

Children in care need of early education, but too few receive it

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Credit: University of Oxford

Opportunities to narrow the achievement gap between looked after children (children in care) and their peers are being missed because too many of them do not receive good quality early education places, says research funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

A new report, "Starting out right: early education and looked after [children](#)," by researchers from the University of Oxford and the Family and Childcare Trust warns that children in care are falling well behind

children in the general population before they even get to primary school and this gap widens throughout their schooling and beyond. It suggests that local authorities, who are already required by law to monitor and support the educational progress of looked after children at school, should be legally responsible for their early years education as well. It highlights huge gaps in the evidence, suggesting that better data monitoring on whether children in care are receiving free, high quality early education.

The report reveals that the take-up of free early education places for two, three and four year olds is at least 14 per cent lower among children in care than for children not in care. From what data they could collect, researchers describe the local authority provision for looked after children across England as 'patchy', saying the true figure for overall provision is probably worse than 14 per cent. The report highlights numerous studies showing that high quality early education vastly improves outcomes for disadvantaged children. Previous research by Oxford University found high quality early education could boost GCSE results by as much as five grades. Only 18 per cent of children in care go on to achieve five GCSEs at grade C or above compared with the national average of 64 per cent, according to the government data.

The team found that some councils are doing a lot to promote the early education of looked after children through 'virtual schools', a team of teachers and dedicated education professionals who work to support the education of children in care. However, the report says the lack of good quality national data reveals a lack of focus on how vulnerable children fare in the early years educationally before they start school. Already at risk of much poorer outcomes, many are at an additional disadvantage when they start school if they have not had good quality early years education, says the report. The interviews suggested that there is a huge range in the preparedness of preschools to meet the needs of children who may have had highly traumatising early experiences, but that the

funding available to support this (the EYPP) is not adequate.

Sandra Mathers, Principal Investigator from the Department of Education at the University of Oxford, said: 'We know that the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers starts well before [primary school](#), and that good quality early years provision can act as a powerful intervention to help narrow this gap. Many children in care have such a tough start in life; I can think of few groups for whom access to good quality early years education is more important.'

Claire Harding, Head of Research at the Family and Childcare Trust, said: 'Opportunities to close this educational gap are being missed due to a policy blind spot. We call on the government to make sure that looked after children have access to high quality early education that boosts their outcomes and life chances. This means bringing together existing services for looked after children and early education services to prioritise the issue and track progress.'

Provided by University of Oxford

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