

EVIDENCE REVIEW

The benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for refugee and asylum-seeking children

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This document examines existing literature and evidence on the benefits of ECEC provision for disadvantaged children, focusing on refugee and asylum-seeking children. It also outlines available evidence on the reality of accessing these services for refugee and asylum-seeking families in the UK.

The case for ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children

There is a wealth of literature on the benefits of accessing high-quality ECEC for disadvantaged children.¹ These benefits include social and emotional wellbeing, increased development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, lower chances of dropping out of school, and long-lasting positive impacts on higher education and career outcomes.²

The European Commission in its recommendation for high-quality ECEC systems underscores how they play an essential role in laying the foundation for heterogeneous societies by strengthening social cohesion and inclusion. ECEC settings are often spaces where families meet and children learn about their rights and experience equality, tolerance, empathy and diversity.³ For refugee families who are looking to integrate and settle into a new country and culture, these settings can be a place of belonging, while also helping them maintain and celebrate their home culture.⁴ Research suggests that partnerships between families and communities are essential for facilitating this sense of belonging; when ECEC services consult with families and communities, the sense of belonging is experienced in an organic way that has knock-on benefits for the child, the family and the entire community.⁵

Research by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has demonstrated that investing in early years education is an effective and highly efficient way of addressing inequality in society. Refugee children who may have experienced trauma and varied levels of disruption throughout their life stand to benefit greatly from high-quality early years education that focuses on holistic well-being and development, providing stability and trauma-informed care and support – and that ultimately narrows the attainment gap between them and their more advantaged peers.⁶

It is generally agreed that early years education facilitates the process of ensuring school readiness, which is described as ‘a viable strategy to close the learning gap and improve equity in achieving lifelong learning and full developmental potential among young children’.⁷ However, there is an argument that the current approach focuses too heavily on standardised and predetermined outcomes for children instead of a holistic ‘readiness to learn’ that incorporates a wide range of competencies including motivation, emotional maturity, intellectual ability and health.⁸

Evidence also shows that investing in early years education benefits society and economies as a whole. Investing in ECEC has long-term economic implications, with research in the United States demonstrating a higher return on investment when finances are spent on ECEC than when spent on any other stage of schooling.⁹ The research also found that investing in high-quality ECEC from birth-to-five for disadvantaged students had a 13% annual return on investment for every 1 dollar (USD) spent, when compared to the seven to ten percent returns recorded from investing in preschool programmes that cater to three to four-year-olds alone.¹⁰

This is further substantiated through recent research in the UK, that found for every £1 invested in a universal ECEC system, the treasury would gain £1.31 in return.¹¹ Research by UNICEF found that investing in a child's early years helps reduce costs to address poor results later on in their lives, and sets them on a pathway to thrive in education and achieve their potential.¹²

Evidence across the European context reinforces the importance of ECEC for children when living in unstable and challenging collective housing in providing stable and nurturing environments for play and learning.¹³ In the UK, the poor conditions in temporary asylum accommodation is well known. Refugee Council recently published a report examining the lives of people living in asylum hotels, concluding that insufficient support within such accommodation led to significant and widespread challenges.¹⁴

Access to ECEC in the UK

The Department for Education (DfE) currently¹⁵ funds three entitlements to free early education and childcare in England (greater detail on the eligibility criteria for each of these entitlements is provided in Annex 3):¹⁶

- **the disadvantage entitlement:** 15 hours per week for disadvantaged two-year-olds;
- **the universal entitlement:** 15 hours per week for all three- and four-year-olds; and
- **the extended entitlement:** an additional 15 hours per week (a total of 30 hours) for three- and four-year-olds with eligible working parents.

Not all who are eligible for funded entitlements use them. Government data estimate that 74% of eligible two-year-olds are accessing the free entitlement and 94% of eligible three- and four-year-olds are accessing the universal entitlement to ECEC in the UK in 2023.¹⁷ There are many factors that parents consider when thinking about ECEC that could restrict their use of the entitlements on offer. Evidence suggests these include factors such as cultural norms and preferences for keeping children in the home, the child's age,

parents' work patterns, a lack of awareness of the support available, or supplementary costs as government funding is insufficient to cover the full per hour amount.¹⁸ While evidence is limited, some research points towards disadvantaged children being less likely to access ECEC services in the early years.¹⁹ In England, data suggest that the universal and extended entitlements are disproportionately accessed by more advantaged children across England.²⁰

DfE data on access to ECEC services in 2022 showed that a lower percentage (17%) of three- and four-year-olds who were from minority ethnic groups (excluding White minorities which includes Gypsy, Traveller and Roma children) were registered for the extended entitlement than for the universal entitlement (28%).²¹ A recent report by the Children's Commissioner found that, between 2019 and 2020, children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups were far less likely to take up their place in early years' provision than their White British peers.²² Additionally, a study of ECEC take-up in England suggests that children who speak English as an additional language (EAL children) are nearly three times less likely to access their full early education entitlement compared to children with English as their first language.²³ Research also shows that there is lower use and poorer-quality ECEC provision in deprived areas of the UK.²⁴

While there is no statistics available on the use of ECEC among refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK, research in Europe suggests that the reality is that limited numbers of children from refugee, migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds will access early years settings and, even when they do, it is often of lesser quality to that of their peers.²⁵

Barriers to equal access to ECEC

The literature suggests that access to ECEC in the UK is unequal, with early years policy prioritising children in working families. Evidence shows that 70% of those eligible for the extended entitlements (considered a full-time place) are in the top half of the earnings distribution.²⁶ Additionally, anecdotal evidence indicates that ECEC settings prioritise children whose parents can send their child to nursery full-time (using the extended entitlements) and, by default, are those families whose parents are able to access secure employment.²⁷

Literature widely suggests that inadequate funding of the early years sector is a key barrier to equitable access to ECEC services.²⁸ DfE data for 2022 show a minimal increase in take-up of ECEC entitlements in 2022 compared to previous years, while recording a 4% drop in ECEC providers.²⁹ The ECEC sector in England is also facing challenges with adequate funding that poses serious threats to the sustainability of the sector.³⁰

A Freedom of Information (FOI) report from Early Years Alliance has shown an almost £3000 shortfall in funding towards the free entitlement per child per year.³¹ This consistent underfunding is leading to many ECEC settings to close,

across both maintained nurseries and PVI settings, thus reducing the number of available settings to families. The evidence suggests ECEC settings in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more likely to close their doors.³²

In addition to these challenges, research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that considerably more children from minority ethnic groups and disadvantaged communities have missed out on formal early learning during this period.³³ These findings on the inequality of access to ECEC provision point to an increasing attainment gap between disadvantaged groups and their more advantaged peers, which is exacerbated by socio-economic conditions and the impacts of long term falling investment in early years services.³⁴ Access to ECEC provision that is adequately staffed and funding has the potential to address some of this widening attainment gap.³⁵

The ECEC sector is widely known for high attrition rates, with many professionals arguing that ECEC providers have, for many years, been underpaid, undervalued and overworked, causing a large percentage of ECEC staff to leave the sector in recent years.³⁶ In a study conducted by Early Years Alliance, 84% of ECEC providers surveyed admitted they struggled recruit staff because of an overall lack of applicants as well as a lack of applicants with relevant qualifications and experience.³⁷ In addition to hiring qualified ECEC staff with relevant experience, there is a need for appropriate training among staff on 'bilingual learners', 'cultural sensitivity', and 'facilitation of integration of refugees'.³⁸

Barriers to ECEC access for refugee and asylum-seeking families

Beyond the systemic challenges faced by ECEC providers, there are other factors that could limit a refugee child's access to ECEC such as parental anxiety and stress, travel costs that are unaffordable for many families, language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of confidence and trust in early childhood educators.³⁹ Findings from research suggest that anxiety occurs as a result of displacement which may overwhelm parents to the extent that they are unable to prioritise ECEC.⁴⁰

Some evidence indicates that immigration status-related restrictions can act as a barrier to ECEC access. All children, regardless of their parents' immigration status, are eligible to access the disadvantaged entitlement and the universal entitlement. However, the NRPF condition that affects undocumented families and families who are granted time-bound leave to remain in the UK, renders them ineligible to access the extended entitlement.⁴¹ In addition to this, asylum-seeking families in the UK do not have the right to work for 12 months after their application for asylum, and even after this period there are restrictions on the kind of jobs they can apply for. Recent research has found

that this has a negative impact on the country's economy and makes the UK one of most restrictive European countries in terms of asylum laws and the right to work.⁴² These structural policy restrictions directly affect the ability of refugee and asylum-seeking parents to fully access their ECEC entitlements (particularly the extended entitlements) and engage in meaningful and sustainable employment.

Additionally, refugee families' expectations of ECEC may affect access to available provision. The pedagogy, curriculum, or how practitioners deliver early learning in England may not be accepted concepts or commonplace in refugees' countries of origin. As a result, without effective dissemination of information, through trusted family case workers or own language translators, there may be reluctance to take up ECEC services among refugee families.⁴³

Interestingly, however, studies show that refugee parents assign more significance to the ECEC providers' role in closing the equity gap between their children and those of the native children, as they perceive the latter to have a head start at learning due to cultural familiarity and local language proficiency. Evidence indicates that refugee parents were often dissatisfied with the ECEC providers' learning support for their children.⁴⁴ These competing expectations and varied demands on ECEC providers, provide a glimpse of the challenging terrain of ECEC provision, and how critical inclusive and adequate support is in these settings.

ECEC within the wider early years system

ECEC sits within a wider system of early years support available to children and families. The most common of these are universal health services, maternity services, health visitor checks, GP access, and local community support. Alongside high-quality ECEC provision, these interconnected services support children's development. Access to these services, alongside ECEC, provides children and families with the professional support required to identify developmental delays and to signpost to specialised services.

The reality is, much like the ECEC sector, wider early years services are under strong financial constraints. A study by The Children's Society revealed that over the last decade (between 2010-2011 and 2020-2021), local councils have been required to halve their spending on early interventions support⁴⁵ and a study by The Sutton Trust shows that investment in early years interventions has declined by as much as 72% in the last decade.⁴⁶

Enabling access to and quality of ECEC settings

There are plenty of barriers to accessing ECEC for refugee families in the UK, but there are also certain factors that enable and encourage access to ECEC services. Literature on this, however, is limited, and evidence available is largely based on small-scale case study approaches.

There are several examples that show how local authorities have supported refugee families by improving understanding of their rights and entitlements can help enable access to ECEC services. For example, the Bristol Local Authority appointed a Specialist Leader in Education to facilitate induction, language acquisition, integration and inclusion of refugee families on arrival. In addition, it devised and delivered a package of specialist training on the needs of asylum seeker and refugee parents to mainstream Early Years settings receiving these children.⁴⁷

Understanding family needs and providing support in ways that practically impact their lives, also encourages access to ECEC services. In Norwich an English as Additional Language (EAL) centre was set up with an attached creche facility that had trained ECEC staff. This was done taking into consideration the language barrier that most refugee parents experience on arrival, which also hinders their ability to find meaningful work. This initiative addressed the problem of the need for childcare while ensuring quality by providing trained ECEC staff at the centre.⁴⁸

ECEC settings have the potential to act as a one-stop centre that provides access to other Early Childhood Development (ECD) services by facilitating collaboration between services and simplifying the process of accessing these services for refugee families. However, reports suggest that for this to work effectively, ECEC staff must be working in tandem with other ECD providers to provide holistic and wraparound service as well as to provide early interventions for children's needs.⁴⁹

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