

# IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON OUTCOMES IN THE EARLY YEARS

## Summary:

- Attendance and take up of early education and care fell significantly during Covid-19 lockdowns and may not yet be at pre-pandemic levels
- Studies that have measured some aspects of children's learning and development during the pandemic suggest the learning of key foundational skills has been disrupted
- Attending early education and care can help to develop these key skills, particularly for those experiencing poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented disruption to early years settings. For extended periods in 2020 and 2021, access to early years education was severely restricted. When children did attend, staff shortages due to sickness and periods of self-isolation understandably caused prolonged interruptions to children's opportunities to learn and develop. In England, between March and June 2020, when early years settings were closed to all except children identified as vulnerable and the children of key workers, fewer than 100,000 children attended on any given day—less than 10% of normal expected levels (La Valle et al, 2022). During the third national lockdown of January 2021, early years settings remained open to all children, yet attendance fell to only 50% of expected levels.

Whilst these figures are increasing, in September 2021, attendance was still only 75% of pre-pandemic levels (La Valle et al, 2022; UK Parliament, 2021). Over the last 10 years the government has funded 15 hours of free childcare for two-year-olds living in low-income households, as part of a national strategy to accelerate the learning and development of children experiencing poverty compared to and their more affluent peers (DfE, 2013). However, during the pandemic, national data shows that take-up of these funded hours fell considerably; entitlement places fell from 69% to 62% for two-year-olds, and from 91% to 87% for three-year-olds (La Valle et al, 2022). The pandemic's disruption to attendance and take-up of early education and care is concerning given the increasing body of evidence suggesting access to early years settings supports children's learning and development; one study found that children who had attended early years settings demonstrated higher emergent literacy and numeracy skills than children who had not—regardless of socio-economic background (OECD, 2020).

Research has attempted to measure how much the disruption has impacted children's outcomes. A study that followed infants aged 8-months to 36-months between Spring and Winter 2020 found those who attended early years settings developed greater receptive vocabulary and executive function skills (Davies et al, 2021). A child who accessed 1 day per week of formal early education and care during the pandemic could be expected to understand 24 more new words over the Spring–Winter 2020 period compared with their peers. A child who regularly accessed 2 days during the pandemic could be expected to understand 48 more new words over the Spring–Winter 2020 period compared with their peers (Davies et al, 2021). This suggests that some younger children have not had the opportunity to develop key foundational skills. Studies of older children who missed vital early learning opportunities further supports this.

A recent study funded by the EEF found that fewer children in the 2020/21 cohort (those who experienced lockdowns in both nursery and reception) were meeting the Early Learning Goals of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile compared to children pre-pandemic in 2018/19 (Tracey et al, 2022). The difference was most pronounced for Literacy and Mathematics. A study that followed the cohort who experienced lockdowns in both Reception and Year 1 found that the majority of pupils in year 1 (68%) were not reading at typical levels expected for their age (Nash et al, 2022).

They reported that the pre-post pandemic gap in reading attainment was between 3 and 4 months across year 1—more than the average gap across all other primary school years (Nash et al, 2022). The impact of the pandemic can also be demonstrated beyond pupil-level attainment data; one area is children's personal social and emotional development where 97% of reception school teachers were concerned about children's development (La Valle et al, 2022, Rose et al, 2021). Teachers reported a gap in skills ranging from personal care, such as using the toilet, to emotional regulation.



There is some evidence to suggest the pandemic had a more negative impact on children experiencing disadvantage. Those who were better able to engage in home learning and had access to hard copies of books were more likely to make progress during periods of closure (Nash et al, 2022). The difference in development between those experiencing poverty and their more affluent peers was already starting to increase before the pandemic (Early Years Foundation Profile scores, rose to 32.4% in 2018/20 compared to 31.8% 2017/2018, DfE, 2019). This could be potentially wider still post-pandemic – to be confirmed by the Early Years Foundation Profile Data release in November 2022. A study that looked at the cohort who experienced lockdowns in Reception and Year 1 found a substantial gap in attainment between disadvantaged children and their peers in reading and maths, of around seven months' in the spring of 2021 (EEF, 2021). Health outcomes are also of

concern; The National Child Measurement Programme (NHS Digital, 2021) found that obesity in reception aged children had increased from 9.9% in 2019/2020 to 14.4% in 2020/2021, and that children living in the most deprived areas were more than twice as likely to be obese than those living in the least deprived areas.

It seems clear that early years settings have an important role to play in supporting all children whose learning and development has been disrupted by the pandemic, but particularly for those who have been disproportionately affected, such as those experiencing poverty or those who have not taken up places with early years providers. Access to early education and care has always been important for learning and development, but has an even more important role to play when considering the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in the early years.

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