Attending early education during pandemic provides sustained benefits for youngsters' development

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The more time pre-schoolers spent in childcare during the first year of the pandemic, the more their vocabulary grew, a new study has found.

Research led by the University of Leeds found that attending Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) during the COVID-19 outbreak had sustained benefits for youngsters' development.

The paper "Sustained benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for young children's development during COVID-19" was published in the *Journal of Early Childhood Research*.

Academics investigating the ongoing impact of COVID-related closures found that for each day of the week spent in ECEC, toddlers could produce an average of 29 more new words over the first year of the pandemic and understand an average of 16 more new words than peers who did not attend formal childcare.

To understand children's "school readiness," academics discovered that the more time youngsters had spent in ECEC, the better their vocabulary and personal-social skills.

Also, for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the more time spent in those settings, the better their communication and problem-solving skills. Lockdowns are widely believed to have negatively affected young children's language skills, but these results suggest that ECEC had sustained learning benefits for youngsters growing up during the pandemic—with specific benefits for those from less affluent homes.

Narrowing the gap

Dr. Catherine Davies, Professor of Language Development in the School of Languages, Cultures, and Societies at the University of Leeds, said, "Our findings demonstrate the importance of early years education for children born without social advantage—helping to narrow the gap in early development and level socioeconomic inequalities.

"It's essential that we facilitate access for the families who will benefit most from this support, at this crucial stage in youngsters' lives."

High-quality, center-based early education during the first three years of life is known to benefit children's cognitive, language, and social development at school entry and beyond.

The aim of this project, carried out in collaboration with researchers at Oxford Brookes University, University of Oxford, Leeds Beckett University and University of Warwick, was to discover to what extent the benefits of ECEC were maintained during the disruption to education caused by quarantine restrictions.

Lockdowns' negative impact

Three years on from the first UK lockdown—as pandemic-era pre-schoolers have now entered formal schooling—families, practitioners, and policymakers are concerned by mounting evidence that lockdowns led to delays in key developmental skills, especially in children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Prof Davies said, "Increasing the reach of ECEC is a smart way of providing post-pandemic opportunities for socialization, emotional well-being, physical development, and foundational academic skills, rather than compensating for 'missing skills." Supporting these opportunities and nurturing children via responsive support should address concerns about school readiness and help to mitigate socioeconomic attainment gap."

The Social Distancing and Development Study (SDDS) followed over 600 children and their families, aged between eight months and 36 months, living in England, Scotland and Wales.

Data was gathered in Spring 2020, Winter 2020 and Spring 2021, using online questionnaires because of COVID restrictions in place at the time.

Parents completed surveys about their daily lives and children's abilities, including the number of words that their child said or understood, and their child's early thinking skills, or executive functions—the control of attention, behavior and emotion. They followed up at regular intervals throughout 2020 and 2021, reporting again on their child's language ability and thinking skills.

They were asked to record their child's understanding and use of words across categories such as vehicles, adventures and animals. They were also asked how often their child exhibited different behaviors, then played games designed to elicit skills such as waiting, finding, and sorting. For problem solving, caregivers commented on whether, for example, their child could retrieve a sweet from a bottle by turning it upside down.

Researchers then explored links between families' socioeconomic background, children's growth in language and thinking skills, and time spent in non-parental childcare before the Spring 2020 lockdown, during all three lockdowns (Spring 2020, Winter 2020, Spring 2021), and between these lockdowns.

Childcare provision was reduced not only because of lockdowns but also due to issues such as staff shortages, social bubbles, cleaning regimes, and quarantining of close contacts.

Protective effects maintained

The primary aim of the new study, carried out between March 2020 and June 2021, was to investigate whether the positive association between ECEC attendance and cognitive development—shown by the same team

in an earlier study during the first lockdown in Spring 2020—was maintained during the extended disruption.

Dr. Nayeli Gonzalez-Gomez, Reader in Psychology at The Center for Psychological Research, Oxford Brookes University, and principal investigator on the wider SDDS project, said, "The fact that ECEC settings were grappling with disruption into 2021 yet still maintained these protective effects highlights both the robustness of their influence on children's development and the crucial role that these settings play in fostering children's growth."

The second aim of the research was to track children's developmental milestones as they matured through the pandemic and prepared to start formal schooling. Their findings evidence that ECEC has a positive effect on the communication and problem-solving skills of youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as on the personal-social development of all children—all key skills for starting school.

Calls for policy reform

The team of researchers appeal for education policy reform by Government to enable:

- better promotion of the role of ECEC for children's development, for example by highlighting its provision of education as well as care, and as an engine for narrowing attainment gaps and generating economic productivity.
- support for lower-income families to access early childhood education and care, e.g. by simplifying application processes and increasing funding for the Early Years Pupil Premium.
- a review of ECEC funding under the upcoming sector expansion, with the goal of ring-fencing sufficient resources for high-quality, flexible, professionalized provision. This could include

exempting providers from business rates.
- schools to nurture children who may not have developed pre-pandemic levels of school readiness during the preschool years, e.g.by investing in family and community support and parent engagement opportunities.

Crucial role

Prof Davies said, "ECEC plays a crucial role in child development, now also supporting children born during COVID-19 as they develop through the early years and transition to primary school. At the same time, the sector faces significant challenges stemming from a range of changes to early years entitlements and family work patterns, alongside crises in funding and recruitment."

Kathryn Ingold, Chief Officer and Consultant in Public Health at Leeds City Council, welcomed the report, saying: "The findings echo our own research and consultation undertaken as part of the 2022 Director of Public Health for Leeds annual report, which found that the pandemic's impact on children and families was profound and unequally experienced, with communication and language as key themes."

Victoria Eaton, Director of Public Health for Leeds, recommends that city partners work together to ensure all children in Leeds receive the best start in life, with a particular focus on children from more deprived backgrounds, and redressing the gap in speech, language and communication development.

The research team plan to continue to follow this cohort of "pandemic babies" as they start school and advance through their education.

More information: Sustained benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for young children's development during COVID-19,

Journal of Early Childhood Research (2023).