

# Funding needed to equalise access to childcare <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Grandparents are providing valuable childcare supports, but more Government investment is needed for equal access to formal childcare and improvements in its quality, researchers have said.

The study of the types of childcare used by children at different ages, and its impact on their development, found families of lower social classes were less likely to use non-parental childcare, either by relatives or centre-based care.

In contrast, non-parental childcare was more likely to be used by households with a high income, where the primary care giver works full-time, or where all parents present are working.

While this was also the case for lone parent families, Maynooth University lecturers Delma Byrne and Catriona O'Toole linked it to targeted provision of community childcare and subsidised after-school childcare places for such families.

Based on analysis of the ongoing Growing Up in Ireland research, they found a positive but limited role of centre-based care in infancy. For example, babies in centre-based care show greater abilities in fine motor skills such as turning a page or holding a pencil, than those who have not attended such care.

However, babies who were cared for by relatives at nine months were found by age three to have demonstrably stronger vocabulary and naming skills.

Irish families were found to rely heavily on informal care, particularly in the first three years of children's lives.

"Clearly relatives and grandparents are providing a vital service for Irish families and, in general, children are faring well in their care," the authors wrote in the study for child and family support agency Tusla.

Ms O'Toole said the research highlighted that there was no single childcare type that was necessarily better or worse than any other, as children and families have diverse childcare needs.

The report says it is important to note that the study did not assess the quality of childcare, as such information was unavailable.

The authors said Government intervention has the potential to mitigate unequal access to non-parental childcare, but such intervention is limited in availability.

They recommend increased public investment in early years services, beyond the free year of pre-school now being taken up by the parents of the vast majority of children, to enable families to break out of cycles of poverty, reduce the cost of childcare and place children on a more even playing field.

But they also say that any public investment must be instrumental in raising the quality of early years' services. "Based on our analyses, it is likely that access to quality childcare settings is biased toward those with the most resources to access such care, creating barriers to positive outcomes for children and society as a consequence. Raising quality standards across all childcare should be a priority for Government action."

The Government has moved in recent years to increase the qualification levels of staff in settings funded in its early childhood care and education system through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

A team of inspectors is being recruited by the Department of Education to work in the sector to assess the standard of learning taking place in those settings. A series of pilot inspections is due to begin later this year.

-reprinted from the Irish Examiner

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