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## The quality of group childcare settings used by 3-4 year old children in Sure Start local programme areas and the relationship with child outcomes

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Edward Melhuish, Jay Belsky, Kristen MacPherson, & Andrew Cullis

Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs), now Sure Start Children's Centres, aim to support young children and their families by integrating early education, childcare, healthcare and family support services in disadvantaged areas. SSLPs aim to improve the health and well-being of families and young children, so that children will have greater opportunity to do well in school and later life. This study investigates pre-school group childcare (childminders were not included) used by children in 150 SSLP areas, and makes comparisons with childcare used by children in England overall. Also the study investigates links between childcare quality and child development in SSLP areas.

### Key Findings

- There is a wide range of pre-school childcare provision in SSLP areas.
- Group childcare settings in SSLP areas show a similar pattern in terms of staff qualifications, child numbers and group size to that across England.
- The quality of provision in SSLP areas is generally good; however, educational opportunities are mostly only adequate, as in most settings in England.
- The quality of provision in SSLP areas was slightly better than in England overall.
- There were modest links between childcare quality and adult-child ratio in SSLP areas: the fewer children per adult, the better the quality of care.
- SSLP-funded settings had more children and were open for more weeks a year and more hours a week than other settings in SSLP areas, and SSLP-funded settings also had slightly better adult-child ratios.
- Allowing for pre-existing family and area background characteristics, *higher pre-school childcare quality was linked with higher child language development as measured by standardised assessments and by teacher report in Foundation Stage Profiles*, and this applied to all sections of the population in SSLP areas.
- Evidence from the NESS Impact Study (NESS, 2010) indicates that children in SSLP areas were not showing greater language development by age 5 than children in comparable areas elsewhere. If SSLPs are to produce greater long term effects upon child outcomes in deprived areas, particularly for literacy and academic outcomes, an important step would be to improve childcare quality.
- Research (e.g. Melhuish et al., 1990; NICHD, 2005) suggests that it is important to improve childcare quality to improve children's language development. This is because early language development is both predictive of later literacy and academic performance (Young et al., 2002; Sénéchal, Ouellette, & Rodney, 2006) and is susceptible to environmental influence (Melhuish et al., 1990; Hart & Risley, 1995; Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009).
- One strategy to improve children's language development in deprived areas would be optimising childcare quality. Other research (see Melhuish, 2004) indicates that improving staff training can improve the quality of childcare provision. The Children's Workforce Development Council ([www.cwdcouncil.org.uk](http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk)) is looking at ways to improve the childcare staff training. Further research on improving pre-school childcare quality is needed.

## Background

Influenced by research indicating long-term benefits of early childhood programmes for disadvantaged children, the Government of the time set up Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) from 1998 to reduce child poverty and social exclusion. By 2004, 524 SSLPs targeted families with children 0-4 years of age in the 20% most deprived communities. In 2005 it was decided to develop SSLPs further by turning them into children's centres and roll out the programme nationally, ensuring that comprehensive early education and family support services are available for every community. The National Evaluation of Sure Start has been undertaking research relevant to the development of SSLPs since 2001. This part of the study focuses on 150 SSLP areas from the first four rounds of SSLPs, which are all in deprived areas.

## Methods

This report presents new information, collected as part of the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) and is in two parts; Part A considers the characteristics and quality of group childcare settings used by children in areas served by SSLPs, and was conducted from 2006 to 2008. Part B uses data on 5-year-old child outcomes collected in the NESS Impact Study between 2007 and 2009 to examine relationships between pre-school childcare quality and child outcomes.

**Part A:** Data in Sure Start Local Programme areas were collected through interviews with childcare staff and observations made in 229 group childcare settings (childminders were not included) used by children in 150 Sure Start Local Programme areas. The data provide a picture of the current provision, including measures of the quality of care and education provided, for 3-4 year olds in Sure Start and non-Sure Start led settings in these SSLP areas. The non-Sure Start area comparison data come from a study of group childcare settings used by children in the Quality of Childcare Settings in the Millennium Cohort Study (QCSMCS) (Mathers, Sylva, & Joshi, 2007). Quality in this context refers to how the environment provides conditions likely to foster children's development, such as caregivers being attentive, responsive and stimulating. Quality is measured using three well established observation tools:

- ECERS-R: Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised – measures the quality of the setting environment
- ECERS-E: Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Extended – measures the quality of educational provision
- CIS: The Caregiver Interaction Scale – records the nature of the interactions between the caregiver and the child<sup>1</sup>.

**Part B:** Analyses were undertaken to explore how the setting characteristics presented in Part A may have influenced the outcomes for 5-year-old children as measured in the NESS Impact Study. The issue addressed is whether or not there are relationships between pre-school group childcare setting quality and outcomes for children attending the group childcare settings studied, once the background characteristics of children have been taken into account.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on these three measures of quality can be found in section 2.2.2 of the full report

## Findings

### Part A: Childcare Setting Characteristics and Quality

- There is a wide range of pre-school formal group childcare provision used in SSLP areas including private day nurseries, nursery schools, nursery classes, playgroups, as well as children's centres.
- The qualifications of staff in these settings is primarily at level 3 (e.g. Diploma in Childcare & Education) or below. The most senior member of staff has a degree or higher qualifications in 43% of settings.
- On average nursery classes in primary schools employ staff with the highest level of qualifications and the voluntary sector the lowest. The level of staff qualifications is similar amongst the other types of settings (e.g. private day nursery, children's centre, nursery school).
- In comparison with a nationally representative survey (the QSMCS study of group childcare settings), it emerged that group childcare settings used by children in SSLP areas show a broadly similar pattern in terms of characteristics such as staff qualifications, child numbers and group size to that seen in group childcare settings across the country. However, the qualification level of SSLP setting managers is slightly lower than that found in the QSMCS study in settings in England overall.
- Observations reveal that the quality of provision in group childcare settings used by children in SSLP areas is generally good, as measured by means of ratings of overall quality of care and interactions experienced by children (ECERS-R). However, ratings of educational opportunities offered in settings (as measured by ECERS-E) are mostly scored only adequate, as was also found in most settings studied in the QSMCS study.
- Comparisons with the QSMCS survey indicate that the quality of provision in group childcare settings may be slightly better in SSLP areas than in England overall. However, these findings need to be treated with caution as the data were collected by different teams at different times (although using the same standardised instruments and similar training) and in areas not comparable demographically, in that SSLP areas were all deprived and QSMCS areas were representative of the whole country, and hence the comparison may not be completely comparable.
- There are some modest links between the quality of provision and adult-child ratio: the fewer children per adult, the better the quality of care.
- Of the settings studied in SSLP areas, only 59% are directly funded by SSLPs. Comparisons of settings directly funded by SSLPs with others not funded by SSLPs reveal that SSLP funded settings had more children and were open for more weeks a year and more hours a week than other settings. SSLP-funded settings also have a slightly lower (better) adult-child ratio.
- Settings funded by SSLPs have similar overall levels of staff qualifications to other settings, but they have more staff at both the highest and the lowest qualification levels. They also had on average setting managers with slightly lower qualification levels.

### Part B: The Impact of Childcare Quality on Child Outcomes

- In SSLP areas, the relationships between pre-school group childcare setting quality and a range of child outcomes were examined. The child outcomes included measures of child physical health, cognitive and language development, Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) results and social and emotional development.
- After taking into consideration pre-existing family and area background characteristics, the analyses indicated that *the higher the pre-school childcare quality, the higher the child's attainment in language development as measured by the BAS 'Naming Vocabulary' scale*. In addition, for one measure of quality (ECERS-R), higher pre-school childcare quality was

associated with higher FSP scores for communication and language and total FSP score. Higher pre-school childcare quality was also associated with greater progress in language development for children from 3 to 5 years of age. Hence higher childcare quality is associated with improved language development as measured by two independent sources: performance on standardised tests and teacher ratings through FSP scores. No other child outcomes show significant effects associated with overall pre-school childcare quality. These effects of pre-school childcare quality appeared to apply to all sections of the population studied, as they did not vary in their size across select policy-relevant population subgroups (e.g. lone parents, workless households).

## Conclusions

There is a wide range of pre-school group childcare used in SSLP areas, including private day nurseries, nursery schools, nursery classes, playgroups, as well as children's centres. Broadly the characteristics of group childcare in SSLP areas looks only a little different to that used in England overall. Of the settings used by children in SSLP areas, only 59% were directly funded by SSLPs. The SSLP-funded settings had more children and were open for more weeks a year and more hours a week than other settings, and they had a slightly better adult-child ratio. There are indications that the quality of provision in group childcare settings may be slightly better in SSLP areas than in England overall, but these findings are to be treated with caution owing to some methodological issues.

Other evidence from the NESS Impact Study Report (NESS, 2010) indicates that children in SSLP areas overall were not showing greater language development by age 5 than children in comparable areas elsewhere. If SSLPs are to produce greater long term effects upon child outcomes for children in deprived areas, particularly for literacy and academic outcomes, an important step would be to improve childcare quality across all settings. Research (e.g. Melhuish et al., 1990; NICHD, 2005) suggests that it is particularly important to improve the aspects of setting quality that will improve children's language development. This is because i) early language development is highly predictive of later literacy and academic performance (Young et al., 2002; Sénéchal, Ouellette, & Rodney, 2006); ii) language development is susceptible to environmental influence (Melhuish et al., 1990; Hart & Risley, 1995; Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009), and iii) pre-school quality is linked to children's literacy later in life (Sammons et al., 2008; Melhuish et al., 2010). The results of this study indicate that one way for SSLPs to improve language development for children in deprived areas is through optimising the quality of the childcare setting they attend. Another option identified through other research (see Melhuish, 2004) indicates that improving staff training can improve the quality of childcare provision. The Children's Workforce Development Council ([www.cwdcouncil.org.uk](http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk)) is currently looking at ways to produce improvements to the training of the early years childcare workforce. Further research on improving pre-school childcare quality may be needed to develop policy on this issue.

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### **Additional Information**

The full report can be accessed at <http://publications.education.gov.uk>

Further information about this research can be obtained from  
Gail Peachey, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3BT  
[Gail.PEACHEY@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Gail.PEACHEY@education.gsi.gov.uk)

This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.