

New index of children's 'school readiness' highlights importance of family support

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Credit: Martin Abegglen

The importance of family support on a child's 'school readiness' is highlighted in a study published this month in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*. Researchers developed and piloted a new index that might provide a simple and stress-free alternative to the government's proposed baseline assessments for four-year-olds starting school.

Researchers at the University of Cambridge Centre for Family Research and Psychometrics Centre have completed a study in which they developed the simple questionnaire for teachers, dubbed the Brief Early Skills and Support Index (BESSI).

The government has indicated that it wishes to introduce testing for all [children](#) at Reception (when they first enter school at age four) in September this year. These tests seek to provide baseline assessments of a child's '[school readiness](#).' However, the proposals have been criticised by several teaching organisations as being too narrowly focused and likely to add to the difficulties of an already challenging period for both children and their teachers.

"If schools are to deliver the extra [support](#) needed to help children make a successful transition to school, some form of assessment is required, but the tests due to be introduced in September are not what teachers need: they are labour-intensive and potentially stressful for four-year-olds," says Professor Claire Hughes from the Centre for Family Research, who led the research.

"Teachers need something that is brief but reliable and that harnesses their own skills and experience to identify children in need of extra support. A short teacher questionnaire such as the BESSI could provide all the necessary information and be easier to implement."

The Cambridge study was a study commissioned by Frank Field MP who, following his 2010 report, The Foundation Years: how to prevent poor children becoming poor adults set up and now chairs the Foundation Years Trust. Part of the Trust's work is to develop, implement and promote life chance indicators, which are seen as playing a key role in driving policy and incentivising a focus on improving children's long-term life chances.

The BESSI questionnaire is unique in being both brief (one page) and broad (including, for example, items about the kinds of support children receive at home). A previous, much longer questionnaire, the Early Development Instrument (EDI), was designed by a Canadian research team and has enabled teachers in Australia to profile the development and wellbeing of more than 260,000 five-year-olds. This national census revealed worrying regional disparities in the proportion of children with 'developmental vulnerabilities', with clear policy implications for mobilizing extra support. However, the EDI is not appropriate for use in the UK because British children start formal schooling one year earlier than children almost everywhere else in the world – a significant time difference in terms of a child's development and a source of concern for many.

Professor Hughes and colleagues carried out focus groups with teachers in Field's Birkenhead constituency with a view to getting a first-hand view of variation in children's school readiness. This highlighted an additional problem: a lack of consensus on how 'school readiness' should be defined.

Researchers in the USA have noted that for politicians, whose primary interest is in the extent to which schools produce employable young adults, school readiness hinges on achieving foundation skills in literacy and numeracy. As Professor Hughes explained, "For teachers, who face the more immediate challenge of 30 small children in a confined space, the obvious starting point is children's behaviour and emotional and social development."

Defining school readiness is also complicated by the fact that learning takes many forms – from 'surface learning' (e.g. letter recognition) to 'deep learning' (e.g. finding patterns or principles). Some theorists argue that the very term 'school readiness' is intrinsically unfair, in that it appears to place the burden of responsibility on the child. The

Cambridge researchers noted that a lack of educational support at home was a frequent issue raised by teachers.

To address these various problems, the researchers developed and piloted the BESSI. So far, this has been tested in three waves involving schools and nurseries in the Wirral, in London and in Manchester. The first wave was with teachers of over 800 children in Reception, the second was with nursery staff working with a similar number of much younger children, and the third was with teachers of a further 270 children to check the reliability of BESSI ratings.

Amongst other factors, the BESSI provides information about children's social and behavioural adjustment (e.g. are they able to play with other children or to wait their turn?) as well as measures of their daily living skills (e.g. can they use cutlery and can they go the toilet by themselves?) and language / cognitive skills. Importantly, it also captures variation in family support and includes items about reading, praise and fun at home. The findings around fun are particularly interesting as they indicate that parental support is not simply a matter of regular reading at home – although there may be a virtuous circle by which parents and children who have fun together are also more likely to read together.

As the researchers expected, some problems, such as distractibility and trouble sitting still, were very common, even among the older children in the sample. However, the BESSI also provided some surprising insights. First, not only were problems typically almost twice as common in boys as in girls, but these gender differences were also evident in family support. For example, compared with girls, boys received much lower ratings of 'fun at home'.

Second, children from low-income families lagged behind their more affluent peers – but these differences were removed when scores for family support were taken into account. In other words, when families

facing financial difficulties are still able to have fun together, the children appear better prepared for school – but [teachers'](#) ratings indicated that fun at home was often lacking.

"We should not blame parents who provide low levels of support, or recast problems of inequality as a matter of parental responsibility, or let these findings detract from efforts to reduce inequality in order to give all children a fair start in life," adds Professor Hughes. "Instead, our hope is that the BESSI will help educational professionals support all children, regardless of family background, who display difficulties during the transition to school or nursery."

More information: "Measuring the foundations of school readiness: Introducing a new questionnaire for teachers – The Brief Early Skills and Support Index (BESSI)." *British Journal of Educational Psychology*. doi: 10.1111/bjep.12076

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