



Department
for Education

Early education and childcare

Research priorities and questions

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General Approach to research needs and priorities

This paper is one of a series of 15 which aims to:

- promote the importance of robust quantitative evidence, in combination with other methods, to increase understanding of ‘what works’ in education and children’s services;
- identify evidence gaps and promote discussion of them with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders;
- initiate collaboration with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders to research these issues; and,
- support work that helps understand and tackle the barriers to evidence based practice, including how to make evidence accessible to practitioners.

The principles behind the department’s research strategy are inspired by Ben Goldacre’s vision¹ in the Department for Education Analytical Review². In future, the development and use of evidence should be increasingly driven and owned by the research community, sector bodies and practitioners.

The published suite of priority and question papers between them cover the department’s key areas of work and provides a coherent strategic context for the research community, sector bodies and practitioners as well as the department, to plan and prioritise research. The department will continue to commission research, informed by the published priority questions

Views about the research questions and priority papers, recent findings, on-going research or evidence gaps are warmly welcomed. We will also be arranging a series of discussions throughout 2014 with practitioners, the research community and other stakeholders to discuss views and help shape departmental plans to filling evidence gaps. If you want to be involved please email us at:

Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk, follow us on Twitter (@educationgovuk) or like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/educationgovuk).

¹ Goldacre, B.(2013), [Building Evidence into Education](#)

² The Department for Education (2013), [Analytical Review: The Department](#)

Early Education and Childcare: the policy context

High quality early education and childcare promotes children's development and is the foundation for their future success at school and in later life. It also helps to narrow the gap between those from disadvantaged families and their peers from more affluent and stable families. Reliable and affordable childcare is vital too in helping to give parents the choice to get into and remain in work.

The Government's vision, outlined in the department's *More Great Childcare* and *More Affordable Childcare* policy papers³, - both published in 2013 - is that: all children can benefit from high quality early years provision, whatever their background and wherever they live; and parents can access the affordable childcare that provides them with choices, including enabling them to work the hours they want.

Though there are many diverse examples of excellent early education and childcare practice, more needs to be done to encourage providers and other stakeholders to work collaboratively and learn from the best, both here and in other countries.

The Government's programme of policy reform focuses on a number of key areas that evidence tells us will develop children's propensity to learn and reduce social inequalities, by driving improvements in the **quality**, **availability** and **affordability** of early education and childcare.

The Government will raise **quality** by:

- Working with the National College for Teaching and Learning (NCTL) to improve qualifications and training, including introducing Early Years Educators and Early Years Teachers;
- Strengthening inspection, and further simplifying regulatory requirements to focus on outcomes;
- Increasing the evidence base on pedagogical practice and approaches in the early years in terms of the structure of teaching and curriculum content;
- Reforming the local authority role in the delivery of training and improvement support to make clear that Ofsted is the arbiter of quality in the early years, with local authorities focusing their resources on supporting Requires Improvement providers ; and
- Improving assessment and accountability in the early years including by exploring the scope for a reception baseline, and working with the Department of Health on a more robust assessment for two year olds.

³ Department for Education (2013) [More Great Childcare](#);
Department for Education (2013) [More Affordable Childcare](#).

It will increase the **availability** of different sorts of early education and childcare and provide greater **choice** for parents, including by:

- Making it clear that we want more schools to provide or extend their early years offer and the care they deliver before and after school, and at holiday times; and showing why this is in the interests of the school ;
- Introducing childminder agencies; and
- Supporting existing providers by making it easier for them to offer childcare and encouraging new ones to enter the market by reducing red tape and removing planning restrictions, simplifying registration requirements and extending exemptions to the learning elements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

It will improve the **affordability** of childcare for families by:

- Establishing a new entitlement so 260,000 two year olds receive Government-funded early learning;
- Improving the efficiency of the early years funding system by: ensuring that good or outstanding providers automatically receive government funding for 2, 3 and 4 year olds; developing a national funding formula; and securing capital funding to help deliver the funded early learning for two year olds; and
- Increasing childcare support to improve work incentives and making it worthwhile for parents to work up to full-time hours by: introducing new tax-free childcare for working families from autumn 2015; and increasing the support to lower income families from 2016 as part of Universal Credit.

This paper should be read in conjunction with the department's Teachers and Teaching Research Priorities, published in 2013⁴, which has relevance for the early education and childcare workforce. The Chief Executive of the National College for Teaching and Learning, Charlie Taylor, has also set out his vision for a 0-18 system which drives up teacher quality across the age range.

⁴ Department for Education, [Research Priorities and Questions Teachers and Teaching 2013](#)

The high level research need

There is a need for a stronger body of national and international evidence on current policies, programmes and organisation that identifies effective practice and provision in early education and childcare (including the transition to primary school) to support practitioners; and is increasingly owned at setting level. The evidence should demonstrate how to:

- Generate the best outcomes for children, at provider level as well as at national level, through structural arrangements on funding, legislation and inspection;
- Help create a dynamic and well-functioning childcare market; and
- Deliver the information, advice and support that parents and providers need.

Through a refocused inspection regime, the Government will help encourage/expect providers increasingly to demonstrate how they are using evidence-based practice. In order to support providers to do this, the Government will encourage collaborative working between settings, service deliverers and research organisations.

The Government will also identify, and disseminate the learning from, best practices and innovation nationally and internationally (including benchmarking our performance against our competitors) through consistent and easily accessible information on policies and programmes.

We will continue to enhance access to our early education and childcare datasets to encourage research and statistical analysis and improve knowledge and understanding of policy and practice. The department's Foundation Years benchmarking tool, published in 2012⁵, contains statistical information on a range of key early education indicators. It covers all local authorities and can be used by individual LAs to: compare their systems and outcomes against those of others; and drive improvements and increase value for money. Providers and parents can also use the tool to understand better the early education landscape in their area and local decision-making.

We will also contribute actively to the development of internationally comparable early education and childcare indicators.

⁵ [Foundation Years Benchmarking Tool](#)

Research Summary and gaps

High quality early education and childcare can have a lasting impact on children's attainment and behaviour, particularly for the most disadvantaged. A child's reading and maths ability at entry to school is a strong predictor of their achievement in these subjects at ages ten and fourteen.⁶

The qualifications of early years staff are recognised as one of the best predictors of the delivery of that quality provision⁷ - especially those settings led by well qualified staff⁸; and those with a strong educational focus where trained teachers work alongside and support less qualified colleagues.⁹

Despite this extensive evidence about the impact of high quality early education and childcare, teaching and learning, there are important gaps in the evidence base about how to secure and sustain the best possible standards and the practice that makes the most difference to children's lives. In order to address these gaps we have commissioned the *Study of Early Education and Development* (SEED) which began in autumn 2013¹⁰. This new, large scale, longitudinal study (due to be completed in 2020) will assess the effect of early education provision at ages 2, 3 and 4 on children's outcomes; and will assess the extent to which Government investment in early years offers value for money. It will publish its initial baseline report in 2014, with the first reports on setting quality due in 2015 and 2016. In addition, the department has commissioned the OECD to carry out an international policy review of early years pedagogy the report of which will be published in November 2014.

Furthermore, international and national evidence reports high costs of childcare in England. While childcare cost data is highly complex, costs are generally considered to have increased over time in this country^{11 12}.

The Government carries out a regular survey of parents, which provides nationally representative statistics on families' views on, and experiences of, childcare and early education. The statistics relate to children age 0-14 and are wide ranging including topics

⁶ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2004) [The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education \(EPPE\) Project: Final Report](#) DfES. SSU/FR/2004/01

Sylva, K et al (2008) [Final Report from the Primary Phase: Pre-school, School and Family Influences on Children's Development during Key Stage 2 \(Age 7-11\)](#) EPPE. Research Report DCSF-RR061

⁷ OECD reference OECD (2012a), [Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care](#), OECD Publishing.

⁸ Mathers et al (2007) [Quality of Childcare Settings in the Millennium Cohort Study](#).

⁹ Mathers et al (2011) [The Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund](#) DFE RR-144

¹⁰ Led by the National Centre for Social Research, Professor Edward Melhuish, 4Children and Frontier Economics

¹¹ OECD (2011b), [Doing Better for Families](#), OECD Publishing.

¹² Family and Childcare Trust (2013) [Childcare Costs Survey 2013](#)

Family and Childcare Trust (2013) [Holiday Childcare Costs Survey 2013](#).

such as perceptions of availability, quality and affordability. Estimates of use for various different packages of formal and informal childcare are provided.

In addition, the Government has commissioned Ipsos Mori to carry out research into the information that is available to parents about childcare and early learning. It will report its findings in March 2014.

The Government also carries out a regular survey of childcare and early years providers. It collects a wide range of information, including the characteristics of both providers and the workforce, number of places and children and the qualifications of staff. The survey also collects information on the average fees charged, providers' total average income, profitability, and the proportion of places which need to be filled for providers to break even. Evidence gaps that will remain include:

- The most effective teaching, staffing, organisational and collaborative models of early education and childcare, so greater certainty and clarity can be fostered amongst practitioners and parents over what works; and
- The best means of reinforcing the continuity with, and transition to, primary schooling.

In addition, the childcare market is diverse and complex and a greater understanding is needed of:

- How it functions, including the most effective means of encouraging expansion, driving up quality and stimulating demand - and understanding the main drivers of and pressures on providers' costs;
- The most effective business models, in order to provide exemplars for potential new entrants to the market; and
- The relationship between the supply of childcare and levels of parental employment.
- While data from our survey of providers tells us how much some settings charge parents per hour, we can improve our understanding of how much such services actually cost households on a weekly basis after accounting for various different patterns of childcare use and various types of support such as childcare benefits, childcare vouchers, and Government funded early education for two-, three- and four-year-olds.

Future Early Education and Childcare Research Priorities

Looking ahead and building on current knowledge and plans, we have identified three key research themes: raising quality; increasing choice; and improving affordability. Clearly these three are closely inter-related and it is important that research looks at the impact in the round.

They are intended as prompts to help indicate where further analytical and evaluative work would most usefully be focused, whether by Government, independent researchers, national or international early education and childcare organisations.

We also need to understand how these issues might impact differentially across the diverse childcare market which covers all early education and childcare of over two hours a day for children from birth to the school years.

These priorities will be revisited at regular intervals, as evidence gaps are addressed and new areas for investigation emerge.

Raising Quality

- What factors best guarantee high quality early education and childcare?
 - What can be learned through international comparisons about how to ensure quality provision?
 - Are any of the factors different for under 3s?
 - What factors best support an effective transition and continuity from early education and childcare into school?
 - What are the most cost-effective and sustainable ways to achieve a professional and confident workforce, to deliver high quality provision? How is this achieved in other countries?
- What are the most cost-effective mechanisms and models for delivering Continuous Professional Development to the early years workforce (respecting the differences between childminders, school-based provision etc.)? Could a provider-led model, as part of Teaching Schools, work effectively?
- What are the relative impacts on children's developmental outcomes of different patterns of childcare and early education, using different types of practitioners with different levels of qualification? What are the cost/benefits of using graduate, teacher-led sessions as a part of a child's broader day of childcare?

Increasing Choice

- What are the most effective models of early education and childcare provision, as seen internationally, and how can they be widely adopted in England?
- What hours do nurseries, primary schools and secondary schools open to offer childcare provision? What factors support longer opening hours?
- The childcare market is fragmented and, in some areas, dysfunctional and does not meet parents' needs. How might it become more cohesive and function more effectively for the benefit of families?
- What barriers should be removed to enable a coherent market to develop offering increased choice and flexibility to parents, whilst ensuring high quality outcomes for children?
- What are the incentives that can make it easier for - and encourage - new providers, including those currently working in other countries, to enter the childcare market?

Improving Affordability

- What estimates could be made of the costs of provision per place to providers, by region and provider type?
- What methods could be used to estimate the costs of childcare to parents more rigorously than current survey approaches?
- What methods of supporting parents with the costs of childcare have the greatest impact on uptake?
- What approaches are most effective in simplifying the Government's early education funding and ensuring the maximum amount reaches the front line?

Engaging with Future priorities

We would like individuals or organisations to respond to this and you can do this in various ways:

- Share with DfE any existing research evidence or current work relevant to questions. Email to Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk.
- Prioritise research effort or bids in the light of the evidence questions.
- Debate evidence gaps and priorities with your own associations or other stakeholders. DfE would be interested to hear any views emerging - email as above.
- Follow us and join the discussion on Twitter (@educationgovuk)
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