

Evidence submission: Review of Early Years

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December 2023

The Education Policy Institute's evidence for Sir David Bell's Review of Early Years

About the Education Policy Institute (EPI):

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) is an independent, impartial research institute that promotes high quality education outcomes. Our aim is to hold government, policymakers, and education providers to account. Through research and analysis, we help identify the policies which can improve educational, social, and emotional outcomes for all, particularly for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people in our society.

Eligibility for, access to, and affordability of early education and childcare (ECEC) provision for children aged 0-4

Evidence has indicated consistently that some groups of children are less likely to attend ECEC at ages two, three, and four. They include those from low-income families, and families speaking English as an additional language. There is also great variation by local area.¹

¹ Campbell et al, 2018. "Universal' early education: who benefits? Patterns in take-up of the entitlement to free early education among three-year-olds in England.'

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/87649/7/Campbell_Universal%20early%20education_2018.pdf

Teager & McBride, 2018. 'AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE 2-YEAR-OLD FREE CHILDCARE ENTITLEMENT: DRIVERS OF TAKE-UP AND IMPACT ON EARLY YEARS OUTCOMES.' <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/an-initial-assessment-of-the-2-year-old-free-childcare-entitlement>

Children's Commissioner, 2022. 'Vision for childcare.' <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/cc-vision-for-childcare-oct-22.pdf>

Save the Children UK, 2018. 'Evidence Review: Improving the early learning outcomes of children growing up in poverty: A rapid review of the evidence.' <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/14977>

Notably, children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are markedly underserved by ECEC, with many failing to be provided with a place. The latest figures from Coram’s survey of local authorities show only 18% of areas ‘reporting sufficient childcare for children with disabilities.’² So in over 80% of authorities the needs of children with disabilities and their families cannot be met.

Additionally, there is evidence that ECEC options for families living in economically disadvantaged areas have disproportionately been limited to ‘weak’ and / or expensive private providers, alongside a restricted number of maintained sector nurseries.³ In recent years, there are growing indications that children from poorer backgrounds are becoming less likely to attend these maintained settings, which have qualified teachers.⁴ This seems to suggest limited and decreasing opportunities for access to quality ECEC for children from lower-income families.

There is also growing evidence on ‘ECEC deserts.’ Recent calculations by the New Economics Foundation found that ‘44% of children aged 0–5 in England live in local authorities that are ‘ECEC deserts’, i.e. there are more than three children for every registered ECEC place.’ And these ‘deserts’ are dominantly in deprived areas – in the most wealthy locations, they are negligible.⁵

² Coram, 2023. ‘Coram survey finds childcare shortages nationwide with the most disadvantaged children missing out.’ <https://www.coram.org.uk/news/coram-survey-finds-childcare-shortages-nationwide-with-the-most-disadvantaged-children-missing-out/>

³ Morgan & Reed, 2016. ‘Early learning and childcare delivering for disadvantaged children in England.’ <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Early-learning-and-childcare-delivering-for-disadvantaged.pdf>

Hillman & Williams, 2015. ‘Early years education and childcare’ https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Early_years_education_and_childcare_Nuffield_FINAL.pdf

⁴ Stewart & Reader, 2020. ‘The Conservatives’ record on early childhood: policies, spending and outcomes from May 2015 to pre-COVID 2020.’ <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp08.pdf>

⁵ Pollard et al, 2023. ‘A fair start for all. A universal basic services approach to early education and care.’ <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/a-fair-start-for-all-web-version.pdf>

The extensions of funding under the new entitlements soon to begin roll-out is likely to result in an expansion of private sector, profit-making providers, in more affluent areas. This is partly because providers in the voluntary sector, and in low-income areas, are already on a trajectory of increased closures due to unsustainable funding levels, even without the new expansion.⁶ Resourcing for the 'free' hours has been set at an inadequate level for some years,⁷ requiring cross-subsidisation via extra charges and additional paid hours from wealthier families. This is now compounded by 'recent pressures such as rising energy costs, rising food costs, recruiting costs, as well as minimum wage and business rate increases [that] are putting considerable additional pressure on the market and reducing sustainability.'⁸ Therefore the pattern of unequal access is likely to be exacerbated over the coming years.

On the basis that all children should have the opportunity to access quality ECEC, there is a pressing need to focus policy on ensuring the feasibility of attending an adequate number of properly funded hours, in good provision, for all. But this is not the direction of recent policy, which concentrates instead on subsidising costs for more affluent families. The IFS have calculated that,

⁶ Guardian, 2023. 'Poorer families 'locked out' of big expansion in free nursery hours, analysis finds.'
<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2023/nov/08/poorer-families-locked-out-of-big-expansion-in-free-nursery-hours-england>

NDNA, 2023. 'Nursery closure rates up fifty per cent on previous academic year.'
[https://ndna.org.uk/news/nursery-closure-rates-up-fifty-per-cent-on-previous-academic-year/#:~:text=Anne%2DMarie%20Argile-,Nursery%20closure%20rates%20up%20fifty%20per%20cent%20on%20previous%20academic,Day%20Nurseries%20Association%20\(NDNA\).](https://ndna.org.uk/news/nursery-closure-rates-up-fifty-per-cent-on-previous-academic-year/#:~:text=Anne%2DMarie%20Argile-,Nursery%20closure%20rates%20up%20fifty%20per%20cent%20on%20previous%20academic,Day%20Nurseries%20Association%20(NDNA).)

⁷ Early Years Alliance, 2021. 'Freedom of Information investigation findings.'
<https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/freedom-information-investigation-findings>

⁸ House of Commons Education Committee, 2023. 'Support for childcare and the early years.'
<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41066/documents/200023/default/> (p15)

‘the bottom 30% of the income distribution [will see] almost no direct benefit.’⁹

It is important to view all of this not only in terms of inequitable access and unrealised opportunities for children, but in terms of impacts on families in the context of concurrent welfare policies and reforms. If ‘ECEC deserts’ continue and become more pronounced in deprived areas, then it will not be possible for low-income or out-of-work parents/carers in these areas to take up employment. Yet increased conditionality for social security benefits receipt for parents/carers of young children is being implemented, on the assumption that there will be sufficient childcare provision for parents/carers to move into work.¹⁰ Care must be taken to ensure families are not unfairly penalised and sanctioned, and poverty deepened, if working is not possible due to lack of availability of ECEC provision in their area. This requires cross-government understanding and collaboration.

Ways to increase the quality of provision in early years, both inside and beyond the school system

Evidence consistently indicates that the quality of early education and care (ECEC) in the pre-school years can be instrumental in children’s experiences and development, in both the short and the long term. Attending high-quality ECEC has the potential to enhance many aspects of children’s lives and trajectories, including educational attainment, wellbeing, and socio-emotional

⁹ Drayton & Farquharson, 2023, ‘Early years spending update: Budget reforms and beyond.’ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/early-years-spending-update-budget-reforms-and-beyond#:~:text=have%20been%20squeezed.-,2.,and%20fastest%20expansion%20on%20record.>

¹⁰ Gov.uk, 2023. ‘Spring Budget 2023 factsheet – Labour Market Measures.’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spring-budget-2023-labour-market-factsheet/spring-budget-2023-factsheet-labour-market-measures>

skills.¹¹ Particularly for those children most disadvantaged by other life circumstances, quality ECEC can have a protective effect that stretches into adulthood.¹²

Conversely, some evidence suggests that low-quality ECEC may be detrimental: either absolutely; because of the opportunity cost to activities children would otherwise be engaged in; or because it puts them at a disadvantage compared to peers who have attended higher quality settings.¹³ Therefore we welcome this review's focus on increasing quality.

Throughout the psychological, educational, early years sector, and social science literature, there is research and consequentially areas of general consensus and understanding in terms of what 'quality' ECEC can feasibly be

¹¹ Bonetti & Blanden, 2020. 'Early years workforce qualifications and children's outcomes.'

https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EY-grads-and-outcomes_EPI.pdf

Melhuish & Gardiner, 2021. 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age seven years.'

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1029529/SEED_Age_7_Impact_Report.pdf

Eadie et al (2022). 'Domains of quality in early childhood education and care: A scoping review of the extent and consistency of the literature.' <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2022.2077704>

ASPE, 2000. 'Child Care Quality: Does it Matter and Does It Need to be Improved?'

<https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/child-care-quality-does-it-matter-does-it-need-be-improved>

¹² Bustamante et al, 2022. 'Adult outcomes of sustained high-quality early child care and education: Do they vary by family income?' <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.13696>

Varshney et al, 2022. 'Early Education and Adult Health: Age 37 Impacts and Economic Benefits of the Child-Parent Center Preschool Program.' <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9273114/>

Bailey et al, 2021. 'Prep School for Poor Kids: The Long-Run Impacts of Head Start on Human Capital and Economic Self-Sufficiency.' <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20181801>

Garcia et al, 2021. 'The Dynastic Benefits of Early Childhood Education.'

http://humcap.uchicago.edu/RePEc/hka/wpaper/Garcia_Bennhoff_Leaf_etal_2021_dynastic-benefits-early-childhood-education.pdf

¹³ Baker et al, 2005. 'UNIVERSAL CHILDCARE, MATERNAL LABOR SUPPLY AND FAMILY WELL-BEING.'

https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w11832/w11832.pdf

Hobbs & Mutebi, 2021. 'The impact of early childhood education and care on children's outcomes, and the sustainability of the sector.' <https://post.parliament.uk/the-impact-of-early-childhood-education-and-care-on-childrens-outcomes/>

Melhuish & Gardiner, 2021. 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age seven years.'

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1029529/SEED_Age_7_Impact_Report.pdf

McCartney, online. 'What Do We Know About the Effects of Early Child Care?'

https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/fii/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/s_mifis01c03.pdf

assumed to look like. For example, evidence suggests that quality ECEC is staffed by responsive carers/educators, with the knowledge and capacity to nourish, support, and engage with children, providing them with communication and interactions, within safe environments where learning, development, and enjoyment can thrive.¹⁴ Low staff turnover and consistency of care are important elements of this, so that children can be secure and flourish.¹⁵

Evidence indicates that, on average, it is ensuring such quality – not inflating levels of quantity – that is vital. In fact, research suggests that relatively higher amounts of time in ECEC might be counterproductive in some ways, for some children.¹⁶ The latest expansions in England of the ECEC funded hours focus entirely on quantity. The amendments to ratio requirements similarly pay attention only to quantity. This is in an existing context of high staff turnover,

¹⁴Bonetti & Brown, 2018. 'Structural Elements of Quality Early Years Provision: A Review of the Evidence.'

https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Early-years-structural-quality-review_EPI.pdf

Sylva et al, 2004. 'The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from Pre-school to end of Key Stage1.' <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8543/7/SSU-SF-2004-01.pdf>

Eadie et al (2022). 'Domains of quality in early childhood education and care: A scoping review of the extent and consistency of the literature.' <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2022.2077704>

Melhuish & Gardiner, 2018, 2021. 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age four years.'

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1034449/SEED-Age_4_RESEARCH_REPORT.pdf

Wall et al, 2015. 'EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PEDAGOGY REVIEW: England.'

<https://www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/early-childhood-education-and-care-pedagogy-review-england.pdf>

¹⁵Bonetti & Brown, 2018. 'Structural Elements of Quality Early Years Provision: A Review of the Evidence.'

https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Early-years-structural-quality-review_EPI.pdf

Social Mobility Commission, 2020. 'The stability of the early years workforce in England'

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906906/The_stability_of_the_early_years_workforce_in_England.pdf

¹⁶Melhuish et al, 2020. 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age five years.' e.g. p19.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/867140/SEED_AGE_5_REPORT_FEB.pdf

low retention, and a demotivated workforce.¹⁷ There is a danger that in sum, recent policies may come to erode quality.

It is crucial therefore that the roll-out of the expanded funded hours is monitored to measure impact on staff turnover, prevalence of agency staff and short-term volunteers, and other patterns within the workforce, such as whether the trend over recent years for staff to become less qualified¹⁸ continues. And the impact of expansion on marginalised and vulnerable groups – including children from under-resourced, low-income families, children in care, those with SEND, families in deprived areas, and those experiencing ‘ECEC deserts’¹⁹ should also be monitored. If lack of access is compounded for these groups, it is impossible for them to experience quality.

Close attention should be paid during monitoring and while developing policy in this area to the issue of optimal and sub-optimal numbers of hours and attendance patterns in ECEC, explicitly in terms of the impacts of these for children’s experiences, development, and longer-term outcomes. Alongside other evidence, the Department for Education’s recent SEED study indicates a mixed picture regarding relationships between hours attended and children’s development, which varies according to the outcome considered and family background context.²⁰

¹⁷ Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023. ‘Retention and return: Delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England.’ <https://www.earlyeducationchildcare.org/early-years-workforce-report>

¹⁸ Bonetti, 2019. ‘The early years workforce in England.’ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-early-years-workforce-in-england/>

¹⁹ Pollard et al, 2023. ‘A fair start for all. A universal basic services approach to early education and care.’ <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/a-fair-start-for-all-web-version.pdf>

²⁰ Melhuish et al, 2020. ‘Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age five years.’ e.g. p19. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e4e5c10e90e074dcd5bd213/SEED_AGE_5_REPORT_FEB.pdf
Melhuish & Gardiner, 2021. ‘Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age seven years.’ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1029529/SEED_Age_7_Impact_Report.pdf

Therefore, it would be useful intentionally to formulate a more exact, evidence-informed target in terms of sufficient, ideal quantity in access to high-quality ECEC. This ought to include determining whether and how quantity should vary according to family disadvantage and circumstances, in order to best serve children. Once this basic entitlement in children's best interests has been set in stone, other components of the strategy for the early years can be built around it during this review.

A long-term plan for the early years' workforce

Our research has shown that despite increased government investment in education, pay for the early years workforce has fallen.²¹ It is well-publicised and much discussed that pay for entry-level jobs in sectors such as retail, which require fewer skills, is better than that for many ECEC professionals.²² While there will be numerous facets to any plan for building and sustaining a high-quality early years workforce, higher pay is a non-negotiable.

Without this, existing problems will remain – such as the tendency for skilled and qualified staff to leave for alternative, better-remunerated settings within education.²³ Estimates have varied regarding the number of new staff that will be required should the current expansions go ahead as planned, but they are

La Valle & Jones (2020). 'REDUCING INEQUALITIES IN THE EARLY YEARS A rapid evidence review to inform LEAP's next five years.' <https://www.leaplambeth.org.uk/files/documents/LEAP%20EvidenceReview%20carried%20out%20by%20NPC-.pdf>

²¹ Bonetti, 2019. 'The early years workforce in England.' <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-early-years-workforce-in-england/>

²² Nursery World (2019) 'Low wages driving childcare workers into retail jobs.' <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/low-wages-driving-childcare-workers-into-retail-jobs>

²³ Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023. 'Retention and return: Delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England.' <https://www.earlyeducationchildcare.org/early-years-workforce-report>

all in the tens of thousands.²⁴ So many good people need to be attracted to as well as retained in the sector if it is to thrive and serve children well.

This requires regulation and ringfencing of pay for staff in ECEC – for example, through pay scales and minimum salary requirements, as in later stages of education. Examples of systems implementing such reforms exist – including recently in Ireland. Here there is a ‘new legally binding status for improved ECEC workforce terms and conditions, and a career framework.’²⁵ This approach combines formalised progression within ECEC careers – something often cited as a barrier to retention²⁶ – with accompanying remuneration at an improved level.

Other recommendations for consideration based on our research and analyses

We also recommend the following for consideration during this review of early years:

- Funding should be **simplified** so it is easier for parents/carers to navigate. This could include a ‘free at the point of access’ model, as in later education. This would lessen bureaucratic barriers and administrative burden for families.

²⁴ BBC, 2023. ‘Childcare: Mum-to-be given two-year wait as demand rises.’

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-67274943>

Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023. ‘Retention and return: Delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England.’ <https://www.earlyeducationchildcare.org/early-years-workforce-report>

Nesta, 2023. ‘How many early-years professionals do we need?’ <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/how-many-early-years-professionals-do-we-need/>

²⁵ Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023. ‘A Public Good Approach: Learning from Ireland’s Early Education and Childcare Reform.’ <https://www.earlyeducationchildcare.org/ireland-reforms>

²⁶ Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023. ‘Retention and return: Delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England.’ <https://www.earlyeducationchildcare.org/early-years-workforce-report>

- Funding should be **weighted** much more heavily towards children from low-income families and children with SEND – to equalise access to quality early years services, no matter family background or location – in direct contrast to the present direction of travel.
 - The Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) – currently just £342 per year, compared to £1,455 for primary school pupils and £1,035 for secondary school pupils – should be increased, so that it is commensurate with the pupil premium in later school years.
 - Investigation of why the EYPP is vastly under-claimed²⁷ and so not reaching settings and children should take place.
 - The Disability Access Fund (DAF) – currently worth about £800 per year, available only to children in receipt of DLA – should also be substantially increased, to reflect actual costs of quality education and care for children with disabilities.
 - Reforming eligibility criteria for the DAF is necessary. Accessing DLA in the early years is in itself a hurdle, particularly for multiply disadvantaged families – so extra funding should not be contingent on families’ capacity to apply for and receive DLA.

- Aside from ECEC for individual children, the **Family Hub model** should continue to be rolled out: ensuring a family-focussed and integrated system of care, education and wider holistic support for young children and their parents/carers. This roll-out should be rigorously evaluated to ensure government continues to learn about what does and does not work.

²⁷ Education Policy Institute, 2023. ‘How well is the system intended to support disadvantaged children through the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) working?’
<https://twitter.com/EduPolicyInst/status/1676910557180354566>

