home-based learning. Children from poorer backgrounds have been shown to lag behind their more affluent peers from a very early age.

Early learning and childcare play a role in mitigating the effects of poverty. Attending good childcare is linked with improved school readiness, higher educational attainment and employment, as well as lower levels of delinquent and criminal behaviours. In addition, provision of childcare can help parents to take up education, training or employment opportunities and assist them in developing a supportive home environment and effective parenting approaches. However, the quality of childcare is important. Poor quality childcare can have lasting detrimental effects.

The [Scottish Government](#) currently (2016) funds 600 hours early learning and childcare per year for all three and four year olds, as well as those 2 year olds that are likely to benefit most. In the latest [Plan for Government](#), there is a commitment to increase this provision to 1,140 hours by 2020.

Current situation

In 2012-14 in Glasgow, about 7% of pre-school children had learning or development difficulties. However, there were differences between neighbourhoods. The proportion of pre-school children with difficulties varied between 3% and 12% across Glasgow neighbourhoods.

In 2015 in Glasgow, about 24% of children had a communication delay at 27-30 months. However, there were differences between neighbourhoods. The proportion of children with communication delay at this age varied between 10% and 35% across Glasgow neighbourhoods.

Are there inequalities to consider?

Children from poorer backgrounds may face barriers to the access of good quality childcare. Ofsted found that in the most disadvantaged areas, fewer childcare providers were graded good or outstanding than in the most affluent areas.

Challenges and solutions

In general, good quality childcare settings are associated with:

- Low child-adult ratios.
- Well-educated providers with specialised training. Establishments which employ a qualified teacher have been found to be of higher quality.
- A stimulating environment with spacious, well maintained and pleasant indoor and outdoor areas.

For children under three years, research has identified four key elements:

- Stable relationships and interactions with sensitive and responsive adults.
- A focus on play-based activities and routines which allow children to take the lead in their own learning.
- Support for communication and language.
- Opportunities to be physically active.

These elements need to be supported by structural conditions that help create a satisfactory learning environment:

- Knowledgeable and capable practitioners, supported by strong leaders.
- A stable staff team with a low turnover.
- Effective staff deployment (e.g. favourable ratios, staff continuity).

- Secure yet stimulating physical environments.
- Engaged and involved families.lead in their own learning.
- Support for communication and language.
- Opportunities to be physically active.

In addition, NICE recommends that, in particular for vulnerable children, early learning and childcare services should:

- Offer flexible attendance times.
- Address barriers to attendance e.g. transport costs.
- Be based on an ethos of openness and inclusion.
- Focus on social and emotional as well as educational development.

Examples of positive action

1. Learning about religious and cultural diversity at Rosshall Nursery. Children at Rosshall Nursery in Glasgow learned about Chinese New Year through a range of well-planned play activities.

2. Cadder Primary School early years transition project provides an environment where, by the time the children start primary 1, they are already part of the school and the community.

3. Family Fresh Air Club: Families from the Strathmartine area in Dundee were invited to take part in the Family Fresh Air Club with countryside rangers. The aim was to show that families could enjoy the outdoors for very little cost, at locations which were within easy reach of their homes. Mums, dads, grannies and grandpas, and their children/grandchildren enjoyed the experience of a short walk and a themed activity in a different setting each week.

NB: The links to these projects no longer work and have been removed. We have no information on whether these projects have continued.

Links to other issues

[Children's wellbeing](#)

[Access to greenspace \(Evidence for Action briefing\)](#)

Links to other resources

Scottish Government (2014): [Building the Ambition](#). Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Maternal and Early Years [archived website]: [Early learning and childcare: 0-3 years and 3-5 years](#)

Mathers, S. Eisenstadt, N., Sylva, K., Soukakou, E. Ereky-Stevens, K. (2014): [Sound Foundations: A Review of the Research Evidence on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care for Children under Three](#). Oxford: Oxford University

NICE (2012): [Social and emotional wellbeing: early years](#). [PH40]

OECD: [Early childhood education and care](#)

Education Scotland (2016): [How good is our early learning and childcare?](#)