

Study finds surprising diversity in early child care ^[1]

Seven pathways to kindergarten identified in one state

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EXCERPTS

A new study of kindergartners in one Midwestern state identified seven different pathways the children took in their early education and care before arriving at school.

The researchers were surprised by the diverse experiences that kids brought with them to kindergarten: While some received care only in their home or mainly in a child care center, others switched back and forth between different types of care, or had other arrangements.

This study is one of the few that has looked at kids' child care experiences all the way from birth to kindergarten, which allowed the researchers to capture the broad range of pathways, said Nathan Helsabeck, lead author of the study and a graduate research associate in educational studies at The Ohio State University.

"There are more nuanced differences in children's experiences before kindergarten than we originally thought," said Helsabeck, who is also an associate of Ohio State's Crane Center for Early Childhood Education and Policy.

"Looking at how children get to kindergarten could help us better consider what they need when they are entering school."

The study was published online in the journal *Early Education and Development*.

The study is part of a larger federally funded project designed to improve understanding of what happens in classrooms from pre-school to third grade. Data was collected from two large, suburban school districts including 25 schools, 152 classrooms and 3,472 students. A subsample of 568 students was used in this study.

One part of the study involved having parents complete questionnaires about their children's education and care from birth to 5 years old.

The researchers found that the largest group of children – 44% – received care only in the home over the first five years of life.

About 10% spent their first two years at home and in the third year became increasingly likely to be in center-based care. Another 7% spent these early years mostly in center-based care.

Those were the three pathways that the researchers had hypothesized would occur before they conducted the study, said Kelly Purtell, co-author of the study and associate professor of human sciences at Ohio State and faculty associate at the Crane Center.

But they found four other pathways as well: The second-largest group, 21%, were at home most of the early years, but were enrolled in a preschool or pre-kindergarten program in the last year before kindergarten. Other groups included children mostly cared for in informal settings (5%); those who went between home and informal care (8%); and those had both home and center care through the whole 5 years (5%).

Why were there so many different pathways?

"It reflects the patchwork availability of child care in this country," Purtell said.

"Child care for infants and young kids is expensive, so there are not a lot of affordable options for parents. Parents have to find different ways to take care of their kids while they work."

Helsabeck said he was particularly struck by the children whose care shifted from year to year, often from home to informal care, as their parents' situations changed.

"There was more than I expected in this category," he said.

"We need to realize that some kids face a lot of instability and their child care situations may change a lot. That may affect how they do in school."

The study also looked at how children who took different pathways did in kindergarten.

Findings did not show differences in test scores between children from different pathways. That was surprising, because most studies show an advantage to kids who spent more time in center-based care, Helsabeck said.

But he cautioned against making too much of that finding. It could be that there were not enough children in each of the seven groups to reveal differences in this study.

Results confirmed other studies that found children who spent most of their time in center-based care during their first five years had more teacher-reported social and behavioral problems in kindergarten.

That may be because these kids are already comfortable in school-like settings and are not as shy about acting out, Purtell said. They may also be more easily bored because for them, the experience is not novel.

“This is a real challenge for kindergarten teachers to navigate children who are brand new to this setting with those kids who are already familiar with the classroom setting,” she said.

The researchers said that the seven pathways to kindergarten found in this study may not be the same everywhere.

“We looked at only two school districts in one state. That’s not going to represent the whole country,” Helsabeck said.

“But what we can take away from this is the wide range of experiences kids bring to kindergarten. It is going to affect how they do in school.”

The research was supported by funding from the federal Institute of Education Sciences.

Other co-authors on the study, all from Ohio State, were Jessica Logan, assistant professor of educational studies; Laura Justice, professor of educational psychology and executive director of The Crane Center; and Tzu-Jung Ling, associate professor of educational studies and The Crane Center.

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