Executive Summary

Research has shown that attendance at early childhood education and care programmes can have a significant impact on children's cognitive, social and emotional development, and on their performance in school – and in life – later on. There is evidence from both randomised controlled trials and observational studies that early childhood education and care has the potential to improve the life chances of children from disadvantaged families; yet results from PISA show that advantaged children are more likely to attend, and to attend for longer periods of time. Failing to tackle this situation could mean that early childhood education and care continue to exacerbate rather than mitigate inequities in education and in society.

Some evidence suggests that peers in early childhood education and care influence children's language and socio-emotional development. It is thus urgent for policy makers to identify the extent to which disadvantaged children are clustered together in early childhood education and care programmes, and whether and where centres with substantial numbers of disadvantaged children are of lower quality than those attended by more affluent children. In most countries, socio-economically disadvantaged children are the least likely to attend high-quality programmes.

WHAT ARE THE INGREDIENTS OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE?

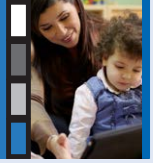
A growing body of research suggests that the magnitude of the benefits of early childhood education and care depends on the quality of the services provided. Quality in this context depends on both the infrastructure, i.e. the available physical, human and material resources, and what is known as "process quality", i.e. the social, emotional and instructional aspects of children's interactions with staff members and other children. In order to attract the most suitable candidates to the early learning workforce, countries need not only to offer adequate pay, but also provide an environment where leaders and other staff are given the autonomy, and have the time and space to work as professionals.

Although research emphasises the importance of initial education and continuous professional development opportunities for early learning staff, there is no simple relationship between the staff's level of education and process quality or children's learning, development and well-being. One way to improve the pedagogical practices used in these programmes is to enhance the staff's competence to communicate and interact with children in a shared and sustainable manner. Research finds that it is not necessary for all staff to have attained high levels of education. Highly qualified staff can have a positive influence on colleagues who work with them but who do not have the same level of qualifications.

WHICH PEDAGOGIES WORK BEST FOR THE YOUNGEST LEARNERS?

A distinction is often drawn between child-centred instruction (activities are child-initiated, children engage in problem solving and enquiry-oriented learning) and didactic instruction (staff-directed, planned tasks focusing on acquiring and practicing academic skills). Both approaches may boost children's skills and practitioners could combine different approaches depending on the purpose; but some evidence suggests the importance of including child-centred instruction at the earliest ages. Research shows that academic, staff-initiated practices and approaches are more likely to improve children's academic outcomes, including IQ scores, literacy and numeracy skills, and specific subject knowledge, while child-centred practices are more likely to improve a child's socio-emotional and soft skills, such as motivation to learn, creativity, independence, self-confidence, general knowledge and initiative. Research also cautions that strong, didactic, staff-directed practices may hinder the development of children's socio-emotional skills, such as motivation, interest and self-regulation, in the long run.

The curricula for early childhood education and care often contrast with those used in primary schooling, partly because the latter tend to focus on the content to be taught, while the former typically rely on psychological and educational theories that inform pedagogical practice, i.e. how to teach, rather than what to teach. While pedagogy is something that



happens in staff-child interactions, policy can shape pedagogical environments, for example, through curriculum design, through initial and continuing staff development, and through work organisation.

An OECD study shows that almost all countries have some form of national-level curriculum or framework in place for early learning. The prescribed learning areas and goals of this framework/curriculum influence the pedagogical approaches and practices used by early childhood education and care providers. Public policy can also facilitate children's transition from early childhood education and care to primary school. Well-managed transitions support children's well-being, ensure that the benefits of early childhood education and care endure, prepare children for school and for life, and improve equity in education outcomes.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN'S USE OF TECHNOLOGY?

These days, preschoolers can become familiar with digital devices before they are exposed to books. Today, not only schools, but early childhood educational institutions too are exploring ways to integrate information and communication technology (ICT) into the learning environment. Education systems need to re-evaluate their curricula, and teachers need to reassess their teaching styles, to ensure that ICT is used effectively. Education policies that foster the development of children's digital skills are those that provide adequate training for teachers, and support the integration of technologies into school curricula. Linking the way children interact with ICT inside of school to the way they already use it outside of school can be a key to unlocking technology's potential for learning.

At the same time, given the ubiquity of technology in the lives of 21st-century children, a concerted effort needs to be made to protect children from the risks associated with technology use. This includes educators, parents and health practitioners assessing whether screen time is affecting engagement in certain healthy behaviours (e.g. physical activity, regular meal-times, sleep), setting certain limits to screen use (i.e. limiting the use of certain devices close to bedtime) and ensuring content-appropriate programming for younger children and adolescents. Based on state-of-the-art evidence, the effects of technology on well-being are generally too small to warrant widespread policy change.

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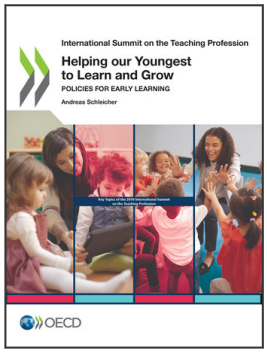

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