

Better language skills at age 3 if young minded by relatives - study

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July 7, 2015

Infants cared for by a relative develop better language skills by the age of three than those cared for in settings such as creches, according to new research.

Children looked after in creches develop better motor-skills such as hand eye co-ordination by the same age, finds the study, commissioned by Túsla - the Child and Family Agency - and the Irish Research Council, and carried out by Maynooth_University.

The research found that language skills are the only element in which children who are cared for by their own extended families fare better by the age of three.

“This was the only type of childcare arrangement to have a positive influence on cognitive development,” say the report’s authors, though it was limited to vocabulary and did not impact on visual recognition abilities.

The study is the first in Ireland to look at the influence of childcare arrangements from infancy (nine months) up to the age of nine years, on a child’s physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development.

It is based on data gathered in the national longitudinal study Growing Up in Ireland.

Social class

Access to paid-for childcare depends on social class, the study finds.

While the majority of all children are more likely to be cared for by a parent or parents – 61 per cent of nine-month-olds, 50.3 per cent of three-year-olds and 77 per cent of nine-year-olds - children in high-income households “have significantly greater participation in non-parental care than children living in low-income households.”

The report, due to be published shortly, finds State investment in childcare is having only a limited impact on child outcomes, particularly for those in poverty.

Co-author of the report, Dr Delma Byrne, highlights the limitations of Government policy in tackling childhood inequality.

She points to the need for a more nuanced approach, including greater investment in family supports across childhood, and in universal services for children.

The introduction of the free universal pre-school year for children aged three to four - known as the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme - has not made it easier for parents to work.

Clear barriers

There remain clear barriers to accessing non-parental childcare outside the three hours, Monday to Friday, that ECCE is provided. Non-parental care, unless provided by family, is too expensive for poorer parents.

The researchers found influences other than childcare arrangements were more important on children’s development.

These included family income, education level of the primary care giver, household employment, stress and depression in the primary care giver.

“Many families rely on grandparents and family members for childcare and there are clear positive influences in the early stages of childhood,” comments Dr Byrne.

The impact of childcare on the social and behavioural competencies of three- and nine-year-olds was limited.

‘Socially stratified’

Difficulties at age three are “socially stratified”, with those children in poor and middle-income households, in households with low levels of parental education, “at a greater risk of displaying higher difficulty” than children growing up in households characterised as professional/managerial and with high levels of parental education.

Children whose mothers had depression when they were infants had more social and emotional problems by age three.

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