

# England joins international PISA study using tablet-based tests on five-year-olds <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Daynurseries.co.uk

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 6 Jul 2017

## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

The Department for Education has revealed that 20 schools and childcare settings in England are to take part in a pilot testing scheme on five-year-olds as part of an international study.

Researchers say the study will give countries an in-depth insight into children's learning at a critical age enabling them to share best practice.

The Early Learning and Child Well-being Study will be run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and will use a combination of interactive stories and games on tablets with at least 3,000 children in at least 200 settings per country and with up to 15 children per setting.

When the idea was mooted earlier this year, James Bowen, director of the middle leaders union NAHT Edge, said there was a "real need for caution" when it comes to early years assessment, adding any assessment during the period should be done by observation rather than tablet-based tests.

Concern it could narrow the curriculum

Peter Moss, emeritus professor of early years education at University College London's Institute of Education, said that there was concern in the sector that these tests would result in the narrowing of the curriculum if too much importance were placed on results.

The tablet-based tests have been described as the 'pre-school PISA', a test which already exists for 15-year-olds to provide a national benchmark for comparing the education systems in over 70 countries.

Mathias Urban, professor of early childhood at the University of Roehampton, said that such a standardised approach will not be reflective of children's early years experiences.

The study will use activities on tablet computers to look at the social behaviour, empathy, memory and self-regulation of five-year-olds, as well as their early skills in language, literacy and numeracy.

It will also take into account other contextual factors including family characteristics, home environment and individual circumstances, based on information from questionnaires that parents and staff will be asked to complete.

OECD member says it will 'provide valuable insights'

Iram Siraj, Professor of Early Childhood Education at UCL Institute of Education and a member of the OECD's technical advisory group on the IELS, has defended the study saying it will "provide valuable insights into how five-year-olds develop, and these will benefit both professionals and parents who want to know how best to support their children's early home learning".

He added: "The holistic approach of the IELS will give us a better understanding of young children's social and emotional wellbeing, not just their academic skills. It will be carried out using enjoyable, age-appropriate assessments with stories and games by professionals who are used to working sensitively with this age-group."

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) will administer the tests in England. The US is also taking part in the study but countries such as Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Belgium have said they will not be participating.

Minister for Children and Families, Robert Goodwill said: "We already know that a child who attends any pre-school can increase their GCSE attainment by as much as seven grades, so now we want to sharpen our understanding of how it can have the most impact. This study will build on the evidence available, driving our work tackling low social mobility and helping to spread opportunities for all children."

Sector is wary of assessments based on data gathering

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-School Learning Alliance, said that experience has taught the sector to be “wary” of early assessments focused on data gathering, rather than improving learning outcomes. He said: “We know the enormous pressures that children today face as a result of a growing obsession with gathering data, testing and league tables. Any attempt to place such pressure on children aged just five-years-old should, and most likely will, be roundly rejected by the education sector.”

The pilot will take place during October to December 2017. Around 300 children in 20 schools or childcare settings will take part in each participating country.

Following a review, a decision will be made whether to proceed with the main study, due to take place in autumn 2018. This will include 3,000 children from 200 schools or settings in each participating country.

Andreas Schleicher, director for Education and Skills at the OECD, has welcomed England's participation in the study, saying: “England is clearly prioritising the importance of children's early development and this study will provide reliable information that will help England to improve the early learning experiences for this and subsequent cohorts of children.”

Final reports will be published in 2020, including a national report on the study in England as well as the overall OECD findings.

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