

Executive summary

The first years of life lay the foundations for a child's future development and learning. Reflecting on the important role of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in providing all children with the skills they need to be successful in school and in helping disadvantaged children to catch up, many countries have increased their financial support for early childhood provision in recent years. More recently, the focus of debate has been shifting from expanding access to affordable early childhood education and care to enhancing its quality. This is because a growing body of research suggests that the magnitude of the benefits for children will depend on the level of quality of services.

In light of budgetary constraints, policy makers require the latest knowledge base of the quality dimensions that are the most important for ensuring children's development and early learning. Current research, however, is often narrow in focus or limited to programme-level or national-level conclusions. To take stock of and to expand the knowledge base on this topic, the OECD has commissioned a cross-national literature review and meta-analysis of the relationship between structure and process quality in early childhood education and care and links of quality to child development and early learning, conducted in 2017. Structural characteristics are conceptualised as more distal indicators of quality that refer to the infrastructure, whereas process quality concerns the more proximal processes of children's everyday experiences.

Results are organised into three thematic policy levers that build on the Starting Strong III Quality Toolbox and later the European Union (EU) Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. The report then concludes with an overview of key insights and avenues for further research.

Overview: Promoting early childhood education and care quality, child development and learning (Chapter 1). As early years provision has expanded, a better understanding of quality has become a priority. This chapter explains why process quality matters, introduces the methods and scope of this report and provides a brief overview on access. It then moves on to describe the importance of defining and analysing quality for different age groups and types of ECEC settings. It highlights key findings and explains their linkages to the policy levers that guide the structure of the report.

Standards and governance (Chapter 2). Child-staff ratios and group sizes are the two most commonly used and studied early childhood education and care quality regulations. Lower ratios and, to a lesser degree, smaller group size were found to be consistently supportive of staff-child relationships across different types of settings. However, the evidence for the relationship between smaller ratios and emerging academic skills, such as early literacy and early numeracy, was unclear. Children in class- or playrooms with a larger share of immigrant or bilingual children seemed to experience lower quality staff-child interactions, as well as present lower language and literacy skills. Other dimensions considered, such as the physical location of the setting, intensity of daily services and

licensing, were based on fewer studies or inconsistent evidence for their association with staff-child interactions.

Workforce development and working conditions (Chapter 3). Higher-quality staff-child interactions and exposure to developmental and educational activities were found to be linked to higher levels of children's emerging literacy and numeracy skills, as well as better behavioural and social skills. These associations were similar for groups of children from predominately disadvantaged backgrounds and more mixed groups. Both higher pre-service qualifications and in-service training (or professional development) were found to be related to higher-quality staff-child interactions, but only staff in-service training was related to children's emerging academic, behavioural or social skills. Positive associations were found between working conditions, the organisational climate in settings, and staff-child interactions, but the number of studies that have included these aspects is limited. The association of staff years of work experience with positive staff-child interactions appeared to be inconsistent across types of settings.

Data and monitoring (Chapter 4). Data and monitoring can be a powerful lever to encourage quality in early childhood education and care by establishing facts, trends and evidence to inform measures for improvements. The implementation of quality monitoring and rating improvement systems was associated with higher-quality staff-child interactions, in particular for centres for children aged 3 to 5 and for children aged 0 to 2. The associations are more uncertain for family daycare. Monitoring and quality rating systems provide only rough indicators of process quality.

Key insights and avenues for further research (Chapter 5). This report offers a set of key insights. Children can develop their skills more effectively when staff provide high-quality interactions, but relationships between structural characteristics, such as child-staff ratios and pre-service qualification, and children's development may be indirect. In contrast, participation in ECEC-specific professional development is associated with both higher-quality interactions and better child development. Associations between group size and staff-child interactions are less clear, but more positive relations were found for the youngest children. Monitoring systems can also inform quality improvements. Emerging evidence on other mechanisms, such as staff collaboration, working conditions, well-being, physical location of centres and child group composition, also indicates a relationship to better staff-child interactions, but the evidence for them is limited.

This report also identifies important avenues for future research. More evidence is necessary on the relationship between the combined or mediated effects of structural features and process quality. Child development domains, such as well-being and critical skills, need to be examined more broadly in studies of early childhood education and care quality. How structural characteristics relate to child peer experiences is ill-understood, as well as the interactions staff establish with other staff, the children's parents/guardians and the broader community. More and more fine-grained evidence on curriculum and monitoring would provide important insights. Finally, further studies of quality for the youngest are necessary across indicators to inform research and policy.



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