



Department
for Education

Research and analysis

Research brief

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Applies to England

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Overview

Five to Twelve is a longitudinal study of children in primary education, funded by the Department for Education (DfE).

It seeks to understand educational and wellbeing outcomes of children, and how these are linked to social inequalities across England in the 2020s.

Year 1 findings draw attention to the challenges faced by both children eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs (SEN). These children experience disadvantage at almost every level at the very start of their academic journeys.

Findings also highlight the relevance of parental education and household income to factors that are associated with later educational outcomes.

Overall, year 1 of Five to Twelve contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors shaping children's educational trajectories in contemporary England, which will be built on in future years of the study.

Research objectives

At the heart of Five to Twelve is a drive to better understand the role socio-economic inequalities play in relation to primary school children's education and wellbeing outcomes.

This report presents baseline findings from the first year of data collection. It describes the characteristics, behaviours, home environment and school experiences of year 1 children in England.

It also examines how children in the following groups compare on the wide range of measures collected in the survey. It looks at a child's:

- eligibility for free school meals
- SEN
- gender
- household income
- parental education

Methodology

The Five to Twelve cohort of children in year 1 (aged 5 and 6 in the 2023 to 2024 academic year) in state primary schools in England was randomly selected from DfE's National Pupil Database, with a boost of those eligible for free school meals.

Survey interviews were conducted with 8,632 families in their homes across England between November 2023 and August 2024, representing a 47% response rate.

Main findings

The first year of Five to Twelve revealed a range of socio-economic and demographic disparities which were present at the start of primary school.

Child health, SEN, health behaviours and socio-emotional measures

Children eligible for free school meals, those with SEN, those from lower-income households, and those with less well-educated parents were more likely to have longstanding health conditions.

Around half (54%) of children had a regular bedtime, and 37% exercised daily.

Children with SEN were less likely to have regular bedtimes or exercise. Those with SEN or eligible for free school meals also slept fewer hours and were rated by teachers as having less well-developed motor skills.

Socio-emotional difficulties were measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman and Goodman, 2009).

Significant variation was found:

- 44% of children with SEN had scores indicating difficulties, compared to 10% without SEN
- 30% of free school meal-eligible children had scores suggesting difficulties, compared to 10% of non-eligible children
- boys were more likely to have scores indicating difficulties (17%) than girls (10%)

Household characteristics

Most children (78%) lived with 2 parents, while 21% lived in lone-parent households.

Free school meals-eligible children were more likely to be in lone-parent households (59% compared to 13% of non-eligible children).

One per cent of children lived with a family member but not a birth or adoptive parent, and less than 1% lived with foster carers or were looked after.

Co-resident fathers were predominantly in paid work (92%), compared to 69% of co-resident mothers.

One-fifth (19%) of children had a parent living separately (own household parent), rising to 50% of children eligible for free school meals.

Own-household parents were usually fathers (92%). Two-thirds of these children saw their own-household parent at least once per week, with 57% staying overnight during term time.

Main household home-learning environment

The majority of families (83%) engaged in home-learning activities at least a few times per week.

Free school meal-eligible households, as well as those with a lower income or lower parental education took part in home-learning activities less frequently. This was also true for children with SEN.

Screen time was higher for free school meal-eligible children, those with SEN, and boys. Over a quarter of children eligible for free school meals used screens for 3 or more hours daily, compared to 15% of children not eligible for free school meals.

School environment and attainment

Three-quarters of the cohort were predicted to meet expected standards in maths (78%) and reading (77%) by the end of key stage 2.

Children eligible for free school meals, with SEN, from lower-income households, or with less educated parents were less likely to be thought to meet standards.

Cognitive ability

Cognitive assessments revealed correlations with socio-economic and demographic variables.

Verbal skills were strongly linked to parental education and socio-economic status, and children with SEN scored lower on average. Non-verbal reasoning and working memory showed similar patterns.

Implications

The Five to Twelve year 1 report provides a baseline for novel research into the lives of primary school children, demonstrating its value as a resource on primary education.

The findings draw attention to challenges faced by children eligible for free school meals and those with SEN, while also underscoring the relevance of parental education and household income to factors linked to future outcomes.

Future research will build on these findings to explore how these factors evolve over time, and provide in-depth insights into children's wellbeing, attainment and outcomes.

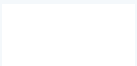
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