

Provision of early learning and childcare and parents' outcomes: an evidence brief

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About this briefing

This rapid evidence brief looks at the impact on parents of their preschool children attending early learning and childcare (ELC). These include direct impacts associated with childcare costs and the indirect impact of increasing parental ability to return to or seek employment, training or education. We take an inequalities approach to the evidence and highlight areas where there is potential to impact on inequality.

Key points

- To meet parental needs, ELC for preschool children needs to be affordable, flexible and available.
- Provision of affordable, flexible ELC can have a positive impact on maternal employment rates.
- Other determinants of employability may be required along with ELC to promote maternal employment.
- ELC provision of more than 30 hours per week that is affordable (around 10% of net family income) may increase maternal employment.
- Reducing ELC costs may increase labour market participation rates among mothers with lower skills and educational attainment.
- High-quality regulated ELC, with educational/learning content, has the potential to impact positively on parents and children.
- Some lower socio-economic groups may experience the double burden of little access to informal care as well as unaffordable formal care beyond the free entitlement.

Policy background

The Scottish Government is committed to increasing ELC entitlement to 1,140 hours by 2020 with emphasis on the provision of high-quality flexible ELC, particularly in areas of disadvantage, with the aim of improving child outcomes and providing parents with greater opportunities to work, train or study.¹ Currently, 3- and 4-year-olds and some 2-year-olds are eligible for 600 hours of ELC per year (approximately 16 hours per week in term time).² The new entitlement will see this almost double to 30 hours per week of free ELC across term time (38 weeks). The Scottish Government provide four reasons for state provision of ELC, as set out by the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and to which Scotland subscribes:

- To promote social justice by providing the best start in life for all children and thereby improve children's outcomes.
- To develop gender equality, particularly in labour market participation.
- To reduce future costs on demand for public services.
- To encourage economic growth.

Definition of ELC

Although there are many different providers of ELC, including nurseries, childminders and play schools, the term 'ELC' is generally regarded as:

'provision for children from birth through to primary education that is subject to a national regulatory framework i.e. it must comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures.'

It may therefore include public, private or voluntary sector provision, whether in the home of the provider or centre-based, but would exclude informal or unregulated care (Eurydice policy brief 2014*).

Although not specifically covered in this evidence brief, it is important to highlight that good-quality ELC is paramount for both parents and children, and can be gauged via structural (e.g. resources), process (e.g. staff–child interactions) and outcomes (e.g. child development) elements.³ Trained, experienced staff, small class sizes, low child-to-adult ratios, and the use of stimulating, appropriate materials are essential for child development.⁴ The evidence suggests that ELC with an educational or learning component can impact on children’s social, emotional and cognitive abilities, reduce inequalities between deprived and affluent groups, and increase school readiness especially for those from deprived backgrounds.^{5 6 7}

Evidence summary

This briefing is a rapid evidence review of a broad range of UK and international sources, including grey literature. The included evidence has been screened for relevance and quality; however full critical appraisal has not been undertaken. This briefing is based on a search of a wide range of social sciences, education and health-focused bibliographic databases and a substantial sweep of the UK and post-2010 international grey literature.

Influence of ELC provision on parental outcomes

Despite considerable cross-country differences in ELC policies and delivery models, there is widespread agreement that ELC can have a positive impact on both parental and child outcomes.^{8 9}

*eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/Eurydice_Policy_Brief_ECEC_EN.pdf

In relation to parental impact, there is also evidence that good-quality ELC can positively impact on maternal emotional health and wellbeing.^{10 11 12} However, where parents perceive that ELC quality is inadequate this may discourage them from using ELC, presenting another barrier to exploring employment opportunities.¹³

Provision of ELC may benefit parents through increased participation in employment, training or education. However, for ELC to benefit all parents, especially those from deprived backgrounds, several key issues have been identified in the literature that may act as barriers to uptake, including availability, flexibility and cost.

Availability and flexibility

For parents to experience any benefits from ELC provision it has to be available and flexible – meaning they can access it at the time they need to and at a convenient location. Evidence suggests however that there are gaps in ELC provision in Scotland beyond typical working hours and for certain groups (such as deprived groups, parents in full-time work, those with disabled children, those living in rural areas or those working atypical hours).^{14 15}

Atypical working hours before 8.00am and after 6.00pm are increasingly the norm for parents across all income groups.^{16 17 18} This is particularly true in the service sector, including health, social care and transport work¹⁹, which often requires shift and weekend work. How atypical working impacts on Scottish parents is unclear, but in England working atypical hours at least three days a week has been found to present childcare problems for female workers.²⁰ Recent evidence from the UK and Europe also suggests that atypical working hours may be particularly problematic for lone parents seeking ELC.¹¹

In addition to accessing formal care, 'informal' care (such as that provided by grandparents, family, friends, babysitters and so on) is likely to be used by parents working atypical hours, as well as those employed irregularly, with evidence that lone parents are more heavily reliant on this form of care. This may be reflective of parental choice but it is also likely to reflect insufficient provision and lack of flexibility of formal care.^{18 19}

Recent evidence suggests that informal care use in Scotland is high (provided mainly by grandparents)¹⁵ and is used in combination with formal care for preschool children across all socio-economic groups in the UK. There is some ambiguity in terms of the evidence around who uses informal care. Mothers who are poorer, younger and from lower socio-economic groups may use informal care more frequently.¹⁸ However there is also evidence to suggest that parents from lower socio-economic groups use informal care less frequently than other groups, possibly reflecting their lack of support networks necessary to provide informal care.¹⁹

Any educational benefits associated with good formal ELC may not be available for children within all informal care settings.^{21 22} However, although informal care provided by grandparents and other informal carers may not be linked to any particular advantage or disadvantage for children, either in terms of educational or socio-emotional outcomes¹⁸, there is evidence that there are pockets of poor provision within the informal sector.¹⁹

Providing formal ELC outside of normal working hours may be required to allow those parents working atypical hours, and who have limited access to informal childcare¹⁹, to choose the type of ELC that suits their needs and that includes a good-quality educational or learning component.

Affordability

Cost is a significant barrier to ELC use, both for low- and middle-income families, and other groups such as lone parents.²³

The majority of parents of 3–4-year-olds who participated in research conducted by the Scottish Government stated that they found it difficult to afford the ELC they needed, with only one in five disagreeing that this was the case.^{14 24}

Although the proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) spent on ELC and early education services in the UK has increased and is relatively high²⁵, ELC costs for parents in the UK, in comparison with many other OECD countries, form a significant proportion of household income.²⁶ In the UK and Scotland, parents spend around 27% of household income on ELC, whereas countries such as Sweden and Denmark spend less than 10%.^{27 28}

In Scotland it is estimated that there have been significant, above inflation, increases in ELC costs since 2011, with the average cost of 25 hours of nursery for a child aged 2 at around £104 per week. This cost is marginally less than the UK average.¹⁴ Recent Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) research estimates that 40 hours of ELC per week to cover full-time working would cost around £163 per week, or £7,834 for a typical 48-week year.²⁹

Informal ELC can play an important role in reducing these costs (as well as being attractive to parents for reasons associated with carer attributes, location and flexibility)¹⁸ although as already noted, the lowest socio-economic groups may use informal care less frequently.

Additionally, in England children in dual-working couple and lone-parent families may be more likely to use formal ELC, with use falling as area deprivation levels increase.²⁰ Recent Scottish evidence suggests that those within low-income households are less likely than those in medium- and

higher-income households to use the current free childcare entitlement.²⁴ Therefore, it may be possible to deduce from this that some lower socio-economic groups experience the double burden of poorer access to informal care and less use of the free entitlement. Additionally, for this group, as well as some middle-income families, formal childcare becomes unaffordable beyond the free entitlement.

How far high ELC costs in Scotland impact on parental employment, training or study opportunities is unclear but the evidence suggests that there is a connection between ELC costs and women's market labour participation. OECD data indicates that in countries where parents spend around 10% of net family income on ELC, maternal employment rates are higher. There appears to be a significant link between higher maternal employment rates and higher levels of enrolment on publicly funded ELC, particularly in countries providing at least 30 hours of ELC per week with costs less than 10% of family net income. In countries where maternal employment rates are low, reducing ELC costs can increase maternal employment rates, particularly among mothers with lower skills and educational attainment. These women are least likely to be in work in the UK, but are more likely to be in work in countries such as Sweden where ELC is more affordable and available.³⁰

Parental impact

Affordable and flexible ELC may improve standards of living, reduce child poverty, gender inequality in pay and welfare costs, as well as increasing tax revenues and the ability of parents to progress careers, seek or return to work, education or training.³⁰ However, there is very little evidence regarding how ELC provision impacts on fathers seeking employment, education or training. Impact on mothers has received greater attention specifically in relation to labour market participation although there is little evidence around training and education opportunities and improved employability.

Maternal impact

Scotland, as with the rest of the UK, has a high female employment rate (around 70%) compared to many other European countries^{31 32} but UK maternal employment rates are considerably lower, being nearer the average rate for EU and OECD countries (66%).³³

This is in contrast with Sweden and Denmark, where maternal employment rates are around 80% and where, as noted above, ELC costs form a considerably lower proportion of household income in comparison to the UK.³⁴

UK maternal employment rates are lowest (60%) among women with children under 5, followed by mothers of school-age children (67%), rising to 75% for women without children. Such differences contribute to significant pay gaps between women with children and both childless women and men.³⁰ Long periods out of the labour market following childbirth may also impact negatively on the probability of a mother returning to work, and her subsequent career progression and salary.²⁸

When in work, mothers tend to be confined to less well-paid part-time work (maternal part-time working rates in the UK are among the highest in the OECD)³⁰ and this may be due to ELC availability and cost or other wider labour market issues. Where UK mothers have been employed full-time, they are more likely to move into part-time work after having children, which can be an active choice, in comparison with Scandinavian women for example, and remain in part-time work after their children have reached school age, a point at which women in many OECD countries extend their working hours. This may impact on their ability to move back into full-time work as their family situation changes.³⁵

What impact the current 16 hours entitlement of free ELC has had on allowing women in Scotland to increase working hours, or to join the labour market, is not clear. However, an Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) evaluation of the impact of 15 hours of free, universal, part-time early education for all

3–4-year-olds in England during 2000–2008 on maternal employment suggests that around 12,000 more mothers, whose youngest child was 3 years old, were able to enter the labour force. Around 6 more mothers were in work for every additional 100 funded places. The additional 12,000 working women cost around £0.8 billion on additional early education places. The IFS states that the approach has increased but not transformed labour market participation among mothers of young children.³⁶

However, it is worth pointing out that recent (2014) Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) modelling indicates that an increase of five percentage points in maternal employment (which IPPR state as ambitious but not unrealistic) could generate a net positive fiscal impact of roughly £750 million annually via increased tax revenue and savings on welfare benefits. They further state that a rise of five percentage points in the proportion of working mothers employed full-time (i.e. increasing working hours) would generate a net positive fiscal impact of approximately £700 million annually.³⁰

The evidence therefore suggests that childcare provision is a factor in mediating women's labour market participation. However, it is not the sole determinant. Skill and employability factors, supportive families and employers, the types of work and contracts available in the local labour market, the prevailing economic context and welfare reform are further barriers or enablers. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that it is a combination of well-compensated immediate post-birth maternity and parental leave, followed by flexible job arrangements, and an adequate coverage of affordable ELC provision that allows women to participate in the labour market in higher numbers, as in Scandinavia, France and Belgium.¹³

Maternal health and wellbeing

Issues associated with securing formal ELC can impact on the wellbeing of children and their families. High costs beyond the free entitlement and inadequate provision (including informal care) may increase parental stress, as well as impact on children's day to day wellbeing.³⁷

ELC provision may increase the ability of parents to seek or return to employment and there is strong evidence that being in worthwhile work has benefits in terms of health and wellbeing and poverty reduction.^{38 39}

Access to high-quality ELC has been linked to reducing negative maternal emotions such as depression and guilt through support derived from ELC workers and parent networks.^{10 11} Good parental mental health and reduced stress may reduce workplace sickness absence and improve productivity.¹²

Inequality and equality

The evidence suggests that good-quality, affordable, flexible ELC can have a beneficial impact on both parents' and children's outcomes. However, various gaps in provision have been highlighted above (for example rural parents, disabled children, lone parents, those working atypical or full-time hours) and ELC may be used more frequently by those from more affluent backgrounds, less so by low-income parents. It has also been suggested that there is limited availability of ELC in deprived areas of Scotland.^{15 40}

Limited ELC availability and affordability may present an inequality in terms of parental ability to take up work opportunities and improve their standard of living. How far other groups, such as ethnic minorities, currently access formal or informal sources of ELC in Scotland is not clear. However, any free universal provision of ELC needs to ensure it reaches and is utilised by all groups and that opportunities for work and further education are also available locally to ensure maximum gain.

Conclusion

The aim of this rapid evidence review was to identify the impact of ELC provision on parents. The majority of the UK and international evidence identified for the purposes of this review tended to focus on parental employment. Much less has been said about any impact of ELC on parental opportunities for education and training or parental health and wellbeing.

This briefing shows that there is a positive connection between ELC provision and employment, specifically maternal employment. This finding is well documented within the international published literature. However, due to a lack of evidence relating directly to the Scottish context, it is difficult to make an assertion about the impact of formal ELC provision on parental or maternal labour market participation in Scotland based on the evidence identified by this rapid review.

Gaps in the evidence base in Scotland mean that it is difficult to identify who is currently benefitting from the free entitlement in terms of access to work or increased working hours, training or education. However the available Scottish evidence does suggest that lack of ELC flexibility, affordability and availability can present barriers for some groups of parents and can potentially increase reliance on informal care. These include low-income groups, lone parents, those working full-time or atypical hours, rural populations and parents of disabled children.

The proposed extension in ELC could be of substantial benefit to many parents if it ensures that the groups identified above have equitable access to good-quality formal ELC that meets their employment, training and education needs and aspirations.

Scottish policy links:

‘Getting it right for every child’ (GIRFEC, 2008)

www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/childrenservices/girfec

‘Getting it right for every child’ (GIRFEC) is the national cross-cutting programme which outlines an approach to working with children and families in Scotland. Based on individual need, the wellbeing of the child is placed at the centre of the approach, which establishes the principle of giving all children and young people the best possible start in life as a priority for all services. GIRFEC builds upon the universal services of health and education and sets out a national programme of transformational change to ensure that each child is: • **Safe** • **Healthy** • **Active** • **Nurtured** • **Achieving** • **Respected** • **Responsible** • **Included**

These principles inform or influence choices and action across a wide range of roles and contexts. As a national approach to meeting the needs of all children and young people, GIRFEC is the vehicle to deliver the other key national action plans and frameworks in the early years.

The Scottish Government (2013) National Parenting Strategy: Making a positive difference to children and young people through parenting

www.gov.scot/Publications/2012/10/4789

The Scottish Government's aspiration is for Scotland to be the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. The National Parenting Strategy seeks to turn this aspiration into practical action, by championing the importance of parenting, by strengthening the support on offer to parents and by making it easier for them to access this support.

NHS Health Scotland has led the development of an Outcomes Framework for Scotland's National Parenting Strategy in collaboration with a wide range of partners that have a role in supporting parents, families and children and young people. The Outcomes Framework is available as an interactive resource from the Parenting Outcome Frameworks website.

Curriculum for Excellence (2012)

Further information available from:

www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence

The 3–18 curriculum aims to ensure that all children and young people in Scotland develop the attributes, knowledge and skills they will need to flourish in life, learning and work. The knowledge, skills and attributes learners will develop will allow them to demonstrate four key capacities, helping children to become:

- Successful learners
- Confident individuals
- Responsible citizens
- Effective contributors.

Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014)

www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/legislation

The Act will further the Scottish Government's ambition for Scotland to be the best place to grow up by putting children and young people at the heart of planning and services and ensuring their rights are respected across the public sector. To ensure that children's rights properly influence the design and delivery of policies and services, the Act includes provisions that will:

- from August 2014 increase the amount and flexibility of free ELC from 475 to a minimum of 600 hours per year for 3- and 4-year-olds, and 15% of Scotland's most vulnerable 2-year-olds. From August 2015 this will extend to 27% of the most vulnerable 2-year-olds
- provide free school lunches to all children in primary 1–3 by January 2015
- enshrine in law elements of the 'Getting it right for every child' (GIRFEC) approach, ensuring there is a single planning approach for children who need additional support from services, providing a single point of contact for every child and providing a holistic understanding of wellbeing.

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