

Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Study of Quality of Early Years Provision in England

This document summarises key findings of the SEED report ‘**Study of Quality of Early Years Provision in England**’ published by the Department for Education (DfE) in Dec 2017.^{1,2}

Study of Quality of Early Years Provision in England

The ‘Study of Quality of Early Years Provision in England’ is a study of 1,000 early years settings in England. Settings included private and voluntary childcare providers (such as day nurseries and pre-schools), nursery classes in schools, maintained nursery schools, children’s centres and Local Authority nurseries. The settings in this study were a subsample of settings attended by children in the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), a longitudinal study of almost 6,000 children which began in 2013. The study is DfE funded and is being undertaken by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), Action for Children, Oxford University and Frontier Economics.

Structural characteristics of the setting (including adult to child ratios, staff qualifications and group size) were measured through a questionnaire. Process quality, including the quality of educational practices and experiences that support children’s development, was measured through observations lasting half a day.

Key findings

Quality across all types of providers was generally at least adequate, and a comparison with previous DfE research suggests that quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) as well as staff qualification levels appear to have improved in England over the past 15 years.

Although average overall quality at all setting types was good, maintained nursery classes and schools as well as children’s centres tended to score a little higher on process quality than private and voluntary settings. Settings caring for three- to four-year-olds also tended to score a little higher than those caring for two-year-olds.

Quality of provision was similar across the most and least deprived areas. Some regional variation in quality was observed, partly relating to differences in types of childcare provision prevalent in different regions.

A number of setting characteristics were associated with higher quality provision, with variation seen by type of provider and age of child.

In private settings, higher quality provision was particularly associated with:

- Narrower age range of children accepted at the setting (e.g. minimum age of two, or lower maximum age)
- Larger setting size (offering a higher number of places)
- Higher average level of staff qualification

¹ More information about methods and findings from this quality study and the SEED longitudinal study, including findings from a separate study of quality in childminder settings, can be accessed at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/study-of-early-education-and-development-seed>

² A revised version of this report was published May 2018

- Higher staff to child ratio (i.e. having fewer children per member of staff), particularly in two-year-old settings
- Having specialist SEN/D provision (age three and four settings only)

In voluntary settings, higher quality provision was particularly associated with:

- Staff training and development (i.e. having a staff training plan in place)
- Higher staff to child ratio (i.e. having fewer children per member of staff), in three- to four-year-old settings

In nursery classes or schools, higher quality provision was particularly associated with:

- Lower maximum age for children accepted at the setting
- Staff training and development (i.e. having a staff training budget in place)
- Lower rate of staff turnover

Conclusions

Good quality ECEC is being delivered by different types of providers across England, and improvements in quality have been seen over time. This may be associated with concurrent improvements in staff qualifications among other factors. Given that past research has indicated variation in quality relating to area deprivation and the new research from SEED has not, this may indicate that efforts to address quality in disadvantaged areas have been effective. A number of setting characteristics which are seen to be associated with process quality may be potential areas for development to further improve ECEC quality in England.

Measures

In settings caring for two-year-olds, process quality was measured in two ways:

- The Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R) measured overall quality (space and furnishings, personal care routines, listening and talking, activities, interaction and programme structure).
- The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEW) measured the quality of staff to child interaction (building trust, confidence and independence; supporting and extending language and communication; supporting emotional wellbeing, learning and critical thinking; assessing learning and language).

In settings caring for three- to four-year-olds, process quality was measured in three ways:

- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) measured overall quality (personal care routines, language reasoning, activities, interaction, programme structure).
 - The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Extension (ECERS-E) measured educational quality (literacy, maths, diversity).
 - The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEW) measured the quality of staff to child interaction (as above).
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