

Pre-school's 'protection' lasts into teen years ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The effects of early education are still felt at 14, research shows

It has long been argued that attending a high-quality pre-school can help children surge ahead in their first few years of formal education. But new research suggests a much longer-lasting impact, with children continuing to outperform their peers in maths, science and English tests up to 10 years later.

In maths, even attending a low-quality pre-school helps to "protect" pupils from poor primary teaching and can leave them up to a year ahead of others at the age of 14, major research has discovered.

The findings are the latest from the ongoing Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-14) project, which is tracking 3,000 pupils through their school lives. Earlier findings helped to inspire Sure Start children's centres, which offer combined education and health services.

The project's latest research - funded by the Department for Education - has, for the first time, shown the longer-term impact of attending pre-school. The strongest effect was on maths results in key stage 3 tests. Pupils performed better at 14 if they attended pre-school, regardless of the quality of provision they received or the effectiveness of staff in introducing number skills, researchers said. The impact is similar to a child receiving an extra year of education or the difference between children from homes with an average income and children from homes with no income.

In science, only children who had attended a medium-quality or high-quality pre-school still showed a significant benefit at 14. In English the effect was smaller, but children who went to pre-schools that were highly effective at fostering pre-reading skills performed better at 14 than others.

One of the principal researchers, Pam Sammons, a professor of education at the University of Oxford, said that the findings were important because pre-school provision is something that society can more easily control than a child's home life or upbringing. "At 14, there is still a benefit that has lasted," she said. "Children may have only had 18 months at pre-school, but we still find that the effect has lasted after many years."

But the findings come amid fears that changes to early years' services could mean that future generations lose out on these benefits. Although the government is maintaining funding for 15 hours a week of early education for all three and four-year-olds, and expanding provision to two-year-olds, cuts have been made to Sure Start children's centre budgets in two-thirds of local authorities. The centres have been praised for their high-quality provision.

Wendy Scott, president of TACTYC, the association for the professional development of early years educators, said that children's pre-school experience was more "consistent" when the EPPSE project started 10 years ago.

"Then there were fewer transitions; now children frequently leave at 3 to go to a school nursery or to divide their time between a day nursery and a school nursery," she said. "The annual entry point into reception has also denuded nursery of the older role models. And having a huge amount of children starting in September means that they don't get the gentle induction they would if the group was spread over three terms.

"I think that all this churning around could undermine the impact of high-quality pre-school and may mean that, unless we pay close attention to the experience children have in the foundation stage, in future we will not be able to claim the same benefits."

Megan Pacey, chief executive of voluntary organisation Early Education, said the research proved that quality early-years settings had long-term impacts. "If you are not having it, other things will not compensate," she said. "This is a solid foundation that sets you up to be an effective learner in life."

PATCHY PROVISION

A National Audit Office report into the £1.9 billion annual spend on early education for three and four-year-olds has warned of wide variation in take-up, especially among children from the most disadvantaged families.

All three and four-year-olds are entitled to 15 hours of free nursery education a week. Changes to school admissions mean that, while 98 per cent of four-year-olds receive early education, many are now in reception classes, which are not part of the free entitlement.

The offer is taken up by 93 per cent of three-year-olds, but this varies from only 62 per cent of eligible children in some areas to all children in others, according to the report. There is also a variation in the quality of providers, with outstanding provision ranging from 64 per cent of providers in some areas to 97 per cent in others.

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