

SEED: Early years quality on the rise across the country ^[1]

The quality of early education and childcare in nurseries has risen over the past 15 years, and staff qualification levels appear to have improved, according to the latest findings of the Government-funded SEED study.

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

- Quality in group settings is 'generally good' and has improved over time
- No difference in quality between nurseries in poorer and better-off areas
- Higher qualification levels linked to higher quality provision in private and voluntary settings

The study of quality of early years provision in England is the latest report from the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), a longitudinal study, which started in 2013, and is following 6,000 children from the age of two to the end of Key Stage 1.

The DfE-funded research is being undertaken by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), Action for Children, Oxford University and Frontier Economics.

The report's main objectives were to explore the distribution of quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in different group settings for two-, three- and four-year-olds, as well as the relationship between the characteristics of a setting and the quality of care and education it offers.

Quality across all types of providers was 'generally at least adequate', and a comparison with the DfE-funded EPPE research 15 years ago showed 'a noteworthy increase in the quality of settings in the SEED results', the report said.

The research on the quality of provision for two-, three- and four-year-olds in different types of setting in England also found that there was no difference between the good quality of early years and childcare in poor areas and better-off parts of the country.

The report's lead author Professor Edward Melhuish from the University of Oxford and Birkbeck, University of London, said, 'The SEED study shows that the quality of early education in England is generally good and has improved over the last 15 years following changes in policy. It also demonstrates the factors, such as continuing professional development, that can be changed to improve quality.'

Sue Robb, head of Early Years at Action for Children, said, 'The Early Years team at Action for Children (4 Children) are proud to have carried out the quality visits necessary for the compilation of today's report. This report recognises the hard work of all practitioners within the early years sector in raising the quality of provision.'

'It is especially pleasing for us to see that there was no difference in the good quality of early education and childcare between more disadvantaged and advantaged areas, meaning that the more vulnerable children within our society have access to the same quality as their more advantaged peers.'

The findings are based on observations made by researchers from the early years team at Action for Children who observed educational practices and experiences that support children's development during half-day visits to 1,000 settings between May 2014 and April 2016. Information about process quality (including the curriculum, pedagogical practices and child experiences that support development) was collected through the observations and was measured using scales detailed below.

Characteristics of the setting (including adult to child ratios, staff qualifications and group size) were measured through a questionnaire.

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.

Staff training and development, lower staff turnover and accepting a narrower range of ages at the setting were associated with higher quality provision across private, voluntary, nursery class and nursery school settings.

A higher average level of staff qualification and having fewer children per member of staff were also associated with higher quality provision in private and voluntary settings.

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 quality than private and voluntary settings. Settings caring for three- to four-year-olds also tended to score

slightly higher than those caring for two-year-olds.

Quality at risk

Sector organisations welcomed the findings but warned that underfunding was threatening nurseries' ability to invest in qualifications, training and CPD, which the report highlights as contributing to high quality settings.

Beatrice Merrick, chief executive of Early Education, said, 'the gains made are fragile, and will easily be lost if there is not continued investment in the early years workforce.

'This report reinforces the importance of having well-qualified staff who have regular access to continuing professional development (CPD) - and that two-year-olds have as much need of staff with higher level qualifications as older children to ensure they receive the quality of provision that they need.

'The Government needs to ramp up its workforce strategy to ensure that we continue to upskill the early years workforce, with regular CPD being available to all.

'The findings of this report show that early years provision must be funded sufficiently for providers to employ well-qualified staff, and to provide them with regular CPD. We know that as well as cost, availability of good quality training is being affected by the cuts to local authority budgets, and is increasingly subject to a postcode lottery. Any future increase in funding to providers should be tied to measures of quality to ensure that it is investment in what makes most difference to quality, namely staff qualifications and training.'

Chief executive of PACEY (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years), Liz Bayram, said, 'This latest SEED study reinforces what Ofsted has demonstrated too, that quality in early years settings has increased over the past few years. This is something everyone working in early years should be immensely proud of, but no one in early years needs reminding that quality is now at risk.

'Increasing costs alongside poor funding levels for "free" places for two-, three- and four- year-olds are beginning to take their toll. Our own research shows that providers' investment in training and CPD is in decline as they struggle to maintain sustainable businesses. We know that high staff turnover continues to be a problem for many settings, due to the low wages and poor career progression available to early years practitioners. None of this is news to anyone in early years.

'What matters now is how Government responds to these challenges, and ensures adequate funding to support well-qualified practitioners to stay in the sector and deliver high quality care. Just this week, England came in eighth place in a global ranking of the reading skills of 10-year-olds. The OECD has again reinforced that investing in early years is what matters most when supporting all children, especially our most disadvantaged, to succeed at school. 'Government has the policy levers to ensure the high-quality experiences our pre-school children are enjoying today are not lost to future generations.'

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, said also welcomed the findings, which he said came at a time of enormous pressure and strain on the sector.

'Few working in the sector will be surprised to hear that staff qualifications, training and development, and low staff-child ratios all contribute to better quality provision – but of course, at a time when so many providers are facing such financial pressure, this is easier said than done,' he said.

'There's simply no doubt that the Government's continued underfunding of the early years sector is making the retention of quality staff and maintaining of ratios increasingly difficult, and if this doesn't change soon, we are likely to see a real downward pressure on the quality of provision in a growing number of settings.

'As such, rather than using these findings to congratulate themselves on a job well done, we hope that this study serves as a wake-up call to those in Government of the value of the services that they are currently putting at risk.'

Minister of state for children and families Robert Goodwill said, 'Making sure all young children have access to high-quality early education is vital if we are to give them the best start in life, so I am pleased that today's report acknowledges the progress that is being made in this area.

'This research backs up what we know – thanks to the hard work of early years professionals, the number of childcare providers now rated good or outstanding by Ofsted has risen to 94 per cent and the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers continues to close at age five. But there is always more to do, which is why we are investing a record amount in childcare to support as many families and have announced a series of programmes to help boost a child's early skills.'

For more on the report's findings see the latest issue of Nursery World, out on Monday

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