

## How early education for two-year-olds benefits children and their families

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**Offering part-time early education to disadvantaged two-year-olds only had a positive impact on children in settings of reasonably high quality, according to an evaluation of the early years education pilot conducted by the National Centre for Social Research for the Department for Children Schools and Families.**

- 92 per cent of children in the pilot (pilot children) experienced one or more forms of disadvantage, suggesting that the pilot was well targeted overall; however, 8 per cent of pilot children experienced no obvious form of disadvantage.
- Overall experiences and views of the pilot were positive: parents thought the staff were approachable, friendly, and good at communicating; satisfaction with the level of feedback about their children's progress was high.
- The majority of the provision offered to pilot children was of 'adequate' quality (77 per cent), but only one-fifth of settings were offering provision rated as 'good' (21 per cent).
- Overall the pilot did not significantly improve pilot children's language ability, non-verbal reasoning or social development. However, where children attended higher quality settings, there was a positive impact on language ability.
- Parents felt that the setting had positively affected their ability to parent, their physical health and mental well-being, and provided them with opportunities for self-improvement.

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## Background to the early education pilot for two-year-olds

A growing body of research shows how early access to early years education can improve children's social and cognitive development, particularly among disadvantaged children. For this reason, the Government introduced the early education pilot for two-year-olds (the pilot) in 2006, following the successful introduction of free part-time early years education for three- and four-year-olds.

The pilot provided free early years education to 13,500 disadvantaged two-year-olds. The main purpose was to improve children's social and cognitive outcomes, such as their social confidence and independence, and their language ability and non-verbal reasoning. Additional aims were to have a positive impact on children's parents and wider family. The funding typically offered these children 7.5 hours of early years education per week for 38 weeks of the year (ie, term time only), although in some areas funding was available for 12.5 hours per week.

The pilot places were available in a variety of early years settings eg, in nurseries, play groups and with childminders. However, all the settings were required to operate the Birth to Three Matters curriculum, which is a framework for childcare professionals that aims to support children in their earliest years, helping them become strong, healthy, skilful communicators and competent learners.

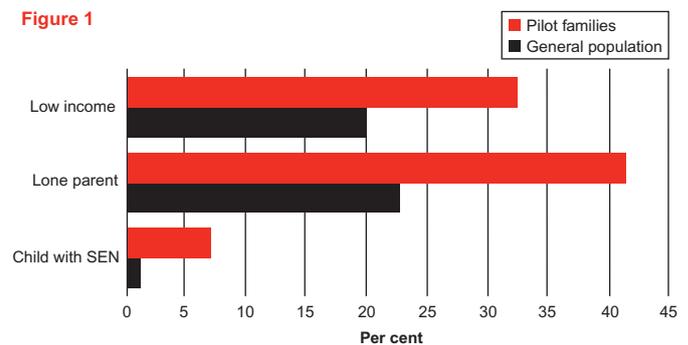
## The pilot was reasonably well targeted at children it aimed to help

Local authorities adopted a range of strategies to promote the pilot to disadvantaged families. While parents heard about the free place from a range of sources, they were most likely to have learnt about the pilot from a professional such as a health visitor, or from an early years setting. Given that parents typically obtain information on early years education through word-of-mouth, this seems to reflect the emphasis on outreach and marketing that was a key feature of the pilot.

The evaluation has shown that the pilot was reasonably well targeted at children intended to benefit from it. For instance, almost three-quarters of pilot families lived in the 20 per cent most disadvantaged areas of the country. Indeed, Figure 1 shows that pilot children were more 'disadvantaged' than the general population of two-year-olds in almost all respects:

- Pilot families tended to have a lower annual income than the general population: 33 per cent of pilot families had a household income under £10,000 compared to 20 per cent of families in the general population.
- There were many more lone parents among pilot families: 41 per cent compared to 23 per cent.
- More pilot children were identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN, most commonly difficulties with speech and language) than in the general population: 7 per cent compared to 1 per cent.

Figure 1



Base: Families with two year old children

When considering a wide range of disadvantages in combination, 92 per cent of pilot children appeared to experience one or more forms of disadvantage. The remaining 8 per cent of pilot families appeared to experience no obvious form of disadvantage, although it might be the case that they were disadvantaged in ways that the survey did not address.

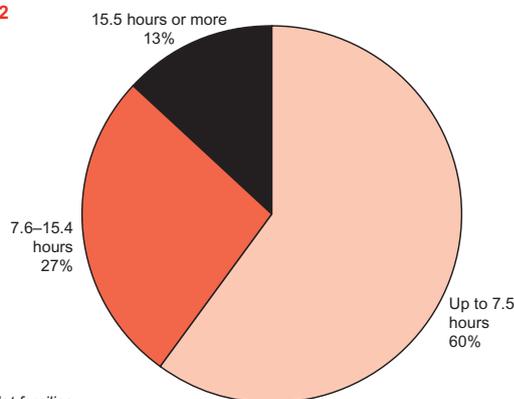
However, according to information from the local authorities, the majority of these families were targeted because of the area that they lived in (71 per cent). Therefore it appears that the majority of these 8 per cent of families are relatively advantaged but live in more disadvantaged areas. This suggests that there may be scope for improving targeting, particularly in authorities that used broad geographic and economic indicators to target potential beneficiaries, rather than family-specific indicators such as parental substance misuse, or children's special educational needs.

## Most families attended settings only for the free hours

Most families (82 per cent) attended the setting for the free hours and no more. The average amount of time spent at the setting each session was 2.5 hours, and the majority of families attended for three sessions per week. As such, most families attended the pilot for 7.5 hours per week in total (see Figure 2).

In many cases (58 per cent), families were satisfied with the number of hours their child spent at the setting. However, a substantial proportion (40 per cent) would have liked their child to attend for more hours, if they could have afforded to pay for them.

Figure 2

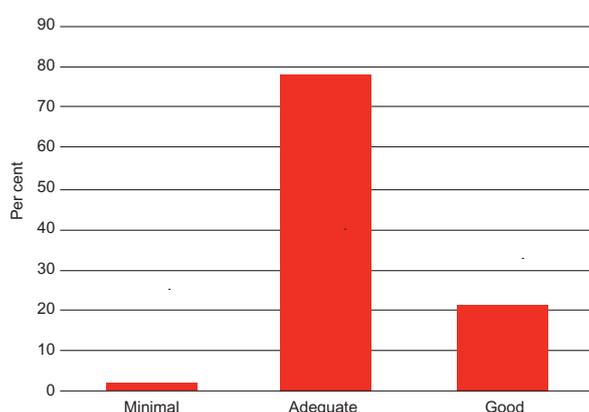


Base: Pilot families

## Most settings were rated adequate while only one-fifth were rated good

The quality of provision available as part of the pilot was assessed through observations by the University of Oxford. These observations demonstrated that the provision offered to most pilot children was 'adequate' (77 per cent), and only one-fifth of settings were rated 'good' (21 per cent), as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3



Base: All observed pilot settings

In terms of the specific aspects of quality, interactions between staff and children were generally warm and respectful, and staff supported peer interactions and the development of children's emerging social skills. However, while support for language development was of good quality for younger two-year-olds, our findings suggest that staff members were slightly less successful in providing the element of challenge required for older two-year-olds. There was also room for improvement in relation to the quality of care routines and the provision of stimulating play experiences for children.

## Higher quality settings had the greatest impact on children's development

The pilot did not significantly improve the cognitive and social development of the children receiving the free childcare, compared to a comparison group with similar characteristics. The development of the pilot children was about the same as the comparison group over the same period. However, this overall lack of a significant impact disguises the fact that for those children in the pilots who were found places in higher quality settings there was an impact on children, at least in terms of child vocabulary.

For these children, the effect of the pilot was to significantly improve their language ability scores from a position of at mild risk of having poor language development in the longer term to a position of no risk. A similar pattern was observed for parent-child relationships, but on other outcomes, such as child non-verbal reasoning, social development, and the home learning environment, there was no evidence of a programme impact.

## Parents were largely positive about their experiences of the pilot

Overall, parents' experiences of, and views on, the pilot setting were typically positive. Only a minority of parents who took part in the survey reported any worries or difficulties while their child attended the setting, and in most cases parents said they could get advice and support in dealing with these issues. More generally, most parents felt they had received good support and help from the pilot setting, and were also happy with the feedback received about their children's development. Those who were less satisfied with the support and help they had received included parents whose child had Special Educational Needs or a disability.

Similarly, parents were largely positive about the additional services and advice parents received which went beyond early education. For instance, some parents felt that the setting had positively affected their parenting skills and their relationships with their children through giving them a better understanding of their children as individuals and/or of different child development stages. Parents talked about their physical health, or mental and emotional well-being, improving where the additional free time had given them the opportunity to have a rest, to sort out their problems, or to socialise. Furthermore, opportunities for self-improvement (eg, attending courses) were sometimes facilitated by the setting where they provided a range of courses to coincide with the early years sessions.

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## Implications for policy

The findings suggest that the pilot was reasonably well targeted at disadvantaged two-year-olds. However, given that 8 per cent of pilot families seemed to experience no form of disadvantage, there appears to be scope for improving targeting. This is particularly true of local authorities that used broad geographical and economic indicators to define and target potential beneficiaries.

While parents' experiences, views and perceptions of the effect of the pilot were largely positive, they thought the pilot could be improved through an increase in the number of hours of early education offered and through provision that better meets the needs of children with Special Educational Needs or a disability.

The Government has already gone some way towards addressing the first of these suggestions, since the pilot is due to be extended to the 15 per cent most disadvantaged two-year-olds in every local authority from September 2009; it is estimated that this will reach 23,000 children per year. This extension to the pilot will offer families either 10 hours or 15 hours per week, which represents an increase of at least one additional session of early education per week.

The findings show that the pilot only had a positive impact on children who attended a setting of reasonably high quality. This is key because it suggests that the pilot would have had a considerably larger impact overall had local authorities been able to secure more places in high quality settings. As such, when the programme is rolled out nationally, it would be beneficial to provide these places in settings with an Ofsted score of at least 'good'. In order for this to be achievable, bearing in mind that the pilot is being extended, there needs to be a greater supply of high quality early education providers. It is likely that this will be best achieved through raising the quality of existing providers, and therefore underlines the importance of Government initiatives like the Graduate Leader Fund which provides funding to encourage more graduate leadership of early years settings, and thereby improve the quality of the early years workforce.

## Methodology

- The impact of the pilot was measured through comparing families who had taken up a pilot place with a 'comparison' group of families living in similar areas where the pilots were not operating.
- Both types of family were interviewed at two points in time: at 'baseline' when the child was aged 2 (just after the pilot children had taken up their place), and were 'followed-up' at age 3.
- Over 1,100 pilot families and almost 1,400 comparison families took part in the follow-up.
- For analysis, the two types of family were matched across a wide range of their baseline characteristics, such as: socio-demographics, history of childcare use, and the level of the child's development. As such, after matching, any differences found at the follow-up represent the impact of the pilot.
- Quality of provision was measured at 75 pilot settings through an observation day, using the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) and elements of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). This provided quality assessments for 38 per cent of pilot children.
- Qualitative interviews were carried out with 54 pilot parents (mainly mothers) to explore in greater depth influences on the decision to take up a pilot place, experiences and views of the pilot setting, and perceptions of different ways in which using early years education had impacted on children, parents and the family as a whole.

## Obtaining the full report for this study

The full report of these research findings, Evaluation of the Early Education Pilot for Two Year Old Children (2009) was published by the Department for Children Schools and Families in July 2009. It can be downloaded for free from the DCSF website <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RR134.pdf>.

For more information on this research or general enquiries about the evaluation, please contact Ruth Smith on [ruth.smith@natcen.ac.uk](mailto:ruth.smith@natcen.ac.uk)