

January 2026

## EEF additional submission to ESC inquiry into the Early Years regarding earlier starting age and extra hours

In November 2025, the Education Endowment Foundation submitted written and oral evidence to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the Early Years: 'Improving Support for Children and Families'. At the oral evidence session, questions were raised in relation to what level of access and starting age in early childhood education and care might deliver the best outcomes for children, particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Shortly after this session, as part of the Autumn Budget, the government committed to reviewing funded childcare provision.

This follow-up note sets out the EEF's summary of the current evidence base on earlier starting age and extra hours in early childhood education and care and their impact on children's cognitive outcomes. We hope this supports the committee with their inquiry and with making recommendations for the government's review.

### Context

We know that high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is crucial to children's educational/developmental outcomes, especially for children from disadvantaged families (e.g. Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Crowley et al, 2025). However, there is acute inequity of access to ECEC: of the poorest fifth of parents with young children, only 36% use formal childcare, compared with more than double that (73%) in the highest earning households (Reed & O'Halloran; 2024). This is baked into the system through the structure of government-funded ECEC hours: children from more affluent families can access twice as much government-funded education and care, and from a younger age (up to 30 hours/week from age 9 months), than those in families receiving additional support (FRAS) (who can claim up to 15 hours a week from age 2). As stated in our written submission to this inquiry, there is therefore a strong case that improving disadvantaged children's access to, and hours spent in, high quality education and childcare should be among the highest priorities for this government.

Spending on funded entitlements has accelerated rapidly, reaching £8.7 billion in 2025-26 (double the spending envelope from two years earlier) (IFS, 2026). Given this scale and acceleration of funding, it is important that there is clarity on the purpose of funded hours and that this informs the design of the policy. Policymakers over several years have iterated funded entitlements and have cited different reasons for the funding including, improving workforce participation, supporting families with the cost of living, raising attainment outcomes for children and particularly socioeconomically disadvantaged children. Funding access to education and care is one of the most expensive early years interventions the state can provide. A clear purpose for this funding is needed to assess whether the funding is achieving its aims.

To inform discussion about the scope of the government's review and any subsequent reform of entitlement arrangements, it is important to identify at what age funded provision could start, and how many hours could be funded to maximise outcomes for children and particularly socioeconomically

disadvantaged children. This paper summarises existing evidence in these areas, and identifies opportunities for further research.

### Key messages

- 1. There is evidence that an earlier start in formal early education and childcare has a positive impact on children's outcomes. Some evidence indicates this is particularly so for socioeconomically disadvantaged children. We therefore recommend that government reforms childcare entitlements, funding greater access for lower-income families.**

The EEF's Early Years Toolkit, which summarises the best available evidence on key areas for learning and development, finds a moderate positive impact of an **earlier starting age**, in this case starting one year earlier than usual, of an additional three months' progress.<sup>1</sup> The EPPSE study (Taggart et al, 2015) found that an earlier starting age (before 3) was correlated with stronger learning outcomes at school entry for language, pre-reading, early number concepts and non-verbal reasoning. The SEED reports on outcomes at age 5 (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2020) and age 7 (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2021) found a positive impact of an early start in formal ECEC (here at least 10 hours a week, starting before age 2), particularly for children from disadvantaged families. The SEED report on KS2 outcomes (Crowley et al, 2025) was less conclusive on an earlier starting age, finding only that children starting between 1 and 2 were more likely to achieve the expected standard than those who had never had more than 10 hours/week formal early education.<sup>2</sup>

- 2. There is evidence that increasing the amount of early years education and childcare that a child receives through extra hours has a positive impact on children's outcomes. Some evidence indicates this is particularly so for socioeconomically disadvantaged children. We therefore recommend that government reforms childcare entitlements, funding greater access for lower-income families**

The EEF's Early Years Toolkit finds that increasing the **amount of early years education** that a child receives at a given age has a moderate positive effect on their learning with an average of an additional four months' progress, with effects seen in early literacy and mathematics.<sup>3</sup> The SEED report on KS2 outcomes (Crowley et al, 2025) found a positive association between extra hours and achievement of the expected standard at the end of KS2, with a greater effect size for children from disadvantaged families. For the children in the 20% most financially disadvantaged families, each additional hour of formal childcare per week was associated with 4.5% higher likelihood of achieving the expected standard at KS2. However, the latter should be treated with caution due to it being derived from a smaller sample. Some other studies find less positive outcomes, for example, the EPPSE study (Taggart et al, 2015) found that children receiving full-day provision did not have higher outcomes in early reading or numeracy compared to those who attended a half-day. It should be noted that the EPPSE

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier starting age refers to increasing the time a child spends in early years education by beginning at a younger age. In the UK currently, children with working parents meeting certain criteria can access government-funded education and care from age 9 months for up to 30 hours/week, whereas children in families receiving additional support (FRAS) can claim up to 15 hours a week from age 2.

<sup>2</sup> This was only statistically significant at the 10% level.

<sup>3</sup> Extra hours refers to increasing the amount of early years education that a child receives at a given age. Most commonly, they are provided by switching from half-day to full-day provision. It should be noted that this differs from the total duration of time spent in early years education, which is a function of both starting age and number of hours provided at a given age.

study finds the duration of attendance (total months attended, linked to both number of hours at a given age and starting age) to be important, with each month of pre-school experience being linked to better outcomes.

**3. Quality of provision remains a crucial factor in whether extra hours and an earlier start have a sustained impact on outcomes. We recommend government ensures there is significant investment in improving the quality of provision as well as childcare entitlements.**

The EPPSE study (Taggart et al, 2015) found that the combination of longer duration (total number of months attended, which is a function of both starting age and hours provided at a given age) and high quality had the strongest effect on children's outcomes. There are also some indications in the evidence that any learning gains related to extra hours in ECEC may not be sustained into primary school unless the quality of provision in the extended time is high.

**4. There are significant limitations in the evidence base for extra hours and earlier starting age for children under 2. The impact of the current funded entitlement for children of working families from 9 months old and any ineligible children is unknown. We therefore recommend government ensures evaluation is being undertaken to assess the impact of this policy on children's outcomes. The government could consider implementing test and learns for alternative funding arrangements and use findings to inform entitlement reforms.**

One of the key limitations of this evidence base is that most studies have tested the impact of extra hours and/or an earlier starting age with children aged 3 or above. Although identified impacts appear consistent, there are currently very few studies on the impact of starting early education at age two or below, rather than three or four, and the impact of extra hours in this age range. Therefore, it is difficult to draw conclusions for impacts on younger children confidently. The SEED and EPPSE studies are important contributions but provide correlational evidence. This evidence gap is notable given that reforms currently being rolled out focus on younger children (from 9 months). We strongly advise that the government endeavours to build the evidence base and fill these evidence gaps when considering the scope of their review and reform of entitlement arrangements. The government could consider implementing test and learns for ways of reforming the system (e.g., universal entitlement approach, fully means-tested approach) before rolling out changes.

## Background

### Scope

The evidence base summarised here is international, with the majority of studies originating in the United States. It covers a range of ages from birth to five. A small number of longitudinal studies follow pupils throughout their school lives (e.g., SEED, EPPSE). As mentioned, the majority of studies focus on children aged three or above, with a very small number of studies testing the impact of an earlier starting age or extra hours on children aged two or below. The EEF's evidence base on earlier starting age and extra hours was last updated in 2023, so additional research may have been undertaken since. Some additional searches were undertaken to identify further research for children from birth to two, to inform this submission (see Appendix for protocol).

### Limitations

Conclusions drawn from this evidence base should be treated with caution due to the small numbers of studies and the fact that many of these studies were not randomised control trials or independently evaluated. For conclusions drawn from the EEF's Early Years Toolkit, additional research may have been undertaken since the evidence base was synthesised in 2023 that isn't reflected here. Whilst additional searches for evidence on benefits for children aged 0-2 drew on systematic review methodology, some methodological concessions were made to produce a timely output for this additional submission. It should be noted therefore that this does not qualify technically as a rapid evidence assessment and that some evidence may have been missed during these searches.

## References

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### Appendix: additional searches protocol

Research question: What are the developmental/educational benefits of early education and childcare for children **aged 0-2**? / What difference does early education and childcare for children aged 0-2 make to their development?

<b>Criterion:</b>	<b>Definition for this:</b>
Population	Children aged 0-2
Intervention	Early education and childcare
Phenomenon of interest	Educational / developmental benefits
Context	International
Outcome/s	Open to a variety of cognitive outcomes at age 2: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communication and language</li> <li>- Physical development</li> <li>- Cognitive development</li> </ul> Also if studies longitudinal, can look at outcomes 3+: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The above plus early literacy, early maths...?</li> </ul>
Study design	Systematic review Meta-analysis
Date limit	2000 onwards