

# The influence of childcare arrangements on child well being from infancy to middle childhood <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Full report in PDF <sup>[2]</sup>

## Executive Summary

### Research Objectives

In 2012, the Family Support Agency (now Túsla, the Child and Family Agency) in collaboration with the Irish Research Council commissioned this study to investigate the wellbeing of children from families in which the parents are in employment and the children are minded by others.

The study set out to describe the uptake of non-parental care from infancy to middle childhood, and to determine how such uptake influences the wellbeing of children. This is the first national study of the well-being of children from infancy to middle childhood in the Irish context.

The key research objectives were:

1. To explore the relationship between childcare arrangements in early childhood and out-of-school care in middle childhood and children's physical, cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes; and,
2. To identify the key risk factors associated with children's well-being from infancy to middle childhood.

### Sources of Data

This study drew on all publicly available cohorts of the national longitudinal study of children, Growing up in Ireland (GUI). This included Waves 1 and 2 of the infant cohort and Wave 1 of the child cohort. These are nationally representative samples of cohorts of children at infancy, early childhood and middle childhood. Each wave collects data on a range of individual, family and primary care-giver characteristics.

The cross-sectional data of each of the waves was examined separately for nine month olds, three year olds, and nine year olds. This data allowed us to examine the factors associated with the uptake of childcare, and the influences on children's physical, socio-emotional and cognitive outcomes at three distinct stages of childhood: at nine months, age 3 and age 9. The longitudinal data from the infant cohort was used to examine the impact of early childcare arrangements in infancy on outcomes for children as they progressed from nine months to age three from September 2008-April 2009 (wave 1) to December 2010-July 2011 (wave 2).

### Main Findings

#### Patterns of childcare arrangements

- Prior to the introduction of the universal pre-school Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, full parental care was the dominant form of childcare over each of the stages of childhood examined in this report: from infancy to middle childhood. However, following the introduction of the ECCE there is now evidence of almost universal uptake of centre based childcare among pre-school children aged 3-4.
- Prior to the implementation of the ECCE, across the stages of childhood, there was variation in the uptake of non-parental care, with 39% of infants, 50% of three year olds, and 23% of 9 year olds in non-parental care. use of non-parental care among pre-school children as a direct result of the ECCE, the uptake of non-parental out-of-school care among primary school children has remained stable (less than 25% of the cohort) between 2002 and 2010.
- Our analyses revealed a strong reliance on informal early childcare prior to the implementation of the ECCE, and an ongoing reliance on informal out-of-school care in middle childhood. Families in Ireland rely heavily on informal care, especially from grandparents, and this is particularly the case when children are in infancy and early childhood. In contrast, the uptake of centre based care was less prevalent at all stages of childhood. Just 3% of all nine year olds are included in the broad definition of centre based afterschool care (which includes homework/afterschool clubs, activity camps and special needs groups).
- Patterns into non-parental childcare are socially stratified at all stages of childhood, from infancy to middle childhood. All else being equal, parents from semi-skilled and unskilled manual backgrounds are less likely to use non-parental childcare. We also report a

general pattern whereby high income households, households in which the primary caregiver is in employment full-time and households in which all parents present are in employment are significantly more likely to have access to non-parental childcare at all stages of childhood.

- Household income not only influences the take-up of non-parental childcare across all stages of childhood, but also the number and type of childcare arrangements that are used.

#### *Influence of childcare arrangements on child wellbeing*

- Results showed that childcare arrangements in infancy have an impact on short-term developmental outcomes by age three. Our findings also highlight the positive, but limited role of centre based care in infancy for early child development with regard to the achievement of infant developmental milestones. Specifically, we report positive developmental outcomes by age three for infants who were in centre based care at nine months with regard to gross and fine motor skill development. However, such effects are limited and do not apply uniformly to all areas of fine and gross motor skill development.
- There was no significant impact of centre based care on early cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes. However, our findings highlight the positive effects of care in infancy by relatives on later outcomes in the area of language and communication. Clearly, relatives and grandparents are providing a vital service within families in Ireland.
- While broader exposure to structured educational and social activities during the preschool years benefits certain aspects of child development, the absence of centre based effects on certain domains of child development may highlight the varied pedagogic orientations across the centre based childcare sector. We also report a negative effect of consistency in the type of childcare from infancy to early childhood, particularly with regard to some domains of fine motor skill development.
- In relation to child developmental outcomes at age nine, children in full-time parental out-of-school care fared better on measures of socio-emotional well-being and academic performance than those in other forms of out-of-school care, including after school clubs.

#### *Key risk factors*

- As well as identifying the effects of early childcare arrangements, our analyses revealed that as infants move through early childhood, developmental outcomes and socio-emotional outcomes are strongly influenced by earlier developmental indicators to include ASQ scores, cognitive scores, and health status but also gender.
- Household socio-economic profile, and parent/family characteristics including low education levels, less advantaged social class position, lone parenthood; maternal ill-health and depression were all associated with greater socio-emotional difficulties and poorer cognitive/academic/ developmental outcomes consistently across all stages of childhood. However, infants growing up in less well-resourced households were more likely to achieve gross motor milestones by age 3.
- The wellbeing of the primary care giver has a consistent influence on child development from infancy to childhood. That is, the children of primary caregivers who had higher depression scores or parental stress scores were significantly less likely to do well in terms of developmental outcomes.

#### **Conclusion**

Our research points to the necessity of access to high quality childcare arrangements at all stages of childhood. We found robust childcare effects on child well-being outcomes, particularly from infancy to early childhood, even when controlling for selection into non-parental childcare. In infancy and early childhood, these effects pertained largely to centre based childcare but also to childcare provided by relatives/friends, rather than full parental care. In contrast, in middle childhood, more positive outcomes were evident for children in full parental afterschool care, even when controlling for selection into non-parental childcare.

Our findings represent the period prior to the implementation of the state supported ECCE and do not capture changes that have occurred since this landmark policy initiative. However, on balance, our findings suggest that the provision of early childhood care and education in this early stage of children's lives (from infancy to age 3) helps to promote child development. Further research using additional waves of the GUI longitudinal data is required to examine the extent of these effects.

Our research also highlights the existence and persistence of considerable social stratification in child well-being outcomes from infancy onwards, even when controlling for different types of childcare arrangements. What transpires within the home, and the socio-economic circumstances of the household (as well as the childcare situation) are very important in predicting child wellbeing.

In line with other international studies, we found the key risk factors in relation to child wellbeing to be low household income and low levels of household employment, low parental educational levels, family stress and maternal mental health. Each of these factors had an important influence on children's development from infancy to middle childhood. While it is unlikely that childcare arrangements can entirely mitigate the effects of social inequality throughout childhood, the evidence in this report indicates that access and participation go some way in levelling the playing field, particularly in early childhood.

**Related link:** [Funding needed to equalise access to childcare](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

**Region:** [Europe](#) <sup>[4]</sup>

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