

# Analysis: Early childhood care scheme too little, too late <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Read online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

When a year's free preschool year for every child aged between three and four was announced in 2009, it was heralded as a measure that would particularly benefit the most disadvantaged children.

The Early Childhood and Care Education (ECCE) scheme would give all children access to structured education and play, three hours a day, five days a week, over the 38-week school year in preparation for formal schooling.

However, research soon to be published by the University of Maynooth, commissioned by Tusla and the Irish Research Council, shows that welcome as ECCE has been, it is too little and too late in a child's life to have any real impact.

A father dresses his son at their home. A T  sla-commissioned study is the first in Ireland to look at the influence of childcare arrangements from infancy (nine months) up to the age of nine years, on a child's physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development. File photograph: Casper Hedberg/The New York Times Better language skills at age 3 if young minded by relatives - study

This is the first research of its kind to look at the impact of childcare arrangements on children's development from infancy to age nine and, drawing as it does on the Growing Up in Ireland study which is tracking almost 20,000 children and infants, its findings are robust and important.

It shows access to childcare outside those ECCE hours, and in the years before and after the preschool year, is highly dependent on the income, education and employment status of a child's parents.

More than this, the detrimental impact of food poverty, income inequality, ill-health and stress in a child's home on their development is already identifiable by the age of three.

### Poverty

Since the introduction of the ECCE scheme, child poverty has not fallen, but has almost doubled from 6.3 per cent in 2008, to 11.7 per cent in 2013 (the most recent data available).

A further 17.9 per cent of children are at risk of poverty, and children are 1.4 times more likely than adults to live in consistent poverty.

These are shocking figures in a developed country. Even during a recession, Government has choices about whom it protects.

The Government speaks about employment being the route out of poverty, most recently in its decision to "activate" lone parents – whose children are at greatest risk of poverty – by moving them off the One-Parent Family payment on to jobseeker's allowance.

And yet this study shows starkly how difficult accessing childcare is for low-income households. Children in high-income households "have significantly greater participation in non-parental care than children living in low-income households", it finds.

This is true at infancy and all the way through to mid-childhood, the report says.

### Childcare policy

One of the key recommendations is that the focus of childcare policy must broaden from just the early years. There is a necessity for "high quality childcare at all stages of childhood".

However, quality childcare is not enough if the playing field for children is to be levelled.

"Our research also highlights the existence and persistence of considerable stratification in child wellbeing outcomes from infancy onwards, even when controlling for different types of childcare arrangements," write the authors.

"What transpires within the home, and the socio-economic circumstances of the household, are very important in predicting child wellbeing."

The choices the Government makes as Ireland moves out of recession, as to whether to invest in supporting all children's families, will reveal much about priorities.

-reprinted from The Irish Times

**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** federal programs <sup>[4]</sup>

child poverty <sup>[5]</sup>

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